

RSS EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC SOUTH EAST

STATEMENT BY CPRE OXFORDSHIRE; PARTICIPANT 7147

MATTER 8E ROLE AND ECONOMY

8Ei.1 What is the rationale for and role of the sub-region? Does the proposed strategy strike an appropriate balance between the future potential of the sub-region and protection of the environment?

We support many of the policies in the South East Plan. We are pleased to see in Policy CO1 that the strategy includes protecting the environment and quality of life, protecting the setting and character of Oxford, and concentrating development in country towns and the built up area of Oxford.

However we cannot see that there is any rationale for a sub-region in Central Oxfordshire.

- i) It is not possible to show that the settlement pattern of the sub-region (with the exception of Oxford City) is in any way distinct or different from the settlement pattern of the rest of Oxfordshire.
- ii) There is no logic for the boundary of the sub-region. It includes Bicester, Didcot, Wantage, Grove, Kidlington, and Witney but for no apparent reason excludes Thame and Banbury. It cuts across existing administrative boundaries.
- iii) There is every reason to believe that the development of the region's dynamic economy will continue as it is doing to date, and no reason to suppose that the establishment of a sub-region will do anything to encourage it.
- iv) There is no basis to believe that the existence of a sub-region will do anything to affect the appropriate balance between the future potential of the sub-region and protection of the environment. In fact it is likely that the region will be better balanced without the restraint of a sub-region.

8Ei.2 Does the proposed strategy make sufficient allowance for the growth of the Oxford/Central Oxfordshire economy?

The strategy does make sufficient allowance for the growth of the Oxford economy.

- i) High value employment, spin offs from the technical base in the universities, health establishments and publishing in Oxford, are already

taking place. There are thriving science parks in Didcot, Culham and Begbroke. There is no indication that these parks need to be in Oxford, and many reasons why they are better out of Oxford. They are more convenient for housing and travelling, avoiding as they do travel into and out of Oxford. In the fullness of time they will provide employment in the country towns where most of the houses will be built.

ii) In this way the benefit from the innovatory developments in Oxford would benefit the whole county, and not just the Oxfordshire sub-region.

8Ei.3 How realistic is the focus on previously developed land to accommodate employment needs in CO1 and CO5?

Most of the previously developed land will be either in the City or on ex Ministry of Defence sites elsewhere in the county. There may also be a number of ex farming sites which would be suitable for small businesses.

i) Most high tech. and innovatory developments will not make great demands on land. There will be a greater development of working from home in the future. It is right therefore to focus on previously developed land to accommodate employment needs but almost impossible to say how the policy will work out in practice.

ii) The Plan is right to say that development for employment uses in Oxford should be restricted to previously developed land. In fact CPRE argues that the protection of Oxford's architectural and historic heritage is more important than developing employment in the City, which would be better done elsewhere. To improve the balance of jobs and housing in the City, available land should be used for housing rather than employment. Indeed we would argue for the same reason that major extensions of retail facilities in the City should not continue to be encouraged.

8Eii Housing and Green Belt

8Eii.1 Are the housing provision figures set at the most appropriate level, taking account of the economic pressures, affordability issues, and the environmental assets of the area?

It is not an exact science, but CPRE believe that the housing provision figures are set at about the right level.

i) A step rise in the level of house building would require a step rise in the level of infrastructure provision, and there is no indication that this is going to happen, let alone the backlog of infrastructure be made up.

ii) All development has to be balanced and planned, and CPRE is concerned that a step rise in house building would damage the attractiveness of Oxfordshire, both to live in and to do business.

iii) One of the major attractions of Oxfordshire, and one of the reasons for its success, is the balance between the attractiveness of the countryside and the vitality of its towns and Oxford City.

iv) Steps will be taken to provide necessary affordable housing, but not everyone who wishes to can expect to live in the most attractive places. The balance in the South East Plan would appear to be about right.

8Eii.2 Is a level of about 50% affordable housing justified and capable of being implemented?

The requirement for affordable housing varies from place to place, and it is not sensible to set cast iron targets. However it is likely that Oxfordshire needs a smaller percentage of affordable housing than the South East as a whole, and 50% might be a good target.

i) The requirement will however vary, and the target should be used as one overall for the county. Provision should be made following assessments of local need by local planning authorities.

ii) Whether such a target will be met depends on the degree of subsidy available to make the housing affordable. If the subsidy is to come from S106 agreements with developers, or a version of planning gain supplement yet to be specified, it is unlikely that the target will be met. Developers will not build the necessary houses unless it is profitable for them to do so, and if the conditions are too stringent it is likely they will walk away. The target will be met only if more funding is made available probably from central government.

iii) Any arrangements made should be permanent and enforceable to ensure that the benefits are passed on to future occupiers.

8Eii.3 Has the potential for expansion of Oxford itself been sufficiently recognised? Is there a case for a strategic review of the Oxford Green Belt?

CPRE believe Oxford's potential has been fully recognised and we support the policy in CO3 for all the reasons expressed there.

i) The best vision for the future of Oxford and Oxfordshire is for the special character and landscape setting of the City to be developed within the Green Belt boundary. Within its boundaries Oxford should concentrate on making the best of those attributes which set it apart, its architectural and educational heritage, its open spaces based on the Cherwell and the Thames, and its character as one of the most impressive cities in England. It should regenerate derelict land, give attention to pockets of deprivation, and attempt to reduce travelling into and out of the City by using what land is available to build housing for its workers.

ii) The Green Belt should be maintained to prevent urban sprawl and the coalescence of settlements. The Green Belt should be a permanent element in the development of the Oxfordshire scene, and there is no case for a review.

iii) In the past it was assumed that the Green Belt land would continue to be farmed, but this is not necessarily always the case. There is an opportunity to provide a high quality environment for everyone's benefit that contributes to mitigating and adapting to climate change. We would like to see plans for locally produced food for local consumption, tree planting for its ecological and amenity benefits, wildlife habitats or some recreational opportunities. But nothing should be done which takes away from its purpose to separate, permanently, town and country.

iv) The focus for new housing will be in country towns, and it is right that employment opportunities should be encouraged in those towns. This is already the pattern, and Culham, Didcot and Begbroke show that the potential for development of the knowledge intensive and high technology businesses is not in any way constrained by the Green Belt.

8Eii.4 How realistic is it to rely on focussing growth at Bicester, Didcot, Wantage and Grove? Are there restraints to focussing growth here, and if so how might they be overcome?

CPRE supports the plan to focus growth on the country towns, however we would also include Banbury and Witney as locations for development.

i) It takes time for a plan to work. Houses can be decided by planners, but the presence of jobs has to occur more naturally. In a future when travel to work will not be encouraged, and may even be penalised, a better balance will develop. Bicester, which at this stage of its development, is very much a commuter town, will become more attractive to employers, particularly as land for employment purposes has been set aside. Given time, the country towns policy will work and will fit into the best vision for the future of Oxfordshire.

ii) The constraints are the lack of infrastructure development, which applies wherever the growth is focussed.

8Eii.5 Does the proposed housing distribution core strategy provide sufficient housing opportunities to support the social and economic well-being of local communities outside the main locations for development?

CPRE supports the strategy. It allows for gradual development to maintain the sustainability of communities. Local councils will ensure that development takes place in those communities where the development can be absorbed, and where transport and other facilities are available and suitable.

8Eiii Infrastructure and Implementation.

8Eiii.1 Have the water supply and waste water treatment, flood risk, and transport implications of the growth proposals been adequately considered?

A great deal of work has been done in considering the implications of the plan, in both the Technical Report on Infrastructure Requirements, and the Implementation Plan. It is not at all clear how the necessary infrastructure is to be provided or the necessary investment found.

i) Water supply is fundamentally important. The Implementation Plan identifies two areas where additional water supply upgrades are needed, at Bicester / Wantage / Grove and Bicester / Didcot / Banbury. There is no estimate of how much these upgrades will cost.

The House of Lords Select Committee Report on Water Management (June 2006) said that they are "completely unconvinced by the government figures on the relationship between housing growth and water use". We are not experts but we are not persuaded that water supply does not remain a major limitation in the Plan.

ii) The cost of waste water treatment for the whole of the South East has been estimated, but other than to say that the source of finance will be PFI (mainly) there is no other detail in the Plan.

iii) The Banbury Flood Alleviation Scheme is the only one detailed in the Plan, and again the cost of implementation is not calculated.

iv) The response to the transport infrastructure requirements is totally inadequate.

The A34 southern Oxford by-pass, a two lane dual carriageway without a hard shoulder, is also a trunk route from the Solent ports to the Midlands. 3,000 houses are planned for Didcot and 1,400 for Grove & Wantage. To suggest that the response to current problems, let alone to the end of the plan period, should be "to improve flow of transport and traveller information" is hard to understand. Junction improvements are planned but the road will be unable to handle the traffic imposed on it.

To suggest that the A40 Witney to Oxford road can be improved by "reduced congestion and improved bus priority" is avoiding the issue.

Policy CO6 is aspirational and the quotations above come from the Sub-regional Investment Framework Implementation Plan.

8Eiii.2 Are the proposals in the Implementation Plan (including for social and green infrastructure) clear, justified and well related to the spatial strategy? What are the priorities?

A competent attempt appears to have been made in the Implementation Plan to analyse the various resources required. In terms of social infrastructure in three categories there is no dedicated funding. In terms of green infrastructure no estimate has been made, and the source of resources is described as "not available".

i) CPRE would have preferred to see a much greater, and costed, analysis to manage and enhance the social and green infrastructure. It is the attractiveness of the City and the countryside which attracts planned growth to the area and it must be maintained positively.

ii) It is quite unclear how the levels of investment listed will be found. Government have not made clear how they will make their contribution. We have grave doubts about the level of developer funding it will be possible to achieve. If sufficient margin is not left with the developer he will find alternative opportunities.

iii) In many case infrastructure needs to be in place before development takes place. There appears to have been no attempt to ensure that this happens.

iv) We would like to see more positive planning to enhance the countryside and preserve open spaces.

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