

# Public speakers

26 January 2021

OXFORDSHIRE

G R O W T H B O A R D

## Question

### 1. Councillor Debby Hallett, Deputy Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council

On 26 April 2018, as the Chair of Vale's Scrutiny Committee, I submitted a statement to this Board about Vale's concerns regarding the affordability of housing in Oxfordshire. I provided to Growth Board members a report produced by Vale officers about affordability issues in Vale of White Horse, and urged you to *"do all you can under these new rules of working and within upcoming new planning policies to make some measurable headway into solving Oxfordshire's housing problem. Explore the options, be courageous and creative, and find sustainable solutions that improve people's lives here in the county."*

That statement is attached, (**Appendix 1**), and within it is the link to the report I referred to. I asked Growth Board to consider this report in its work on affordable housing in the Growth Deal.

The meeting minute says my points were considered in the debate that followed under minute 85. However, that minute lacks any mention of what the Growth Board decided to do as a result of the information I presented. In fact, it has to do with planning flexibilities and not affordable housing at all. There remains a serious issue of housing affordability in Oxfordshire, which the OxPlan50 is well-placed to address.

Since that time, the Affordable Housing subgroup has contributed to the Growth Deal's work. But I haven't seen any reports on evidence gathering to begin to answer the question of, 'Just how unaffordable IS housing throughout Oxfordshire?'. Any proposed means of solving this problem must come after defining the problem.

It's been nearly three years since I asked about this.

Please can you report on what has been done to gather evidence that establishes the accurate scope and nature of Oxfordshire's housing affordability issues, and what decisions have been taken by the OxPlan50 team or the wider Growth Deal team to consider the particular problems here in Oxfordshire and to provide housing that people who work here can afford?

## Answer

*Thank you for your question. The task of establishing the need for affordable housing, including an assessment of scale, type and rent levels is the remit of and carried out by district councils.*

*A summary of the strategies produced by the Oxfordshire authorities was provided to the Growth Board Scrutiny Panel last year and is reproduced below.*

	<i>Local Plan Affordability Policies</i>	<i>Supplementary Planning Documents</i>	<i>Tenancy Strategy</i>	<i>Housing Strategy</i>
<i>Cherwell</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Oxford</i>	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes
<i>SODC</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Vale</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<i>WODC</i>	Yes	Yes*	No	No

*\*In development*

*It's generally recognised by all councils in Oxfordshire that market rents are at a level where a charge of 80% of market rents, allowed by the national definition of affordable housing, would not be considered genuinely affordable.*

*The question asks what decisions have been taken by the Growth Board to recognise the need for affordable housing and seek to secure it.*

*The Growth Deal affordable housing programme supports the ambitions of district housing authorities to provide the affordable housing they assess as required in their policies and strategies by providing funding.*

*In its first two years (2018-19 and 2019-20) the programme has delivered 528 affordable housing (35% shared ownership, 39% affordable rent and 26% social rent). This total includes an 80-unit extra care housing scheme in Vale of White Horse at Great Western Park, Didcot. Without the Growth Deal funding these affordable units could not have been provided. To set that figure in context, these 528 units from the Growth Deal contributed to an overall total of 3,487 affordable homes delivered across Oxfordshire in that two year period.*

*The rest of this year and the final year will see at least the remaining 794 units delivered with early indications showing around 25% of delivery is achievable within the first quarter. This includes an innovative scheme in WODC and Vale of White Horse to support the delivery of 65 new build shared ownership units.*

*The definition of affordable housing has been considered by the Affordable Housing Sub-group. They discussed whether a definition of 'affordable' that better reflected what is truly affordable to local people on average and lower incomes could be set by the Growth Board to apply to Oxfordshire. But the conclusion was that this is matter for individual planning authorities to determine and the growth board has no power to set a definition that differs from that in the NPPF.*

*Unlike in Combined Authorities, Oxfordshire councils do not rely on a single source of grant funding for affordable housing and to add further restrictions to the housing being delivered through the Growth Deal could make it harder for Registered Providers to take part in the Growth Deal housing schemes.*

*The Oxfordshire Plan 2050, as you suggest, could be a tool to secure affordable housing and one of its agreed priorities is to "improve housing availability and affordability".*

*In order to develop a policy approach that seeks to help address this issue, evidence base data and existing strategies will be considered in the development of the Plan. For example, the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment work, which is currently underway, will explore the level of affordable housing need. This and other inputs will be used to help inform the*

*selection of a range of policy options for the Plan. Those policy options and the supporting studies will be published for consultation in the summer of 2021 to ensure that views can be heard and incorporated into the draft policies of the Plan.*

*The Board recognise and support the view of all councils in Oxfordshire that securing genuinely affordable housing for those in housing need is a priority and will continue to consider how we can best support the councils in securing that ambition.*

## **2. Michael Tyce, on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire**

The National Infrastructure Commission originally proposed one million homes, and an associated population increase for the OxCam corridor, of which 250,000 were targeted at Oxfordshire. Everyone rushed to disown the figure, saying it had no validity. That now appears to be the case as Bidwells report that it is now 1.5 million, which is 50% higher, and implying 375,000 houses for Oxfordshire, close on four times as high as the current Growth Deal, which is itself about double the number of houses long term population growth suggests are needed. Your Chairman has said that the Growth Board's objective is to "moderate" the Government's plans for the Arc.

What is the figure for Oxfordshire the Growth Board seeks to moderate towards?

### **Answer**

*Thank you for your question.*

*Firstly, I would like to say as a member of the Ox-Cam Arc Leaders Group, and as one of this board's representatives on the Ox-Cam Arc Leaders Executive, I can reassure you that specific housing numbers or targets have not featured in discussions at those meetings with Civil Servants from MHCLG.*

*The housing figures identified in your question do not have any status in planning policy, and the only known housing figures for Oxfordshire are those identified in Local Plans for the City and District Councils.*

*The development of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 will include a new assessment of housing need based on a robust and tested evidence base. Once this work has been completed, there will be a wide-ranging public consultation on several scenarios this summer to gather the views of residents and test options further. Speculation about the outcome of that work and of the consultation would not be appropriate.*

*The government has identified the Ox-Cam Arc as an economic region to invest in. The Growth Board's 'objective' in relation to this government led project is to continue to engage with our neighbours and partners across the Arc to ensure the best possible outcomes for Oxfordshire. I am pleased to hear that CPRE have a meeting scheduled with our officers next week to discuss these issues in more detail.*