

South East Plan: Headlines from the Panel's Report

Regional Policies

Growth Levels

- The Panel recommends that housing numbers be increased by 10% to 32,000 dwellings a year in the region. 640,160 new dwellings will be required in total over the plan period, an increase of 62,000. The Panel believes too much weight has been given to the views of existing residents and not enough to demographic and economic factors. However, it is lower than alternatives put forward by SEEDA and GOSE, and is lower than the latest demographic forecasts.

Spatial Approach

- Most of the additional housing is recommended to be focussed in the Inner South East – the London Fringe, Western Corridor/Blackwater Valley and Central Oxon – where there is the greatest economic potential.
- The urban focus of Plan is supported as are regional hubs which the Panel considers should more clearly be a focus for housing growth. The Diamonds for Growth and Investment in the Regional Economic Strategy are seen as important mechanisms for delivery.
- 6 strategic development areas are proposed each with 4-5000 dwellings – one of the six is **south of Oxford**.
- The Panel supports the new growth points - including **Didcot**.
- In order to accommodate higher housing levels proposed, the Panel recommends selective reviews of the Green Belts around **Oxford**, Woking and Guildford where the new boundaries should endure to at least 2031.

Infrastructure

- The Panel agrees with the 'manage and invest' approach and the Regional Assembly's work on infrastructure is praised. However, it does not agree that housing levels can be made contingent upon the delivery of particular pieces of infrastructure; but rather the policies should reinforce the importance of timely delivery.

Inter- Regional Issues

- The Panel is concerned that the Plan does not adequately take into account functional inter-connectivity between regions and recommends the deletion of policy CC7. Inter-regional issues should be dealt with in the Implementation, Monitoring and Review Section of the Plan.

Employment

- The Panel recommends an early partial review of the Plan to provide a clearer framework for economic development and employment land once employment land reviews are completed.
- The Panel does not agree that restricting growth in the more buoyant parts of the South East will encourage growth in the areas where regeneration is priority.

Housing

- The Panel considers that the housing figures should not be treated as ceilings and there should not be any attempt to ration permissions to avoid out-performing them.
- While recognising the problem of districts having two or more housing figures, the Panel considers they are integral to the 'sharper focus' concept in the plan.
- The Plan's emphasis on significantly increasing the affordable housing provision is strongly supported. The Panel acknowledges that the only way to tackle genuine need is to increase substantially the level of investment: it is not a case of building our way out of the problem. The Panel supports the region wide target of 35% but accept higher targets in some regions – including Central Oxfordshire.
- The target of 40 dwellings per hectare is supported, but the Panel states this should not be pursued at the expense of other objectives.
- The Panel supports the 60% target for housing development on brownfield land and acknowledges that delivery will vary across the region.

Transport

- The Panel considers that while there are some transport corridors where highway improvements are required, part of the answer to worsening congestion must be that dependency on car travel has to be reduced. However, it believes it unrealistic to achieve an absolute reduction during the life of the Plan.
- The Assembly's position on demand management is supported and the Panel recommends that policy T5 should require sub regional strategies to indicate a mix of demand management measures.
- The Panel is concerned that insufficient leadership is given on road user charging, and recommends that local authorities be encouraged to test new charging initiatives.
- The East West Rail Link is accepted by the Panel for inclusion as one of the region's priority transport infrastructure projects.

Natural Resource Management

- The Panel recommends that policy NRM2 should identify reservoir schemes with a geographic reference to provide greater clarity and the policy should be amended so there is a firmer steer to LDDs to facilitate their delivery if they are shown to be necessary.

Small Market Towns

- The Panel considers that the Plan should identify those towns (up to about 20,000 people) in the "rest of county" areas that are expected to make a wider contribution to the spatial strategy, such as Winchester and Banbury.
- Also recommended is policy guidance on criteria that would help local authorities identify villages where additional development would be appropriate.

Town Centres

- The Panel recommends that Oxford be identified as one of a number of "centres for significant change".

The Central Oxfordshire Sub-Region

Overview

- The Panel concludes there is sufficient justification for the choice of Central Oxfordshire as a sub-region on its proposed boundaries, but takes the view that insufficient support has been given for economic growth and alternative options for higher levels of growth have not been adequately tested.

Housing (policy H1 and CO2)

- The Panel recommends increasing the number of houses to be built in Central Oxfordshire between 2006 and 2026 from 34,000 to 40,100. The reasons for the increase are:
 - insufficient weight has been given to economic factors – particularly the internationally important science base and the initiatives through the diamond for growth and investment in the Regional Economic Strategy;
 - too much weight has been given to the setting of Oxford and the Green Belt;
 - the proposed figure is less than the Government's population projections. Only small allowances have been made to meet the backlog of unmet housing need and some in-migration;
 - there are 34,000 more jobs than resident workers and while it may not worsen significantly to 2016 it is forecast to worsen after then. It adjoins the western corridor, Milton Keynes and Swindon areas, all of which experience net in commuting.
- The Panel recommends the increase in housing numbers be accommodated as follows:
 - a strategic development area south of Oxford of some 4,000 dwellings;
 - increasing the dwellings in Oxford City by 1,000 and South Oxfordshire by 750 to take account of the new growth points for the West End and Didcot;
 - increasing West Oxfordshire by 600 dwellings to reflect the potential at Witney;
 - decreasing the Vale's part of Central Oxfordshire by 250 dwellings.

Housing in the Vale

- The Panel supports the figure of 3,400 dwellings for Wantage & Grove primarily because of its inter-linkages with Didcot and areas of potential for employment growth. It sees no case for increasing the figure particularly as it is the only named settlement without a rail station – a situation which appears unlikely to change.
- The Vale is recommended to take on additional 750 dwellings on the edge of Didcot; and most additional development will take place after 2016. It recommends that these phasing assumptions and the intention to pool development contributions to fund the Harwell by-pass and its northern extension be referred to in the text accompanying Policy CO2.
- For the rest of the Vale part of Central Oxfordshire, the Panel supports the Council's request for a decrease of 1000 dwellings given the difficulties of finding land around the other main settlements (Abingdon and Botley). It acknowledges this would create unsustainable pressures to extend small rural settlements. (Taken with the increase of Didcot, this gives a net reduction for Central Oxfordshire of 250 dwellings).
- For the area of the Vale outside Central Oxfordshire the Panel supports the Council's request for an increase of 300 dwellings to enable some flexibility to provide homes beyond the sites already identified and likely to be built on sites within existing settlements.

The Core Strategy (policy CO1)

- The Panel recommends that Policy CO1 be revised to reflect:
 - an aspiration to maintain the world class status of the sub-region;
 - incorporate growth on the edge of Oxford; and
 - make explicit the aim to improve the self-containment of the surrounding country towns.
- The text should be expanded to acknowledge:
 - cross boundary inter-relationships; and
 - the aim of fostering a development axis between Didcot and Wantage & Grove based on its economic strengths and improving public transport between houses and jobs.

The Green Belt (policy CO3)

- The Panel concludes that an urban extension to Oxford will be required in the longer term and there are exceptional circumstances to justify a review of the Green Belt including:
 - significant potential in science, technology and education sectors
 - significant excess of jobs over working population
 - problems of staff retention and recruitment
 - housing affordability ratios in excess of the regional average
 - some of the highest house prices in the region
 - large back log of housing need
 - worsening traffic congestion
 - limits to where development could be accommodated within the city without damaging its special character
 - limits to providing family homes on infill and redevelopment sites
 - longer journeys to work from residents in the country towns compared to Oxford.
- Of the two locations considered for an urban extension in the draft Structure Plan 2016, the Panel favours development south of Grenoble Road (rather than between Kidlington and Yarnton) because:
 - it could be more easily integrated into public transport systems
 - it is closer to key employment areas
 - any new employment would provide less competition with Bicester
 - less risk of coalescence with surrounding settlements
 - it was the selected location in the deposit structure plan
 - the owners of the land between Kidlington and Yarnton are no longer pursuing their proposal.
- Rather than advocating a strategic review of the Green Belt, which could lead to delay and risk the whole of the Green Belt becoming vulnerable, the Panel recommends a selective review on the southern edge of Oxford to be undertaken through a coordinated local development document. This could be in the form of a joint area action plan between South Oxfordshire and Oxford City. It should identify the most appropriate land for development with least harm to Green Belt functions and additional safeguarded land to ensure the Green Belt boundaries endure over the long term. Because of the sensitivity of the matter the Panel urges GOSE to stimulate and monitor progress on the area action plan.

Affordable Housing (policy CO4)

- The Panel considers that a level of affordable housing above the regional target of 35% is justifiable, but the figure of 'at least 50%' in the draft plan is too high. It

recommends that for Central Oxfordshire the target should be 'at least 40%' acknowledging that a higher percentage would need to be achieved on some qualifying sites to offset the lack of provision on small sites. This would not weaken the negotiating position in Oxford City and the rural areas of West Oxfordshire where the target is currently 50%.

Employment (policy CO5)

- The Panel suggests that policy CO5 should be reworded to indicate the positive objectives being sought in each location: the emphasis should be on stimulating growth at the established research and business parks between Didcot and Wantage & Grove.
- For Oxford city the policy should acknowledge that some new employment land (other than brownfield sites) may be needed, but the objective should be to avoid worsening the jobs/housing imbalance.
- The job growth estimate for 2006-16 in Central Oxfordshire should be 18,000 in Central Oxfordshire.

Transport (policy CO6)

- The lower case text should contain references to traffic management measures on the A34. There should be a cross reference to initiatives to improve rail freight capacity in policy T11
- The text should refer to the objective of improving multi-modal transport links in the corridor between Didcot and Wantage & Grove to improve access between jobs and homes.

Infrastructure (policy CO7)

- The policy which stipulates that development will be contingent on the timely provision of infrastructure is recommended for deletion.
- The text should cross refer to policy NRM2 on the possible need for an Upper Thames reservoir.

Implementation

- This section should stress the need for joint working at LDF level between SODC and the Vale on Didcot and SODC and the City Council on the South Oxford strategic development area.