

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE BOARD

Date of meeting: 4th April 2005

Report of: Michael Crofton Briggs

**Title: CONSULATION ON THE SOUTH EAST PLAN, INCLUDING
THE CHAPTER ON THE CENTRAL OXFORDSHIRE SUB-
REGION**

Ward: All

Report author: Michael Crofton Briggs

Contact Tel No: 252360

E-mail address: mcrofton-briggs@oxford.gov.uk

Key Decision: No

Lead Member: Alex Hollingsworth

Scrutiny responsibility: Environment

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is RECOMMENDED that the Executive Board should make the following comments to SEERA as the basis for the City Council's response to the public consultation on the South East Plan.

1. There is a need for additional housing in central Oxfordshire to tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness as well as future needs. As a result the level of development in Central Oxfordshire should be at least 2,000 dwellings per annum (Section E7 paragraph 2.1).
2. There is the desire for managed growth to take advantage of the unique opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the Central Oxfordshire sub-region.
3. There is a belief that an urban extension to Oxford appears to be the most sustainable location for new housing in central Oxfordshire. As a result Spatial Option B is preferred or even a hybrid of spatial Options A and B. (Section E7 paragraph 2.6).
4. A comprehensive review of Oxford's Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that met all the needs of the City. As a result an objection is made to Policy CC9 Green Belts and Strategic Gaps (Section D1). This policy and the accompanying text should specify that there is a case for a strategic review of the Oxford Green Belt.
5. For the South East as a whole, support is given to the provision 32,000 dwellings per annum and located through the 'sharper focus' distribution. (Option ii c Section C paragraph 3.4.2). However, the City Council believes that SEERA should reconsider an even higher rate of 36,000 dwellings per annum.

It is further RECOMMENDED that the Planning Services Business Manager, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, should comment on the general policies in the Plan, in partnership with other District Councils across the region.

Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to agree the City Council's response to the consultation on the South East Plan by the South East England Regional Assembly by the deadline of 15th April 2005.
2. One of the City Council's top priorities is to provide more affordable and better quality social housing. The policies in the final version of the South East Plan will be fundamental to enabling or frustrating this priority. The City Council's ability to achieve its other priorities will be significantly influenced by this Plan.

Background and Context

3. SEERA (The South East England Regional Assembly) has produced a draft document called the South East Plan – it includes important choices about development in the region to 2026.
4. The Assembly is looking for public opinion on these choices from 24th January to 15 April 2005. During this period a questionnaire is being sent to every household in the region, and it is asking everyone to watch out for a leaflet giving them a chance to have 'Your Shout' soon.

5. For more information see: www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/southeastplan or visit a local library or any Council offices (especially Ramsay House, St Ebbes Street)
6. The Assembly has explained that:

“Over the next 20 years, the region’s population could grow by 900,000 increasing the demand for homes and jobs. Two thirds of this need for homes is expected to come from people already in the South East, rather than people moving from elsewhere. We need to plan ahead to balance the need for good jobs and successful businesses with the need to maintain a high quality environment. We must also ensure that new development goes hand in hand with infrastructure and services.”

“The key areas the Regional Assembly is seeking views on are jobs, homes, where to build, the countryside, essential services (eg hospitals, transport and schools), sharing success across the whole region, water, education and health. With such a large region and so many topics there are going to be differing views, which is why it is important that people complete and return their questionnaire. We need to reach the right balance for the region. If we have jobs without homes businesses may suffer from lack of staff. Building too few homes could lead to higher house prices and homelessness. However building more homes in areas without jobs may mean unemployment. More development also uses up valuable land and can also add to congestion and our environmental impact”.
7. The draft South East Plan is a substantial document with 270 pages and over 100 policies. It also contains a chapter on the Central Oxfordshire sub-region. The Assembly has produced an Executive Summary that is only 10 pages long.
8. **Vision.** The draft Plan’s vision takes as its theme ‘A Healthy Region’ and sets the challenge that there will be a sustained improvement in quality of life in the South East by 2026, measured in terms of social well-being, the economy, environment and the management of the region’s natural resources.
9. **Core Strategy.** The core strategy for the region emphasises the region’s key international and inter-regional role. Foremost among these are the region’s strong links with London. Within the region, the strategy emphasises the need to reduce economic and social disparities between the east and west of the region and the need to achieve regeneration in the Thames Gateway and a number of coastal towns and cities.
10. **Economy.** The strategy envisages strong and sustained economic growth over the period. The annual rate of growth however, at 3% per annum, would be rather less than the rate achieved since 1991. Increased use of new technology to assist productivity increases will be encouraged, but significant levels of new development will still be required.
11. **Infrastructure.** The Assembly has placed considerable emphasis throughout the draft Plan on the importance of adequate infrastructure provision. It is concerned that too often in the past infrastructure investment has lagged behind development or, in some cases, has not happened at all. As a result it

believes that, in some parts of the region, there is an existing infrastructure deficit which needs addressing.

12. The Assembly, in partnership with others, is undertaking further analysis of infrastructure needs and is developing a draft concordat, to submit to Government, to underpin the new arrangements. The overall scale of development in the Plan eventually submitted to Government will be conditional upon progress on this issue.
13. **Housing Numbers.** After considerable debate, the Assembly has decided that the consultation should focus on options for three levels of regional growth, and two options for distribution of that growth.
14. The three growth options are:
 - 25,500 additional homes per annum – a lower figure than the current planned rate
 - 28,000 additional homes per annum – approximately the current planned rate
 - 32,000 additional homes per annum – higher than the current planned rate.
15. The two distribution options are:
 - Continuation of Existing Policy – essentially a roll forward of the pattern of development established in existing regional planning guidance
 - Sharper Focus – a variation which places more emphasis on a combination of areas requiring regeneration and areas with notable economic potential.
16. The higher figure being consulted on is lower than one that the research carried out for the Regional Assembly said was required to meet housing needs. It is considerably lower than the figure needed to sustain economic growth, even at the reduced rate proposed. Only a figure of 36,000 additional homes per annum addresses the existing backlog of housing need in the region (backlog in the sense of 'unhoused' families - it doesn't include providing for people in temporary accommodation).
17. The different scales of growth and distributions have their differing merits but, in essence, lower levels of growth bring relatively modest infrastructure requirements, and probably (although not certainly) have a lesser environmental impact. On the other hand, they would be unlikely to meet forecast housing demand and might inhibit growth in the labour supply and therefore the economy. Conversely, growth at the highest level would increase infrastructure and possibly environmental demands but would be more likely to respond to housing demand, supply and the economy.
18. **Central Oxfordshire.** The key issues of particular significance for the sub-region include:
 - the unique potential of the sub-region's dynamic and innovative economy, including its role as an international centre for education and innovation
 - congestion on road and rail, and the need to strengthen the public transport network, and promote alternatives to car and lorry traffic
 - requirements for physical, social and economic infrastructure to address historic backlogs in provision and to provide for new economic and housing growth

- the need to improve housing availability and affordability
- the character and setting of the city of Oxford and potential constraints to development posed by the Oxford Green Belt
- the need to accommodate development in a sustainable way, meeting social and economic needs while protecting and enhancing the quality of the environment and ensuring the wise use of resources.

19. **Vision.** Central Oxfordshire has distinctive characteristics on which its success is built that must be maintained and enhanced. The Central Oxfordshire economy (especially the high value added end) is largely founded on the universities, spin offs, research campuses and publishing. This workforce is attracted and retained in part due to the sub-region's heritage, green spaces, areas of outstanding natural beauty and varied and beautiful villages and towns. It is important to provide employment land for such uses rather than for activities such as warehousing and distribution. It is equally essential that housing and other growth does not ruin the heritage which is part of central Oxfordshire's appeal to such businesses and their workers.

20. **Core Strategy.** The core strategy seeks to build on the strengths of the subregion, realising opportunities for further growth while protecting and enhancing the natural, historic and cultural environment.

21. **Housing Numbers.** Housing numbers are expressed by comparison to the current scale that is required as defined in the Government's document Regional Planning Guidance 9 for the South East (RPG9). The levels of housing provision considered by the sub-regional strategy steering group (officer and member level) were:

Bottom of Range:

New dwellings per annum in Central Oxfordshire	1,600
Total additional dwellings 2006-2026	32,000
Growth level	RPG9

Top of Range:

New dwellings per annum in Central Oxfordshire	2,000
Total additional dwellings 2006-2026	40,000
Growth level	RPG9 + 25%

22. The recommended level of growth proposed by Oxfordshire County Council is that of RPG9 (not exceeding 1,600 houses per annum) with the qualification that any growth must be accompanied by adequate investment in infrastructure including addressing the backlog in provision.

23. Spatial Options

- **Option A** – Development of larger settlements beyond the Green Belt Focusing growth at the towns of Bicester in the north of the sub-region and Didcot (and potentially at Wantage/Grove) in the south. These towns and surrounding areas are regarded as being relatively free of physical constraints, well located and served for transport connections, having potential to generate employment, and benefiting through greater and better planned investment in infrastructure. However, housing growth in these areas could also lead to growth in commuting from these towns, especially by car, if not matched by employment opportunities. This option would reflect the existing strategy of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

- **Option B** – Urban extensions to Oxford. Potential exists for extensions immediately to the south of the city and also to the north-west in the area west of Kidlington. Development in these locations would provide housing nearest to the area of greatest need, and be close to the employment (Oxford's jobs exceed the size of the resident workforce by 27,000), entertainment and transport choices and services offered within the city of Oxford. It would also involve development of Green Belt land and be likely to adversely impact on transport routes including the A34.
24. Option A was selected as the preferred spatial strategy by the County Council. However, there was not unanimous support for this within the Steering Group, with the City Council presenting an alternative strategy with support from two district councils. This alternative was based on a hybrid of spatial Options A and B and accommodating between 36,800 and 40,000 additional dwellings between 2006 and 2026 (between 15% and 25% above RPG9 levels).

Commentary

25. The South East Plan is an important document that will shape the nature of development across the region for the next 20 years. There have been widespread concerns at the scale of development being proposed, together with deciding how much new development should be directed away from areas of highest economic potential. As a result the Regional Assembly has chosen to consult the public on a lower range of housing than that suggested by its officers and to adopt a more restrictive policy that limits Green Belt reviews to local bodies. It is more than likely that the levels and location of housing being proposed will not tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness nor will they sustain the levels of economic growth forecast for the region as a whole.
26. The City Council submitted an alternative strategy to the Regional Assembly because it considered that the best interests of its residents and businesses would be achieved through the provision of new development within and adjacent to the City itself.
27. The preparation of the South East Plan provides an opportunity for some fresh thinking about the spatial framework for the region as a whole and Central Oxfordshire in particular. It is considered that the task requires some long-term strategic thinking and making an assessment of the future role of the City and its sub-region within the South East over the next 30 to 40 years. This is rather than seeing the task as simply a matter of rolling forward past ideas for another 5 or 10 years.
28. The Alternative Strategy was also built up from a starting point of assessing long-term needs. The City already has a very significant standing in the region as a world class University City, the only one in the region. It is at the centre of a quadrant of the region that has the faster growing economic potential of any region in Europe. This stems from the knowledge-based and life science economy that is inextricably entwined with the two Universities within the City. In addition the recent Regional Transport Strategy has recognised the significant role the City plays within the Region as a Transport Hub.

29. Overall the demographic and employment forecasts indicate that policies for the Central Oxfordshire sub-region should seek to accommodate a net increase of between 37,000 and 40,000 dwellings over a plan period of 2006 to 2026. If backlog of housing needs is taken into account such as the 1,000 families in temporary accommodation in the City, then any Plan should seek to make provision for the top end of this range. In addition to homelessness the City has a housing waiting list of 5,000 people and a housing requirement survey that indicates that between 1700 and 1800 affordable houses are needed per annum.
30. At present there are 52,000 dwellings in the City of Oxford and some 160,000 in the sub-region as a whole. It is calculated that in the last 20 years some 45,000 dwellings have been built within Central Oxfordshire. More recently in the last 6 years, between 1996 and 2002, 4,000 dwellings were built in the City and some 9,000 in the sub- region as a whole. 50% of this latter amount was provided on previously developed land, mostly within the City itself. The proposed annual rate of building in the Alternative Strategy of 2,000 houses per annum is less than that achieved in the past 20 years.
31. It is considered that new land will only need to be found for, at the most, some 20,000 of the additional dwellings needed. So, as in previous decades, it is not true to argue that the dwelling requirement being proposed will lead to the substantial loss of the rural area of the county. This has not happened in the past and need not in the future. An argument that an area of the Oxfordshire countryside on equivalent to the area of the City of Oxford will need to be built also forgets that about 50% of the City is non-residential. Oxford City covers 4,500 hectares. Even if all the extra housing were built on green fields this would only amount to about 450 hectares. In fact it is more likely that up to 50% of the extra 20,000 houses will be built within urban areas.
32. The City Council has proposed in the Alternative Strategy that a proportion of the new housing required should be provided as new urban extensions either to the south or north of the City, with each location accommodating mixed development and some 6,000 to 8,000 houses together with appropriate facilities to support such new communities.
33. This Alternative Strategy considers that there are the necessary exceptional circumstances to warrant revision to the Green Belt boundaries to facilitate taking land out of the Green Belt and enabling the provision of new communities as urban extensions.
- There are unique economic needs that can only be met within or adjacent to the City
 - The very substantial scale of housing needs cannot be accommodated at the country towns alone
 - The country towns need a period of consolidation while their infrastructure backlog has a chance to catch up
 - There is an opportunity to build truly sustainable communities associated with the City.
 - The City, with its established social and cultural facilities, is better able to meet the needs of new residents
 - New infrastructure is more sustainable and the associated costs less adjacent to the City Affordable housing is required by the City, near to the City, rather than at the country towns.

34. It is acknowledged that if the Alternative Strategy were to precede this would entail a careful and comprehensive review of the Green Belt around the City. The Green Belt was originally conceived in the 1950s and its general extent established at that time, although the actual detailed boundaries have only been finally confirmed more recently. This has therefore endured for over 50 years. The review proposed would equally aim to endure for a considerable time. The land likely to be required for development represents only a small proportion (about 1%) of the whole of the Green Belt around the City and is not within the areas that contribute directly to the character and setting of the City. The scale of development being contemplated represents a small part of the countryside of the whole of the County.
35. The urban extension proposed would involve building on what is currently low-quality agricultural green belt land within an adjoining local authority area. Although this option was rejected in the deposit structure plan for the county, a recent structure plan examination in public panel concluded:

“The Deposit Structure Plan strategy up to 2016 just, but only just, meets the development requirements of RPG9 and the needs of the Oxfordshire economy. A more comprehensive review of options, including those that involve making changes to the green belt, is needed to provide a rational basis for development choices in the longer term.”

Details of others who have been consulted

36. A public debate was held on 9th February at which officers from both SEERA and the County Council spoke before discussions in groups was conducted by an independent facilitator. The local environment Portfolio Holder, the Chief Executive and a couple of her colleagues also attended the public debate held in Didcot on 23rd February.
37. Cowley Area Committee on 2nd March agreed:
- (a) to support Option B (in paragraph 23) the Urban Extension to Oxford.
 - (b) to support the Growth option of 32,000 additional homes per annum for the South East (paragraph 14)
 - (c) to support the distribution option of a ‘Sharper Focus’ for the South East (paragraph 15)
38. North Area Committee on 3rd March agreed:
- (a) to support to the need for additional housing in central Oxfordshire to tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness as well as future needs.
 - (b) to offer cautious support to the desire for managed growth to take advantage of the unique opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the sub-region.
 - (c) NOT to support a belief that an urban extension to Oxford appears to be the most sustainable location for new housing in central Oxfordshire.
 - (d) to support that a comprehensive review of Oxford’s Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that met all the needs of the City.
39. Council on 7th March decided to confirm its views already expressed on 22nd November 2004, namely:
- (a) the need for additional housing in central Oxfordshire to tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness as well as future needs.

- (b) the desire for managed growth to take advantage of the unique opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the sub-region.
 - (c) a belief than an urban extension to Oxford appears to be the most sustainable location for new housing in central Oxfordshire.
 - (d) that a comprehensive review of Oxford's Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that met all the needs of the City.
40. Central South and West Area Committee on 8th March agreed to:
- (a) endorse the alternative strategy adopted by the Council on 22nd November 2004.
 - (b) express the view that any development forming an urban extension to the city should be constructed to the highest urban design and environmental standards
41. South East on 14th March strongly supported:
- (a) the need for additional housing in central Oxfordshire to tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness as well as future needs.
 - (b) the desire for managed growth to take advantage of the unique opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the sub-region.
 - (c) a belief than an urban extension to Oxford appears to be the most sustainable location for new housing in central Oxfordshire.
 - (d) that a comprehensive review of Oxford's Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that met all the needs of the City.
42. North East Area Committee met on 15th March:
- (a) The Committee noted that the three growth options as set out in the report did not address Oxford's housing problems, especially in beginning to deal with the backlog of housing needs. 32,000 additional homes per annum would be considered as the minimum level to keep pace with needs while 36,000 would only begin to tackle the backlog.
 - (b) The continual sub-division of family homes due to the lack of suitable sites for housing development would become worse if land was not made available to enable new houses to be built.
 - (c) In considering the possible erosion of the Green Belt, Members said that there was a need to recognise that the amount of land required for development comprised only about 1% of the Green Belt land around the city.
 - (d) Consideration also needed to be given to environmental, economic and transport issues to relieve congestion on key routes to Oxford and develop the relationship with other key towns across the county such as Bicester and Didcot.
 - (e) Members also felt that consultation had been inadequate, especially in the use of the survey issued on behalf of the regional assembly.
43. East Area Parliament on 16th March had a full and long agenda and ran out of time to discuss this item.

Financial implications

44. There are no financial implications flowing directly from this report

Legal implications

45. There are no legal implications flowing directly from this report

Staffing Implications

46. There are no staffing implications flowing directly from this report

The grounds for recommending a particular option

47. At the Council meeting on 22nd November 2004 Council resolved to commend the Council's submission on a sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire, noting in particular:
- (a) the need for additional housing in central Oxfordshire to tackle the existing levels of housing need and homelessness as well as future needs.
 - (b) the desire for managed growth to take advantage of the unique opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the sub-region.
 - (c) a belief that an urban extension to Oxford appears to be the most sustainable location for new housing in central Oxfordshire.
 - (d) that a comprehensive review of Oxford's Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that met all the needs of the City.
48. It is recommended that the City Council should continue to argue that its alternative strategy is best for the City, the sub-region and the South East as a whole, namely 2,000 dwellings per annum and Option B – urban extensions to Oxford, as described in Section E7 of the South East Plan.
49. With respect to the scale of growth across the South East as a whole as proposed in the South East Plan, it is recommended that the consultation option ii c at Section C paragraph 3.4.2 should be supported, namely 32,000 dwellings per annum with a 'sharper focus'. However, it is also suggested that SEERA should re-consider a higher rate of 36,000 dwellings per annum, as included in the officer draft of the Plan.
50. It is suggested that the City Council should express strong concern over Policy CC9 Green Belts and Strategic Gaps. As originally drafted by officers this Policy recognised that it was appropriate for the South East Plan itself to indicate where, as a result of the strategy in the Plan, there should be a strategic review of a Green Belt. The current Plan states that the Assembly considers there is no case for any strategic review with any local reviews pursued through the LDF. Since the City Council believes that a comprehensive review of the Oxford Green Belt is required, it is important that such a review should be clearly proposed in the SE Plan. Given the administrative boundaries around the city, local reviews could not be adequately comprehensive.
51. Officers from Districts across the Region are sharing views on the many and varied region-wide policies in the draft Plan. It is suggested that if there is a consensus of views prepared for submission to SEERA, the City Council should add its name to these too. It is recommended that such views could be submitted by the Planning Services Business Manager following consultation with the Portfolio Holder, Strategic Planning, Housing and Economic Development.

The timetable for action following the decision

52. The Regional Assembly is seeking views on its draft plan by 15th April. Work is underway, being led by the County Councils, on district housing distribution options with a view to these being submitted to SEERA in September. SEERA then intends to submit a revised South East Plan to the Deputy Prime Minister in the November 2005.

THIS REPORT HAS BEEN SEEN AND APPROVED BY:

Portfolio Holder: Alex Hollingsworth and Ed Turner

Strategic Director: Sharon Cosgrove

Legal and Democratic Services: Kate Chirnside

Financial Management: Claire Reid

Background papers: No unpublished papers have been relied upon in preparation of the report

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