

 **Report of: Planning Business Manager**


 **Executive Board**

 **Date: 19 June 2006**


 **Item No:**

 **Title of Report : The South East Plan**

Summary and Recommendations

 **Purpose of report:** To agree City Council's response on the draft South East Plan submitted by the South East England Regional Assembly and advise the Examination in Public Panel appointed by the Government of these views by the 23rd June.

 **Key decision:** No

 **Portfolio Holder:** Councillor John Goddard

 **Deputy Responsibility:** Environment

 **Ward(s) affected:** All

Report Approved by: Councillor John Goddard
Emma Burson – Finance
Jeremy Thomas - Legal

Policy Framework:

Oxford Plan priority statements

- * Find sustainable solutions to Oxford's need for more housing.
- * Seek to sustain the City's economic status and success

Recommendation(s):

1. To advise the Panel that:

- (i) Green Belt. (Policy CC10a) There is a case for a strategic review of Green Belts within the region.

- (ii) Overall Housing numbers (Policy H1) The South East Plan should make provision for 36,000 dwellings per annum, as indicated from the demographic and economic forecasts prepared by SEERA.
- (iii) Central Oxfordshire (Policy CO2) The Plan should make provision for 2,000 per annum (40,000 in total) to meet the demographic and economic forecasts prepared by SEERA.
- (iv) Sustainable Development – The Plan is commended for its policies on sustainable development (Policy CC1), climate change (Policy CC2) and sustainable construction (Policy CC4) as these complement those of the City Council
- (v) Economy (Policy CC8b). The priority given to regional hubs is supported
- (vi) Town Centres (Policies TC1 and 2) Support is given to the recognition of Oxford as a Primary Regional Centre.
- (vii) Central Oxfordshire Policy CO5 Support is given for the recognition given to the Castle development, West Gate redevelopment and the wider West End rejuvenation.

Background and Context

1. SEERA (The South East England Regional Assembly) has produced a document called the South East Plan and submitted it for approval to the Government. The Government has appointed a Panel to consider comments on the Plan and to write a report advising on any Modifications that it should make to the Plan. To help the Panel in its task it is consulting on the Plan up until 23rd June and will hold an Examination in Public between November 2006 and March 2007.
2. Oxford lies within one of ten sub-regions across the South East. The Central Oxfordshire sub-region covers the City itself and its adjoining country towns of Bicester, Kidlington, Witney, Abingdon, Wantage, Didcot and Wallingford.
3. The City Council has considered the emerging South East Plan on two previous occasions.
4. After a debate at Full Council in March 2005 the Executive Board responded to SEERA's consultation on the draft South East Plan. The Executive Board concluded that:
 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 (40,000 between 2006 and 2026) (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 is 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.
5. In October 2005 Executive Board responded to a consultation by Oxfordshire County Council into the options to accommodate housing in the Central Oxfordshire part of the region.
6. It concluded that:
1. No support is given to either Option 1: Focus on Bicester and Didcot or Option 2: Focus on south of the county.
 2. The Alternative Option that should be promoted is Urban Extension to Oxford. It is considered that this is the most sustainable focus for new housing in central Oxfordshire.
 3. A comprehensive review of Oxford's Green Belt is required, with an aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that meets all the needs of the City.
7. The City Council prepared an Alternative Strategy to that prepared by the County Council and submitted that direct to SEERA.

Commentary

8. The City Council's views have gone unheeded by SEERA and this report suggests that the Council's current views need to be presented to the Panel.

Housing in the City is in Crisis – housing in the lower quartile of the price bracket is beyond the means of the majority of the population. There is a flight of families from the City unable to afford to remain here. The estimates of housing need for both affordable and market housing far exceed the ability of the City in terms of land and resources to provide for new houses. The pressures on the market are leading to planning applications for unacceptable levels of conversions to flats and of high housing densities and poor quality of new provision.

The Economy of the City is being disadvantaged – the major impact of the housing crisis is on increasing levels of in commuting and an inability of local employers to recruit and retain staff.

Oxford's Economy is distinctive – The interaction between the universities, teaching hospitals and research and spin out companies makes an essential contribution to the national economy. Innovation is known to act as the dynamo for the knowledge-based economy. The knowledge-based sector here in the City supports a considerable diversity of service industries, which are reliant on the health of the former.

There is a danger of complacency - Unfortunately recent figures produced by both SEEDA and the Oxford Economic Observatory indicate that the local economy is not performing as well as it should be and the future economic health of Oxford requires nurturing.

The City's Needs.

9. The simple conclusion that flows from these points is that more housing, especially affordable, is necessary in Oxford in sustainable locations. Demographic and economic forecasts used by SEERA indicate that 2,000 houses per annum are required within the Central Oxfordshire sub-region (From 2006 to 2026 this equates to 40,000 dwellings). The forecasts indicate that the population as a whole is not growing significantly but people are living in smaller households. So the need for new housing in the central Oxfordshire sub-region (and the South East as a whole) arises for four main reasons.
 - People are living longer. In fact we need to house 4 generations compared to 3 generations 20 years ago.
 - People are remaining single for longer and are divorcing more often than 20 years ago.
 - To provide homes to reduce the back of unmet needs (reduce homelessness and overcrowding or sharing).
 - The local aging population creates a need for net economic migration of a fresh influx of employees.
10. Against the total of 40,000 dwellings required some 26,000 of these are already planned in current Structure and Local Plans (2006 to 2016) mostly on brown field sites. The Local Plan estimates that 7,000 of the 26,000 homes can be accommodated within the City. It is the residual that is still to be satisfactorily allocated.
11. The Council considers that a Green Belt Review should precede any specific site allocations. The green belt was originally conceived in the 1950s and its general extent established at that time. It has therefore endured for over 50 years. The review proposed would equally aim to endure for a considerable time. The land, which may be required for development, represents only a small proportion (about 2%) of the whole of the green belt around the City. There are some areas within the Green Belt that do not contribute directly to the character and setting of the City.
12. The Green Belt review should make use of appropriate criteria to assess where best to build sustainable communities associated with the City. The review criteria should include assessments on how best to provide social and cultural

facilities to meet the needs of new residents, where new infrastructure is most sustainable to reduce travel and how to minimise infrastructure costs. The review should also assess whether more housing is required near to the City or at the country towns. It is possible that urban extension to the City might have distinct advantages over building at the country towns.

Response to the South East Plan.

13. **Green Belt** - SEERA considers that there is no case for any strategic review of Green Belt within the region. Not all new development can be provided on brown field land and the approach by SEERA prevents the opportunity to consider all the most sustainable locations. The City Council should seek a review of the Green belt around the City. (Policy CC10a)
14. **Overall Housing numbers** – the plan explains that SEERA carried out demographic and economic forecasts but then used these as only a starting point for considering future levels of growth. Other factors, not least the impact of development and the provision of infrastructure led SEERA to revise down its levels of provision to 28,900 dwellings per year. This might be appropriate for those already in housing but has ignored those who are part of the backlog of unmet needs or those who will become new households over the life of the Plan. The South East Plan should make provision for 36,000 dwellings per annum, as indicated from its own demographic and economic forecasts. (Policy H1)
15. **Central Oxfordshire** - The Plan only seeks to provide 1,700 dwellings per annum (34,000 in total) and directs 7,300 of these to expansion at Didcot, Bicester and Wantage/Grove. The Plan should make provision for 2,000 per annum (40,000 in total) to meet its own forecasts. (Policy CO2)
16. **Sustainable Development** – SEERA should be commended for its policies on sustainable development (Policy CC1), climate change (Policy CC2) and sustainable construction (Policy CC4) as these complement those of the City Council.
17. **Economy** – Oxford is one of 21 regional hubs that are to act as centres of economic activity and transport services (Policy CC8b). The priority given to regional hubs should be supported.
18. **Town Centres** – Oxford is recognised as a Primary Regional Centre where large scale developments should be focused. Recognition is also given to the Castle development, West Gate redevelopment and the wider West End rejuvenation. This should be supported. (Policies TC1, 2 and CO5)

Council 26th June

19. The Executive Board under the Constitution is the body with the responsibility to respond to the consultation by the Examination in Public Panel. However, the Executive Board may wish for this report to be considered by Council on 26th June. Nevertheless, since the deadline to send comments to the Panel is 23rd June, the Executive Board will need to make decisions on the recommendations and for these to be sent to the Panel to ensure that the City Council is invited to participate in the EiP. The Panel have recognised due to the elections in May that it might be difficult for some Councils to respond within the deadline and it has agreed that provided it receives interim views by the 23rd June, it will accept final views after this date as long as they are received by the end of the month.

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Background docs: no unpublished papers