

To: City Executive Board

Date: 10 September 2015

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Oxford Growth Strategy

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations from the Housing Panel on the Oxford Growth Strategy

Key decision? Yes

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead member: Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Board Member for Transport, Planning and Regulatory Services

Policy Framework: Corporate Plan priority 'Meeting Housing Needs' in particular sub-objective 3 'Reviewing the Green Belt'.

Recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the following recommendation:

- 1. That the Council's strategic approach to providing new affordable housing should be aligned with, and referenced in, the Oxford Growth Strategy.**
- 2. That the Oxford Growth Strategy includes a greater emphasis on mobile working and the opportunities presented by Better Broadband for Oxfordshire.**

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Notes of Oxford Growth Strategy discussion at the Housing Panel meeting on 3 September 2015

Introduction

1. The Chair of Scrutiny requested to pre-scrutinise the Oxford Growth Strategy decision and this was placed on both the agendas for both the Housing Panel on 3 September and the Scrutiny Committee on 7 September.

2. The Scrutiny Committee would like to thank Councillor Hollingsworth, Matthew Bates and Lyndsey Beveridge for presenting this item to the Housing Panel and answering the Panel's questions. The notes of this discussion were circulated to the Scrutiny Committee and are attached as appendix 1.
3. The Committee would also like to thank Councillor Price and David Edwards for attending the Scrutiny Committee meeting to discuss the work of the Oxfordshire Growth Board and for staying to support the Committee's discussion on the Oxford Growth Strategy.

Summary of the discussion

4. The Chair of the Housing Panel said that the Panel had received good answers its questions the Panel and was broadly supportive of urban extensions to Oxford with improved transport links.
5. The Committee questioned whether the strategy could provide more analysis of how growth would affect social housing. The Leader of the Council said that there were both economic and demographic growth pressures in the city and that delivering 28,000-30,000 would be a huge challenge. The City Council required that 50% of new housing within the city was provided as affordable housing. However, the city had no such policy levers for new housing located outside the city boundaries as other authorities' local plans were sovereign.
6. The Committee also heard that the city also lacks an integrated transport system, and was unlikely to get one. The challenges around growth were not limited to Oxford but were particularly acute in the city. The Executive Director for Regeneration and Housing said that market housing would be needed to fund infrastructure improvements but that a proportion of new housing could be provided as key worker housing. The Committee heard that the Council had not reached the stage of developing parameters yet so any such opportunities sketched out in the strategy would be speculative.
7. The Committee noted that the Inequality Panel had recommended that factors around inequality should be considered in all major Council strategies. The Committee suggested that affordable housing should at least be alluded to at strategy level and that there were strategic opportunities to deliver affordable housing without affecting the sovereignty of local plans, such as through investing in 'real lettings'. The Committee noted the need for strategic thinking about affordable housing that aligns with this Strategy.

Recommendation 1 – That the Council's strategic approach to providing new affordable housing should be aligned with, and referenced in, the Oxford Growth Strategy.

8. The Committee noted that increasing patterns of mobile working meant that distributed housing was becoming more feasible. Better Broadband for Oxfordshire provided such opportunities and the Committee suggested that this should be reflected in the Strategy.

Recommendation 2 – That the Oxford Growth Strategy includes a greater emphasis on mobile working and the opportunities presented by Better Broadband for Oxfordshire.

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List of background papers: None
Version number: 1.0

Appendix 1 - Notes of Oxford Growth Strategy discussion at the Housing Panel meeting on 3 September 2015

The Board Member for Transport, Planning and Regulatory Services introduced the report and explained that it contained nothing substantially new but provided a useful summary of the current position.

A Principal Planning Officer highlighted an error on page 96 of the paperwork (paragraph 17 of the report), where '£50,000 for Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire Examinations' should read '£50,000 for Vale of the White Horse and West Oxfordshire Examinations'.

The Panel questioned whether the Council had looked at potentially cheaper alternatives to the proposed additional resources, such as co-funding some of this work on a county-wide basis. The Panel heard that there was a joint working process but not full agreement on some issues, so there was a need for the City Council to frontload evidence to the Oxfordshire Growth Board. Two districts were trying to evidence that Oxford's housing needs could be met within Oxford, for example through the removal of height restrictions and certain environmental protections. The City Council was identifying sites on the edge of the city for housing development and the Districts were not necessarily keen to carry out such work on a joint basis.

The Panel asked whether there was scope for the City Council to negotiate on issues such as housing density and height restrictions in the city, or to consider sites outside the city on major transport routes, in order to find middle ground and seek agreement with the districts. The Panel heard that there had been positive engagement with some districts and less positive engagement with others. The Board Member advised that finding solutions to Oxford's unmet housing need would require difficult decisions about sustainability that would have to balance a range of views. However the evidence that Oxford's housing need far out-scaled its capacity meant that progress was now being made towards agreement of Oxford's unmet housing need that would need to be met outside of the district. The Board Member advised that the housing need figure that the City Council had agreed to accept [from the Strategic Housing Market Assessment] as a working assumption for the purposes of calculating the unmet element, was at the lower end of future projections and would not meet the affordable housing needs by some way.

The Board Member advised that height restrictions were very important to the character of Oxford but that did not mean that a completely flat skyline would be desirable. Some higher developments on selected sites could be appropriate if they are carefully designed, such as potentially at the Oxpens site.

The Board Member advised that the City Council would consider whether high density housing would be appropriate on future development sites. It was unlikely that there were streets of older housing within the city that could feasibly be redeveloped and replaced with new housing blocks, as suggested by a Panel member.

The Panel expressed disappointment that so far, only student accommodation had been allocated on the Oxpens site. The Panel heard that the City Council was awaiting the latest plans for selling the site from the landowner, London and Continental Railways.

A Principal Planning Officer advised that the City Council had assessed that there was capacity for 10,368 additional housing units in Oxford in the period from 2011-31. This was a slight increase on the figure given in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), and was a significant increase from the SHLAA in previous years. This was a very ambitious figure that made some very optimistic assumptions about density and overcoming constraints, and hence it should be seen as an absolute upper limit.

The Panel questioned what else the City Council was doing to get its message across. The Panel heard that the City Council was seeking to influence districts' local plans and had successfully pushed for a 2 year time frame for Cherwell to review its local plan. South Oxfordshire (SODC) would be the last of the 4 neighbouring districts to review its local plan, with examination anticipated in late 2016. SODC's latest draft assumed a contribution of 3,000 new homes towards meeting Oxford's unmet housing need, and considered three sites; land South of Grenoble Road, Wick Farm north-east of Barton, and a new settlement near Lewknor off junction 7 of the M40 motorway. The Board Member advised that he was not confident that Grenoble Road would be SODC's preferred option.

The Panel questioned who owned land South of Grenoble Road and how many houses could be accommodated on this site. Principal Planning Officers advised that this depended on the size parcel of land in question but that the site could accommodate at least 4,000 homes. The City Council, Thames Water Utilities, Magdalen College were the major land owners.

The Panel asked whether improved transport links would be part of any urban extension of Oxford and heard that this would be part of the detailed work including routes for cycling, walking and buses. The Board Member advised that the Cowley branch line represented an opportunity to improve public transport in that part of the city, along with new or extended bus routes. More ambitious options, such as trams, were unlikely.

The City Council was also continuing to engage at Leader and officer level and using political persuasion and argument to challenge undesirable alternative options, such as developments near Swindon or in more distant Oxfordshire villages, which would be less suitable for meeting Oxford's needs. The preferred option for meeting Oxford's needs is through sustainable urban extensions around the edge of the City. The City Council's position had been clearly represented in local media. The City Council was also making a technical and political case to national government.

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