

A Better Vision for Oxfordshire

Campaigning for our Rural County



The Future of Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire is the most rural county in the South-East but for how much longer?

An unelected and little-known quango called the National Infrastructure Commission has identified the area from Oxford to Cambridge for the creation of a new linear city. For Oxfordshire, it says this means over 200,000 additional houses “need” to be built in our county – adding to the extra 100,000 already foisted on us by the government imposed “growth plan”.

All this has been “decided” without any proper public consultation, or without considering how other crucial factors such as pollution, climate change, commuting and transport, or the loss of agricultural food production should be taken into account. Our local authorities have been instructed to come up with a plan to make it all happen. And this they have done.

What their draft plan shows is that it is impossible to build another 300,000 houses in Oxfordshire without changing the fundamental character of our county. It is nonsense to say – as government ministers claim – that this can be done without Oxfordshire becoming a completely different place to live.

CPRE believes that our countryside is a crucial part of what makes the county such a great place in which to live and work. We all know that we need some more houses – there are lots of Oxfordshire people who need their own home – but the government’s experts say that this could be met by building around an extra 60,000 houses – not 300,000! And we all know too that there are places where the road, rail and public transport systems need to be improved. But adding in another 300,000 houses with all their cars and people wanting to get to work will bring the county to a halt – not make our lives and economy better.

So read on to learn more – and join the debate about what our county should look like in the years to come.

John Harwood, *President – CPRE Oxfordshire*

Helen Marshall, Director CPRE Oxfordshire

Our six local authorities are working together to bring forward the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, which will set the framework for the county for the next 30 years. CPRE Oxfordshire has welcomed this more strategic approach to development but we know that getting it right is absolutely vital, otherwise our rural character could quite simply be lost within a generation. CPRE's role is often to point out the flaws in proposals but we are at times, and quite rightly, challenged to say what our own approach would be. This document sets out our views on how an appropriate level of development could be brought forward in a sensitive and well-planned way that would both protect and enhance our rural communities and landscape. We hope you will be inspired by this vision to join us, support us in our campaigning and help ensure that anyone living in Oxfordshire in 2050 can still experience the benefits of our rural character which we enjoy today.

Dr Jayne Manley, Oxfordshire Environment Board

Oxfordshire's environment is widely acknowledged as the critical underpinning of a successful, healthy county, but we are seeing significant declines in the natural resources that makes Oxfordshire so special. If we are to reverse the impact of our actions and loss of our natural support system, as well as achieve the Government's stated ambition of net environmental gain, we will need to approach growth and development differently in the future. At this crucial time, it's good to see CPRE Oxfordshire taking an active role in that conversation, and we should all be playing our part and joining in.



A Vision for Oxfordshire: The Opportunity

The Campaign to Protect Rural England Oxfordshire works to improve, protect and preserve the landscape of Oxfordshire and its towns and villages for the benefit of everyone.

Our vision

Development should be well planned and sensitively executed to protect and enhance Oxfordshire's countryside so that anyone living in Oxfordshire in 2050 can experience the rural character of Oxfordshire which exists today.

Oxfordshire's countryside, towns and villages are at the heart of its environmental, economic and social well-being. The county's rural character is the fundamental starting point from which decisions about the future development of the county should be made.

We are all custodians of Oxfordshire and it is our joint responsibility to ensure we maintain and enhance our county's unique and wonderful rural character, landscape and communities for future generations.

Our guiding principles are that:

- the amount of development, and its timescale, should be based on natural growth and migration;
- brownfield land should be developed first. Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) should be developed as a last resort under proven exceptional circumstances;
- genuinely affordable housing should be made available, in perpetuity, to address local need;
- high densities of development should become standard, to avoid losing more land than necessary;
- any new communities must be sustainable and existing rural communities need investment to support services and infrastructure;
- job creation should reflect Oxfordshire's existing skill base while addressing areas of need to reduce unsustainable commuting.

“Oxfordshire can be the lungs of the region to the north of the Home Counties. It can be a breathing space between the cities of London, Birmingham and Milton Keynes that still values and embraces wildlife, nature, countryside and the symbiotic relationship between beautiful small towns of character and vibrant rural communities, comprised of villages with a still-beating heart and farms that both give to, as well as take from, nature. It can also stand as a testament to the achievements of intelligent and sensitive planning by moderating building development through extensive use of brownfield sites and giving priority to the value of the wildlife and nature.” My Vision, CPRE Oxfordshire member



Caron Badley Shutterstock



The Challenges Facing Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire benefits from a strong economy, high quality of life and remains the most rural county in the South East. Future development needs to balance the County's economic growth with protecting the County's rural character and environment.

The Growth Arc

The Government has endorsed the National Infrastructure Commission recommendation that the five counties forming the "Oxford Cambridge Arc" should be targeted for exponential growth. **In Oxfordshire's case this is identified as over 200,000 houses on top of the 100,000 in current Local Plans.** CPRE considers that growth on anything like this scale would be incompatible with preserving the rural nature of Oxfordshire.

New road and rail links will provide the infrastructure for this proposed growth.

East West Rail is intended to facilitate commuting between settlements in the Growth Arc with several new or enhanced South-North links from London. CPRE accepts East West Rail but is concerned that the new South-North rail links will encourage

migration from London, pricing local people out of houses and reducing social cohesion, changing the county's character in another way.

A new Oxford-Cambridge Expressway, a motorway in all but name, will act as an outer M25. CPRE Oxfordshire opposes the Expressway in principle and the scale of development it is intended to facilitate. Should an Expressway nevertheless be imposed it should minimise environmental harm, use existing roads where possible and avoid entirely new roads being driven through the Oxford Green Belt, AONBs or the open countryside.

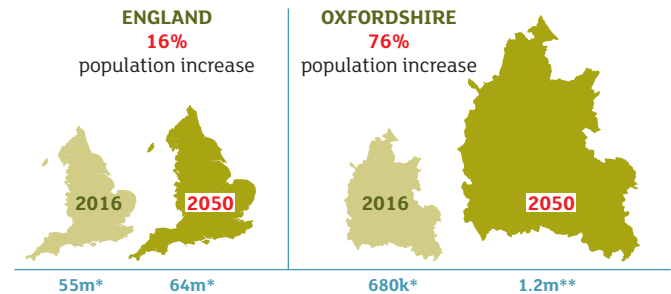
With the new rail lines and the Expressway providing the infrastructure, the Government plans to double the Oxfordshire population, create new jobs and build new housing for the new population.

What proportion of present agricultural land and countryside will have to be sacrificed to meet the impossible demands the 2050 proposal presents? The character of the Oxfordshire countryside would change for the worse and forever.

The Oxfordshire Plan 2050

The Plan provides an opportunity to shape the future of Oxfordshire. It is being jointly developed by our six Local Councils and will guide future housing, employment and infrastructure in the county.

Oxfordshire set to grow at five times the national rate



*Office of National Statistics ** National Infrastructure Commission

Oxfordshire is set to grow at five times the national rate. How can we meet carbon and climate change commitments when future commuting and car dependency is encouraged?

“A county in which housing and employment sites were more evenly spread, connected by good public transport that reduced the current over-dependency on private cars. Growth would be sustainable rather than excessive and would bring more affordable and better designed housing.”

My Vision, CPRE Oxfordshire member



What Makes Rural Oxfordshire Worth Protecting?

Oxfordshire's Cultural Capital

Nowhere in Oxfordshire is pristine wilderness: everywhere, including the three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, has been shaped by the interaction of past human societies with the county's natural resources, fauna and flora. The historic character of the landscape reflects more than 6,000 years of human activity, and contains a wealth of archaeological sites, historic buildings and designed landscapes of many different periods. This heritage is fragile, highly vulnerable to insensitive change and irreplaceable: it is an inextricable part of the county's character and amenity reinforcing the need to protect and manage characteristic features and where possible reverse previous harm to enhance rather than further spoil Oxfordshire's historic character, amenity and interest.

Oxfordshire has many places of rich heritage that attract many visitors as well as residents, with a strong and diverse vernacular building style reflecting variations in local geology and traditions. The county is recognised as a quintessential English landscape at the heart of the nation. It has a strong heritage of traditional customs, events, crafts and produce, a vibrant creative arts scene, cultural institutions and collections.

The essence of Oxfordshire underpins the county's economy and the wellbeing of residents and visitors alike. Oxfordshire's cultural capital should be recognised, protected and enhanced.

Farming and Food

Farming is a critical industry for Oxfordshire and deserves greater priority in considering future plans and resources for the county.

A viable farming community is vital for our rural economy. Our agricultural land must be valued for its contribution to the beauty of our county as well as its economic and practical benefits. We must protect the land where we grow our food. Using farm land for grand housing schemes, warehouses and accompanying infrastructure means loss of landscape, rural employment, and increases the need to import food from elsewhere.

Our Environment

Our natural resources and biodiversity are currently in decline. We now have an opportunity to outline ambitious proposals for reversing that decline. Future development needs to provide solutions that address the challenge of climate change. New communities must be resilient to climate change as well as sustainably designed. Nature Recovery Networks must be identified (based on existing Conservation Target Areas) and policies must be put in place to ensure investment in protecting and enhancing our natural environment.

Around half of our current carbon dioxide emissions are from housing and transport. These issues are critical to meeting carbon reduction targets by 2050 or earlier.

Higher density living, intelligent spatial planning and enhanced public transport could reduce car use with substantial benefits for carbon emissions, air and noise pollution and the disruption of the countryside.

Health and Well-being

The countryside and nature are fundamental to our physical health and mental well-being. Fresh air and open spaces provide recreational opportunities and relaxation, an opportunity to learn skills that help us interact with the world around us. Many of us live in urbanised areas and rely on the surrounding countryside to escape the confines of built-up areas. The Green Belt is literally the 'countryside next door' for city dwellers. It's important Oxfordshire retains its ordinary countryside and landscape. Our opportunities to visit the countryside should not be limited to preserved 'green spaces' as decided by developers. New and existing settlements should meet Natural GreenSpace Standards.

“Keep our flora and fauna alive and the fields green with grass carpet not concrete below our feet” My Vision, CPRE Oxfordshire member

CPRE Oxfordshire: Realising the Vision

Right HOMES in the Right Places

We recognise the need for more housing in the county. Targets should be based on the Government's household projections which already allow for the natural growth of the existing population and a share of migration. Arbitrary increases to reflect entirely notional and unwarranted growth targets are unacceptable.

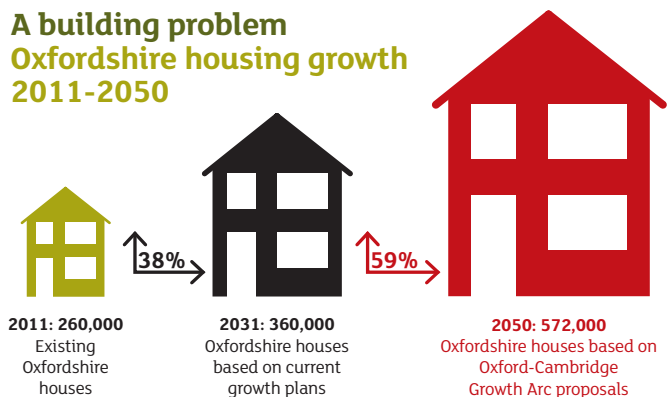
Affordable Housing

Genuinely affordable housing, available in perpetuity, is a clear priority where there is a local need. Affordability should be based on actual levels of income rather than a discount on market rate, and housing costs should generally not exceed 30% of household income.

Location of development

We need a clear hierarchy for development, which gives priority to bringing forward suitable urban brownfield sites, with appropriate mechanisms and incentives to support this. At the other end of the spectrum are our three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Oxford Green Belt where development should only take place under genuinely exceptional circumstances.

A building problem Oxfordshire housing growth 2011-2050



Of the eight AONBs under most pressure across England, three are in Oxfordshire: the North Wessex Downs, the Chilterns and the Cotswolds.

Other designated areas such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Conservation Target Areas should also be protected.

Green Belt

The Oxford Green Belt's role as a constraint for urban sprawl is more vital today than ever, helping to protect the setting and character of the city, which is fundamentally unsuitable to be a large-scale metropolis.

The creation of new Green Belts, as provided for in the National Planning Policy Framework, could ensure existing and newly created “Garden Towns” benefit from a natural, designated and protected boundary.

Infrastructure

A successful Oxfordshire needs the right infrastructure. New settlements may well play a role in the future, but they must be sustainably located and of sufficient size to be self-sustaining with a robust assessment of infrastructure requirements.

Organic growth, proportionate to existing settlements, can provide local housing within an existing community. However adequate infrastructure, including sustainable transport, should be available and impact on the local landscape should be minimised.

High quality, high density development

The relaxation of sustainable building codes and the poor focus on overall design means that there are very few developments that have come forward in Oxfordshire over the past decade that could be described as high quality. **We should be much more ambitious for new development**, to ensure that we are adding to Oxfordshire’s heritage not dismantling it as well as future-proofing against climate change.

Higher density development encourages sustainable communities, more easily able to support local services and public transport and encourages developers to build smaller more affordable properties rather than large-scale executive homes for commuters. Clearly density levels will need to vary according to site specific circumstances, but given that land is such a precious commodity we believe a target density of 70 dwellings per hectare is appropriate.



Right JOBS in the Right Places

The starting point for economic growth should be the natural growth in Oxfordshire's population for which employment might be needed, with the focus then on identifying the right jobs in the right place in order to reduce unsustainable commuting. This is the reverse of current proposals which seek to maximise jobs and then look at what might be needed to support them, including the inevitable increase in long-distance commuting and increases in population.

The priority should be to create employment that reflects our county's needs and skills. Large-scale manufacturing and warehousing are not appropriate in a rural community. Oxfordshire's specialist role as a seed bed for high tech development should be acknowledged and actively supported, but at the same time we should recognise that as companies grow it may well be appropriate for them to relocate to other parts of the country where employment needs are far more acute, allowing benefits of economic growth to be more widely dispersed and giving the opportunity for the space they leave to be used by new seed-bed companies.



Rob Bowker

Putting People First

Oxfordshire's countryside, landscape and historic environment are at the heart of protecting our future prosperity.

Land is not an endless resource: conserving, maintaining and improving our landscape is essential. This can only be achieved through long-term, collaborative planning.

Planning for Oxfordshire should prioritise the needs of communities and therefore residents should be given opportunities to decide the future of Oxfordshire. Younger members of the community, who will live with the consequences of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, should be proactively involved.

In a recent CPRE members survey 70% of respondents didn't feel their views on the future of Oxfordshire are considered and an equal number believe that no value is given to the countryside in local decision making.

All councillors, MPs, the LEP and business leaders must ensure that meaningful and responsible consultation takes place before announcing long-term strategies affecting us all. This means open engagement with all stakeholders, including Oxfordshire residents, on targets *before* they are set, with action and feedback demonstrating how their views are taken into account.

The views of unelected and remote bodies, such as the National Infrastructure Commission and England's Economic Heartland, should not be automatically accepted.



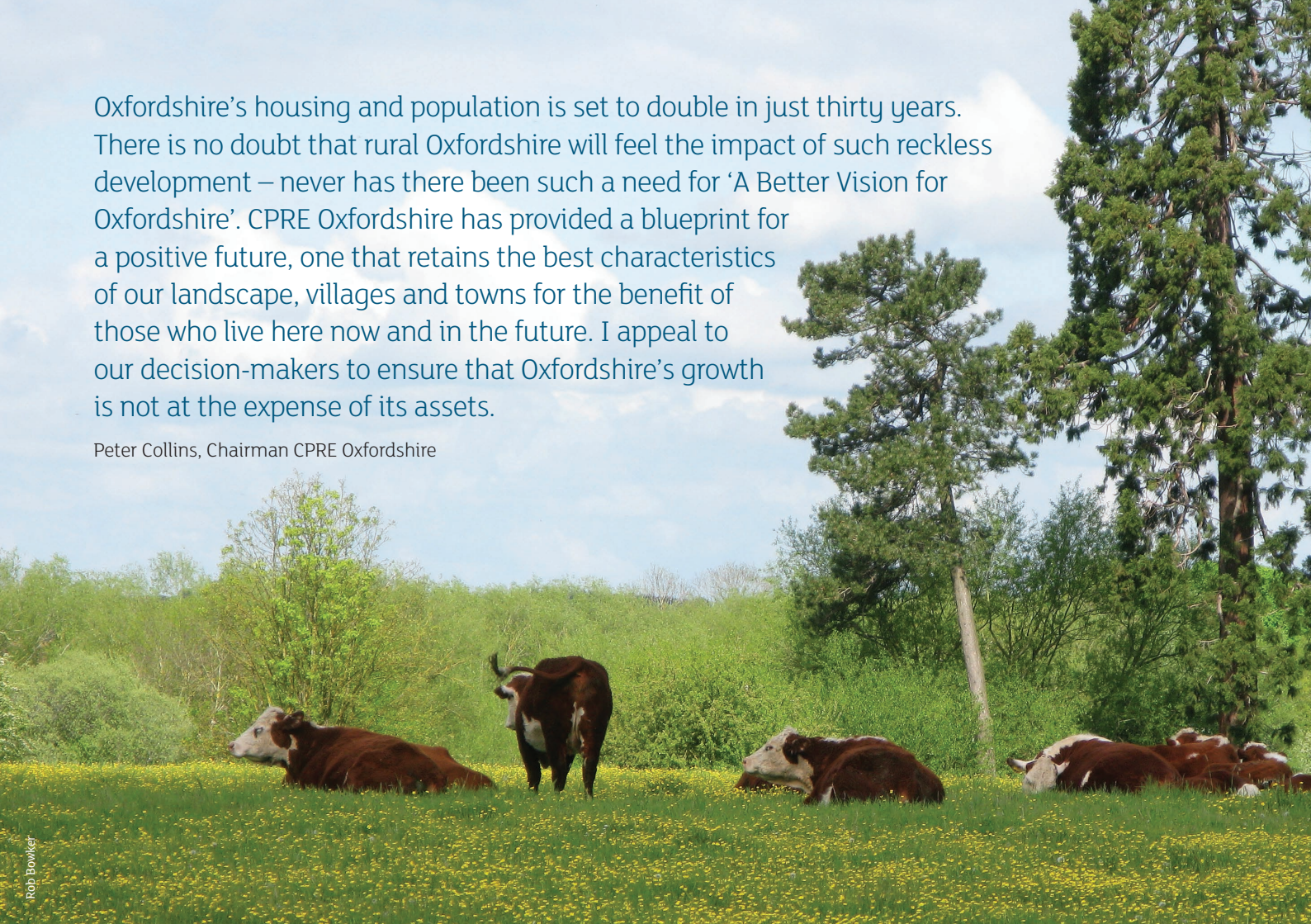
Be part of our Vision

Do you agree we should:

- Have a plan for how our environment is going to be protected and enhanced?
- Develop Oxfordshire based on natural growth and migration not arbitrary targets?
- Ensure housing densities make best use of land?
- Support more affordable housing in rural areas to meet local need?
- Stop urban sprawl, the coalescence of villages and prioritise brownfield sites?
- Create employment that reflects our county's needs and skills?
- Strengthen neighbourhood planning so that local communities can have their say about local plans and location of development?
- Put residents at the heart of decision making, not unelected quangos?
- Work to protect the cultural capital of Oxfordshire?
- Develop and invest in transport strategies that reduce congestion, increase public transport and support cycling?
- Recognise the importance of our environment in underpinning a healthy economy?
- Protect rural tranquillity including dark skies and dark landscapes?

Oxfordshire's housing and population is set to double in just thirty years. There is no doubt that rural Oxfordshire will feel the impact of such reckless development – never has there been such a need for 'A Better Vision for Oxfordshire'. CPRE Oxfordshire has provided a blueprint for a positive future, one that retains the best characteristics of our landscape, villages and towns for the benefit of those who live here now and in the future. I appeal to our decision-makers to ensure that Oxfordshire's growth is not at the expense of its assets.

Peter Collins, Chairman CPRE Oxfordshire



What can you do?

Write to your MP: writetothem.com

Engage with the Oxfordshire Plan 2050:
oxfordshireplan.org

Become a CPRE member:
cpreoxon.org.uk/join-us

Make a donation to CPRE Oxfordshire:
justgiving.com/cpreoxon/donate

Volunteer: cpreoxon.org.uk/join-us/volunteer

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