

## Update from West Oxfordshire and the wider county

On 27 September 2018, West Oxfordshire District Council formally adopted its *Local Plan* for 2011–2031. The Plan includes the misnamed “Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village” of 2,200 new homes immediately north of Eynsham – misnamed because it is not in the Cotswolds. Eynsham village is also being expanded to the west in the *Plan* to accommodate another 1,000 new homes. Through the middle of this “Greater Eynsham” – an increase in the size of the village of 150% – runs the already famously congested A40.

When you look at maps of the Cambridge–Milton Keynes–Oxford Corridor, or Arc, with its proposed Expressway and East-West rail connection, the shaded area does not seem to stretch as far west as West Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds. However, the Government response to *Partnering for Prosperity* makes clear on page 1 that the whole of the “ceremonial county area” of Oxfordshire is in the Arc, including West Oxfordshire. So you would think it would make sense to ensure proper coordination between WODC, Oxfordshire County Council, the county’s other local authorities and the plans for the Arc.

### ***The bigger picture***

The first stirrings of the current Arc initiative go back to a speech Lord Wolfson made to the British Chamber of Commerce in 2011, when he called for a motorway between Cambridge and Oxford. However, it was perfectly reasonable at that stage, and for the next three years or so, for the Oxfordshire councils to examine local economic growth and housing needs without reference to what was still a nebulous concept.

Thus, in April 2014, the Oxfordshire local authorities published a *Strategic Housing Market Assessment* (SHMA), which suggested that demographic trends and the growth of the county economy would necessitate 100,060 additional new homes in Oxfordshire between 2011 and 2031.<sup>1</sup> These new homes broken down, by district council, are as follows:

Cherwell (north of Oxford)	22,800
Oxford City	28,000
South Oxfordshire	15,500
Vale of the White House (south-west of Oxford)	20,560
West Oxfordshire	<u>13,200</u>
Total	<u>100,060</u>

In November 2014, a project team was set up “to consider the implications of the SHMA and how best to meet the identified unmet housing need of Oxford” on the basis of the Duty to Co-operate – because, apparently, Oxford City could not accommodate all 28,000 new homes. The “evidence-based apportionment” to meet the unmet housing need of Oxford (15,000 homes) broke down as follows:

Cherwell (north of Oxford)	4,400
Oxford City	550

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Growth Board, ‘Post SHMA Strategic Work Programme – final report’, 26 September 2016.

South Oxfordshire	4,950
Vale of the White House (south-west of Oxford)	2,200
West Oxfordshire	<u>2,750</u>
Total	<u>14,850</u>

Of the 4,400 new homes in Cherwell District, many are for Oxford’s ‘unmet need’, and would in any case result in the merging of two villages – Begbroke and Yarnton – into a ‘Greater Kidlington’, creating a sprawling suburb of Oxford and engulfing the separate identities of the component parts. The other new homes – in Woodstock, Cutteslowe, Kidlington and North Oxford – would place even greater strain on already congested roads to the north of Oxford City.

The 2,750 new homes in West Oxfordshire include the 2,200 in the “garden village” at Eynsham, all apparently to meet Oxford’s “unmet need” (together with 550 of the 1,000 homes in West Eynsham), thus contravening several ‘garden village principles’, including the stipulation that they should not be “dormitory suburbs”.

Since 2014, official statistics have shown a significant fall in the projected increase in households in the country, but the Government is insisting that 2014 data be used as the basis for planning.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Oxford City Council has failed to release the most up-to-date figure for the City’s objectively assessed housing need (OAN). As the Harbord Road Area Residents Association, which is mounting a legal challenge, says in a press release of 7 January 2019: “This is a critical piece of information which will determine the number of new houses to be built, not only in Oxford but in the surrounding districts which are charged with providing houses for Oxford’s so-called ‘unmet needs’. What is more this figure is almost certainly significantly lower than the OAN from the 2014 SHMA. We are taking this unprecedented step because so much of what is happening around Oxford, not least the potential loss of huge swathes of the green belt, is based on the OAN figure which the City Council won’t declare.” [STOP PRESS/end January: Oxford City’s OAN has finally been released, and the number of new dwellings per annum has almost halved from 1,400 to 776.]

### ***The Arc***

In early 2015, the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway – Stakeholder Reference Group was established, and held meetings throughout that year and 2016. Membership of the group included the local authorities that would be affected by it. So the Oxfordshire local authorities would have been well aware of the size and ambition of the Arc, and the impact it would have on their districts.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Barton Willmore, ‘the UK’s leading independent planning and design consultancy’, a change in the Government’s proposed Standard Method for assessing housing need in local authorities has resulted in a significantly lower projection of household growth across England. In West Oxfordshire, for example, it has fallen from 601 dwellings per annum to 347 (<http://www.bartonwillmore.co.uk/Knowledge/Intelligence/2018/Housing-need-will-fall-in-light-of-new-household-p>).

Nevertheless, they decided not to reassess or revise their housing figures, and on 26 September 2016, the Oxfordshire Growth Board, on which all six councils have a senior representative, resolved by five votes to one to “approve the apportionment of the agreed working figure for unmet housing need for Oxford, in the interest of complying with the Duty to Co-operate”.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2016, the National Infrastructure Commission’s *Interim Report into the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford Corridor* noted that: “The delivery of new homes and communities must be a core objective of this strategy”. Did this prompt an objective reappraisal by the Oxfordshire local authorities of their need for new housing and where it should go?

In November 2017, the Commission’s final report, *Partnering for Prosperity*, noted the opportunities to deliver: “one million new homes and jobs in the area by 2050 . . . the first new towns in this country for 50 years”. Did this prompt an objective reappraisal by the Oxfordshire LAs of their need for new housing and where it should go?

On the contrary, they are continuing to press ahead with their self-imposed maximalist growth targets (*not* forecasts) quite separately from the massive development that the Arc will bring. In late December 2018, South Oxfordshire District Council reversed its previous opposition to huge housing development on the green belt, and approved by 21 votes to 9 a *Local Plan* for consultation that includes all sites in the previous, aborted 2017 version plus additional major sites within the green belt. As objectors have pointed out, this means a plan to build “*what they know to be* more than twice as many houses as we need in the district according to government figures. By our calculations, we are building four times as many houses as can be filled. These are not for people living in Oxfordshire. They destroy our environment and create ‘planning blight’.”

It is clear that, between them, the supporters of the Arc and the Oxfordshire local authorities have decided, even if by default rather than design, to allow an unchecked feeding frenzy for developers – and their consultants - that would turn much of Oxfordshire into a Los Angeles-style urban sprawl. You would have thought, surely, that Oxfordshire’s proportion of the million new homes to be provided by the Arc would cover both Oxford City’s “unmet need” (while providing super new road and rail links for commuters) and much of the local authorities’ broader housing need, as projected in the 2014 SHMA, itself now an over-estimate. But no, co-ordination of this kind, and questioning of assumptions, are evidently too much to expect.

### ***The smaller picture***

Meanwhile, Oxfordshire County Council has just completed a six-week public consultation on its plans for improving the A40 “corridor” west of Oxford and into West Oxfordshire. There is no doubt that the A40 between Witney and Oxford, and especially around Eynsham, is a congestion black spot. The County Council says in its consultation document that it is seeking to deliver an A40 Strategy “which will increase the number of trips passing

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<sup>33</sup> Oxford Growth Board minutes, 26 September 2016.

through the corridor per hour". Issues such as climate change, species decline, air pollution and food security would suggest that a more sensible strategy would be one that *reduced* development, commuting and other traffic along the A40 by investing in rail, not least for freight, in working close to home and in the creation of jobs and journeys in the opposite direction to the prevailing magnet locations in the east.

The OCC plans for the A40 include a Park & Ride – apparently the first “rural” one, if a large expanse of tarmac, artificial lighting, and up to 1,000 cars can be so described – bus lanes, dualling, and junction improvements. Much of this improvement, especially in Phase 1, is immediately to the north of Eynsham and its western extension, and immediately to the south of the proposed “garden village”. WODC has consistently described the Park & Ride as an “integral part” of the garden village – not a pleasant prospect for future residents. A 40-hectare “science park” is also planned for this “Greater Eynsham” complex.

Astonishingly, the A40 consultation document has just a single reference to “housing development at Eynsham totalling around 3,200 homes”, but nothing else about the impact that these homes on either side of the A40 will have on the road. Thus, there is absolutely no indication in the document, or in accompanying video produced by the ubiquitous consultants AECOM, of

- where the vehicle access to the garden village would be;
- where the vehicle access to the West Eynsham extension would be;
- where WODC’s spine road/western bypass through Eynsham is going to be;
- where access to the 40 hectare ‘science park’ would be; or
- whether WODC’s “iconic” bridge is still being planned.
- Nor does is there any mention of OCC’s own *Minerals and Waste Strategy*, which may result in new quarries either side of the A40 just east of Eynsham.

How can Oxfordshire County Council expect to consult sensibly, and how are the public supposed to respond sensibly, if no one is in possession of all the facts and their impact?

Two reasons have been given by Oxfordshire County Council officials for this extraordinary hiatus. First, it seems that the A40 strategy has to be stove-piped into Department of Transport guidance parameters, and so cannot attempt to accommodate likely developments outside the stovepipe. Second, and more important, unless the County Council meets a Government deadline for presenting the business case for the strategy, it is in danger of losing the funding for it. In other words, it does not matter how blinkered the strategy is; it simply has to get through.

If ever there was a recipe for bad planning and decision-making that will prove to be budget-busting and regrettable, this is it. According to Bent Flyvbjerg, professor of major programme management at Oxford University's Saïd Business School: “Political-economic explanations see project planners and promoters as deliberately and strategically overestimating benefits and underestimating costs when forecasting the outcomes of projects. They do this in order to increase the likelihood that it is their projects, and not the competition’s, that gain approval and funding”.

Appropriately, the article in which this quotation appears is called *Survival of the unfittest: why the worst infrastructure gets built – and what we can do about it*. Planners in Oxfordshire and the Arc do not seem to have read it.

*Nigel Pearce, 10 January 2019*