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**Oxford City  
Council Local  
Plan 2036**

*Density*

BACKGROUND  
PAPER

## INTRODUCTION

This background paper is to be read as a piece of evidence supporting the policy approach taken with density standards in the Oxford Local Plan 2036, and density assumptions underlying the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA). The first section will outline the existing policy context and supra-level guidance. The following section explains the methodology used and process undertaken to arrive at the conclusions made for the density standard and policy approach within the Local Plan, and the assumptions underpinning the calculations within the HELAA. The third section addresses further notes and considerations relevant to the approach that informed the research and work undertaken, and the corresponding conclusions coming out of it. The final section summarises the conclusion.

## POLICY CONTEXT AND GUIDANCE

### Existing Local Policy Position

Policy CP6: *Efficient use of land & density* in the existing Local Plan 2001-2016 sets a guiding threshold of approximately 40 dwellings per hectare (dph) minimum, with higher density development expected on appropriate sites. The policy only allows the grant of planning permission where development proposals make maximum and appropriate use of land and where opportunities for developing at the maximum appropriate density have been fully explored.

Policy CS1: *Hierarchy of centres* in the existing Core Strategy 2026 provides that planning permission will be granted in the city centre and its immediate surroundings for higher-density development.

Policy HP9: *Design, character, and context* only grants planning permission for residential development in which the density of the scheme makes efficient use of land.

As a matter of practice, Oxford City Council has generally shied from setting strict density standards (either minimums or maximums), preferring rather to utilise context and the local environment to dictate development design, with consideration given to the broader context of pressures in Oxford. The exception being the guiding threshold of 40 dph set out in the Local Plan 2001-2016, which was sufficiently low as to allow general flexibility for developers and planners going forward to take into account considerations of local context. The approach of focusing higher density development upon relevant centres has been established and carried through several development documents going back several decades.

## National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Section 11: *Making effective use of land* is the most relevant section of the NPPF for consideration related to the topic of this paper. Specifically, the sub-section entitled *Achieving appropriate densities* including paras 122-123 sets out that planning policies ought to take into account the identified different needs of housing in the area; local market conditions; the availability and capacity of existing infrastructure and services; the maintenance of existing character; and the importance of good design. More notably, however, in para 123, it is set out that low density housing development ought to be avoided for the sake of more responsible and optimal use of land and sites. Para 123 requires minimum density standards to be set and used for centres and locations well served by public transport. Accordingly, these minimum standards are to be set at a level that contributes to lifting the average density of neighbouring residential development, and they should be used in a way that ensures that applications which fail to make efficient use of land be refused.

In Oxford City Council's case, Para 137 (of section 13: *Protecting Green Belt land*) reinforces the use of increased minimum density standards through requiring, that all efforts have been explored, to pursue optimised density figures in advance of concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to the Green Belt. Oxford City Council proposes the release of several small parcels of Green Belt land as part of the Local Plan 2036 and has, as such, sought to optimise the density figure(s) required in the Plan in order to demonstrate that exceptional circumstances do in fact exist for the Green Belt review.

## METHODOLOGY

To begin, it was established that four typologies of development needed to be identified and informed to provide a basis for capacity estimates that were required for the HELAA. The research required to inform the density bandings of these four typologies would then be used for establishing sound density figures/standards as required by the NPPF for a policy in the Local Plan concerned with efficient use of land.

### The Oxford Context

In order to do so, a thorough process was undertaken in order to establish contextually accurate readings of existing population and settlement densities in a series of varied locations around Oxford. These readings were informed by density figures from proposed and forthcoming developments and applications in the city, data from the Consumer Data Research Centre (sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA), and vetting by the professional expertise of council officers. The four typologies of development were identified and informed using the professional expertise of council officers in the Urban Design & Heritage team and the Planning Policy team, and were set out as 'District centre', 'Gateway site', 'Suburban site',

and 'Conservation area'. Data was drawn from sites that would fit into one of the four typologies of development. A sample of the data collected is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: The Oxford Context - data assembled**

<b>Site</b>	<b>Population density (people per ha)</b>	<b>Settlement density (units per ha.)</b>	<b>Source of data</b>	<b>Prospective development typology</b>
<b>Banbury Road / Ring Road juncture</b>	<i>100 per ha.</i>	<i>45 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Gateway site</i>
<b>Barton (existing estate)</b>		<i>29 units per ha. (low-density semi-detached 1950's style family housing)</i>	<i>Barton Park DAS (13/01383/OUT)</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>
<b>Barton Park Phase 1</b>		<i>60-70 per ha.</i>	<i>Barton Park DAS (13/01383/OUT)</i>	<i>Gateway site</i>
<b>Belsyre Court, Woodstock Road</b>	<i>100 per ha.</i>	<i>45 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Gateway site</i>
<b>Cowley Road, East Oxford</b>	<i>130 per ha.</i>	<i>60-80 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>District centre</i>
<b>Eagle Works</b>	<i>220 per ha.</i>	<i>100 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>
<b>Frys Hill, Greater Leys</b>		<i>30-40 dph (low-density detached family housing)</i>	<i>South Oxford Science Village DAS (May 2017 version)</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>
<b>Headington Centre</b>	<i>70 per ha.</i>	<i>30 (minimal residential provision existing)</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>District centre</i>
<b>Headington Quarry</b>	<i>60 per ha.</i>	<i>30 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Conservation area</i>
<b>Horspath Road / Ring Road juncture</b>	<i>80 per ha.</i>	<i>30 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Gateway site</i>
<b>Jericho Victorian terraces</b>	<i>170 per ha.</i>	<i>60 – 80 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>

			<i>ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	
<b>Littlemore</b>	<i>60 per ha.</i>	<i>30 per ha.</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>Conservation area</i>
<b>Lower Waterways</b>		<i>50 dph (high-density 3-storey family terraced housing)</i>	<i>Maidstone Council Density and Urban Design Study (Oxford locations used as case studies)</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>
<b>Mill Road, Wolvercote</b>		<i>47 units per ha. (cottages within a conservation area)</i>	<i>Wolvercote Paper Mill DAS (13/01861/OUT)</i>	<i>Conservation area</i>
<b>Northway</b>		<i>31 units per ha. (low-density semi-detached 1930's style family housing)</i>	<i>Barton Park DAS (13/01383/OUT)</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>
<b>Summertown</b>	<i>37 per ha.</i>	<i>20 units per ha. (minimal residential provision existing)</i>	<i>Consumer Data Research Centre – sourced from ONS/NRS/NISRA</i>	<i>District centre</i>
<b>Temple Cowley (consented scheme)</b>		<i>150 dph.</i>	<i>Planning application</i>	<i>District centre</i>
<b>Upper Waterways</b>		<i>40 dph (2-storey, mix of terrace and semi-detached family housing)</i>	<i>Maidstone Council Density and Urban Design Study (Oxford locations used as case studies)</i>	<i>Suburban site</i>

### Best Practice, Industry Guidance, Comparable Locations

The data collected relevant to the Oxford context was combined with detailed work, research, and case studies identified through a review of a host of best practice literature. This enabled a sense-check of the figures assembled from within Oxford to assess their relative consistency and accuracy with other development patterns elsewhere.

Documents reviewed included:

- Bristol City Council's Urban Living SPD – *Making successful places at higher densities*
- Bristol City Council's Urban Living SPD – *Learning from recent higher density schemes in Bristol*
- *Superdensity: The Sequel*, by New London Architecture and others
- *Better Neighbourhoods: Making higher densities work*, by CABI
- *Lessons From Higher Density Development, London Plan Density Research, Report To The GLA*, by Three Dragons and others

- *Tapping the Potential: Best practice in assessing urban housing capacity*, by URBED for Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions
- *IPL Final Design and Access Statement*, by URBED
- *Density: It must follow, not lead*, by Red Tree
- *Design Catalogue*, by Urhahn Urban Design
- *Redefining Density: Making the best use of London's land to build more and better homes*, by London First and Savills

This series of documents was assembled and vetted by officers of the Urban Design & Heritage team and the Planning Policy team. Drawn out of these documents were a series of additional good practice case studies which were assessed in a similar manner to those in Table 1. See Table 2 for a selection of this work.

**Table 2: External case studies**

<b>Site</b>	<b>Settlement density (units per ha.)</b>	<b>Prospective development typology</b>
Accordia	40	Suburban site
Athena	65	Gateway site
Beaufort Court	116	District centre
Durham & Gloucester Court	182	District centre
Ely Court	66	Gateway site
Garden cities	30-40	Suburban site
Great Western Park	42	Suburban site
Historic infill	80-140	Conservation area
Newhall	52	Suburban site
Northwest Bicester	50	Suburban site
Suburban semi's	15-30	Suburban site
Urban villages	75-125	Conservation area
Victorian terraces	60-80	Suburban site

## Recommendation of Density Bandings and Standards

### *Density bandings for HELAA capacity estimates*

Having agglomerated all the data collected in the exercises outlined previously, officers in the Urban Design & Heritage team and the Planning Policy team came together and, using their professional expertise and experience, came to a conclusion on a series of bandings considered to be appropriate for the Oxford context – both in terms of the physical features of the city and in terms of the constraints, pressures, needs, and aspirations of the city. These final density bandings are set out in Table 3.

**Table 3: HELAA capacity density bandings according to development typology**

<b><u>Development typology</u></b>	<b><u>Proposed density banding (units per ha.)</u></b>
District centre	100-120
Gateway site	60-70
Suburban site	50-60
Conservation area	35-55

It is important to bear in mind that these final proposed density bandings were set out for the purpose of estimating housing capacity numbers in the HELAA. These bandings are not proposed to be used as guides for development in Oxford, although they have been developed bearing in mind the characteristics of Oxford and the ambitions of the Local Plan for future development. For the purposes of estimating housing capacity numbers in the HELAA, the lowest figure in each density banding was utilised as a multiplier for the available land that had been allocated in that prospective development typology.

***Density standard for OLP2036 policy***

As noted above, the NPPF now requires minimum density standards to be set for city/district centres. Accordingly, a final minimum density standard has been proposed in Policy RE2: *Efficient use of land*. The figure has come out of the work and the data collected as outlined above. However, as equally noted previously, the general past approach of Oxford City Council has been to avoid setting numerical density standards, and as such, the minimum standard figure has only been applied to locations in the city centre and district centres so as to comply with the NPPF. The policy and supporting text express strong support for increased densification and for developments to maximise any opportunities for increased efficiency of land use and development patterns. The final minimum density standard to be applied to residential development in the city centre and district centres is 100 dph, and the policy reads as follows:

***Policy RE2: Efficient use of land***

*Planning permission will only be granted where development proposals make efficient use of land.*

*Development proposals must make best use of site capacity, in a manner compatible with the site itself, the surrounding area and broader considerations of the needs of Oxford, as well as addressing the following criteria:*

- a) the density must be appropriate for the use proposed;*
- b) the scale of development, including building heights and massing, should conform to other policies in the plan. It is expected that sites at transportation hubs and within the city*

*and district centres in particular will be capable of accommodating development at an increased scale and density, although this will also be encouraged in all other appropriate locations where the impact of so doing is shown to be acceptable;*  
*c) opportunities for developing at the maximum appropriate density must be fully explored;*  
*and*  
*d) built form and site layout must be appropriate for the capacity of the site.*

*High-density development (for residential development this will indicatively be taken as 100dph) is expected in the city centre and district centres.*

## **FURTHER NOTES**

Much of the reasoning for Oxford City Council's past position that a strict set of density standards is not the most appropriate way to approach increased densification of urban areas and good quality placemaking lies in a firm belief that development ought to respond to and build upon its context and local environment. Policy RE2 and its supporting text attempt to articulate and internalise this belief. In addition to this, several further principles were held to inform the development of the development of the density bandings, density standard figure, and the Local Plan policy approach.

It was maintained throughout the process that the focus of attempts to improve the effective use of land and bring about maximally efficient developments ought to be on urban intensification, rather than simply meeting density figures. Density can be measured in a number of different ways. There is a certain amount of variation inherent in measurements of density (depending on the way land areas are measured, gross density v. net density, etc.) and ensuring consistency and accuracy is difficult. Debates surround the utility of straight figures as a means of effectively bringing about the urban intensification that delivers the more efficient use of land which both the NPPF and Oxford City Council are seeking to achieve. Additionally, strict numerical assignments can often startle those who do not understand the means by which they are calculated and the practical reality of their physical manifestation.

Furthermore, in the Oxford context – considering all the sensitivities of Oxford's historical and heavily constrained environment – it is important to communicate effectively that improving efficient use of land through intensification and/or higher density development does not necessarily mean simply taller buildings or sporadic tower developments. There are many unique considerations to take into account when maximising the efficiency of a development design. Quality of indoor space and outdoor space, access to amenities, sustainability of location, movement and transportation options, long-term resilience of the architecture and building design, and interaction with relevant external factors like nearby heritage assets all carry important weight as considerations to bear in mind whilst attempting to maximise the efficiency of a development and deliver high-quality housing

and placemaking that contributes to an increase in quality of life in the city overall. For example, continental European cities often have higher urban density figures and do so through mid-rise development and settlement patterns. It is this kind of urban form that is likely to be most appropriate in most cases within the Oxford context and most desirable for continuing to enhance the existing character of the city. Oxford City Council has completed a High Buildings Study that forms part of the evidence base for this Local Plan and works towards understanding how and where increased densification and intensification of development can and ought to be done through taller buildings or through different design approaches, etc. It is important to bear in mind that whilst high-quality urban placemaking often requires densification and intensification of the existing context, the local context and character of the area must be valued as well. Fundamentally, it is this belief that underpins the Plan's approach to maximising the efficient use of land through increased intensification and urbanisation, but only stipulating an indicative density figure in city and district centres where such a reference tool is of the most utility for developers and planners.

## **CONCLUSION**

The approach to delivering maximally effective use of land and improving efficiency and quality of urban development outlined above continues and builds upon past approaches by Oxford City Council, whilst internalising the urgency of the constrained and pressurised situation that Oxford finds itself in through a more ambitious tact. It attempts to take a proactive stance that has been positively prepared to balance all the many important considerations relevant to achieving a level of intensification and high quality urban placemaking that responds to the key challenges facing the city whilst equally improving quality of life, environment, and general functionality of the city.

The approach is compliant with NPPF guidance and complements many of the Plan's overall strategic objectives. The approach of the policy and the conclusions of the research and work undertaken to inform calculations underpinning the HELAA is considered to be justified, effective, positively prepared, consistent with the NPPF, and therefore sound.