

OXFORD LOCAL PLAN 2040

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED SUBMISSION DRAFT

PART A

[REDACTED]

Organisation: Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA)*

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Date: 5 January 2024

Please note:

1. **For GDPR purposes CDWA requests that no personal details other than its name and a non-specific address be published.**
2. A representative of CDWA does wish to speak at the examination hearings.
3. CDWA does wish to be notified when:
 - i the Council submits the plan to the Government
 - ii the Inspector's report is published and
 - iii the plan is adopted by the Council.

*Cherwell Development Watch Alliance is an alliance of the Begbroke & Yarnton Green Belt Campaign; GreenWayOxon; Harbord Road Area Residents' Association; Kidlington Development Watch; and the Woodstock Action Group.

CDWA has substantial support from people living in the Oxford Green Belt parishes of Begbroke, Gosford and Water Eaton, Kidlington, and Yarnton within Cherwell District. CDWA also has substantial support in the North Oxford area which adjoins the Cherwell District boundary. The five member groups of the alliance have authorised CDWA to respond to local plan consultations. The overall membership represented is c.2,700.

Two Part B Comments are Attached.

PART B Comment:

Q1 This comment relates to **Paragraphs 2.3 to 2.9 and Policy H1 – Housing Need and Requirement**

Q2 Do you consider that the document

(a) is legally compliant

(b) is sound – **NO**

(c) complies with the duty to co-operate – **NO**

Q3 Do you consider that the document is unsound because it is not

(a) Positively Prepared – It is **NOT** Positively Prepared

(b) Justified - It is **NOT** Justified

(c) Effective – It is **NOT** Effective

(d) Consistent with National Policy.

Q4 Why we consider the document is not sound and fails to comply with the duty to co-operate

In summary, the document is not positively prepared or justified because it is based on a flawed assessment of the area's assessed needs and does not appear to involve satisfactory agreements with other neighbouring authorities. As it includes a highly exaggerated level of housing need it is not consistent with achieving sustainable development. The plan is not effective because it is not deliverable over its period or based on effective joint working on cross-boundary strategic matters. Our detailed comments on this follow.

Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA), and/or its constituent organisations, have opposed the encroachment of development from Oxford into the Oxford Green Belt in Cherwell for about 10 years. CDWA considers this encroachment has been based on substantial over-estimates of Oxford's housing need.

CDWA has participated in previous EiPs on Local Plans in Cherwell (2014, 2019) and Oxford (Oxford Northern Gateway, 2015, and Oxford 2019).

Housing Need Assessments. The housing need in the draft Oxford Local Plan 2040 is based on a document known as the Housing and Economic Needs Assessment (HENA) (para 2.7). This is an update of a document, the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA), which was commissioned for the now abandoned Oxfordshire Plan 2050. The HENA was produced by the same personnel¹ (*see note below) who were responsible for the very high figures in

¹ Note: the 2014 and 2018 SHMA were produced by GL Hearn and SQW while the OGNA and HENA were produced by Icení and Cambridge Econometrics. However the key personnel have remained the same, namely Mr Nick Ireland (Planning Director at GLHearn and Planning/Economics Director at Icení) and Mr Justin Gardner (of JG Consulting).

the “2014 SHMA” and the “2018 SHMA Update” for Oxford. All of these documents have a track record of making substantial upward “adjustments” to official demographic projections.

Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA) considers that all of these housing need assessments substantially over-estimate Oxford’s housing need and was supported in this view by independent reviews of these documents which were carried out by consultants who specialise in independent housing market assessments.

CDWA responded to an earlier consultation by the City Council on the HENA. This response is included as an Appendix below.

Oxford’s claimed need. The HENA claims a housing need figure for Oxford of 1,322dpa (para 2.8) which compares with a Government Standard Method figure of 762dpa, an uplift of 73%. The Standard Method figure is not even mentioned in the Plan. The omission of the Standard Method figure means that a reader of the Plan will not understand the substantial extent to which the City Council’s use of the HENA has inflated the claimed housing need. We believe that para 2.8 is therefore misleading and should be re-drafted to provide a full explanation of the City Council’s claimed housing need as compared to the Standard Method figure.

The Standard Method figure for Oxford, itself, includes a 40% uplift to reflect affordability concerns, meaning that the HENA figure is actually 144% higher than the underlying demographic need of 544dpa. It should also be noted that this latter figure derives from the 2014-based household projections which were themselves higher than more up to date projections for Oxford (see more below).

1322dpa (HENA figure) is a similar level of claimed need to that in the three previous documents referred to above i.e. the 2014 SHMA, the 2018 SHMA Update and the OGNA. In each case the (same) consultants engaged have devised different means of inflating Oxford’s need. In 2014, this was by making various upward adjustments to migration and headship rates in official projections. In 2018 it was by a model of affordable housing need which allowed for people to fall into need but not to move out of need inevitably resulting in a highly inflated estimate of need.

In the current HENA the consultants have calculated an (inflated) total future housing need for the County and allocated this to Districts according to the existing distribution of employment which inevitably inflates Oxford’s claimed need. This is a very unusual, unconventional and unjustified approach.

The HENA figures suggest that the City should increase its total housing stock by almost 50% over 20 years just to meet its own needs, equivalent to adding a medium sized New Town (such as Bracknell) on to Oxford. This is not credible as it represents growth rates as high as those experienced in the development of the twentieth century new towns. Unlike those new towns, Oxford is an historic city with a very congested traffic network, it is surrounded by Green Belt (to protect that historic city) and it does not have a Development Corporation.

Iceni and Mr Ireland regularly represent landowners and the development industry which we consider to represent a conflict of interest. We understand that Iceni’s initial contract for the Oxfordshire Plan was cancelled for this reason. In Oxfordshire we know that Mr Ireland represented Crest Homes at the West Oxfordshire EiP and also appeared at a planning inquiry in 2019 for the landowner appellant (SOxon P17/S4254, Oxford Brookes/Wheatley Campus).

HENA Consultant’s “Census Adjusted” figures. It should also be noted that the 2014-based projections, which form the basis for the Standard Method figure of 762dpa, are particularly high for Oxford. They give a population of 166,000 for 2021 which is actually 4,000 higher than the Census 2021 outturn figure of 162,100.

Nevertheless the HENA consultants produce what they call a “Census adjusted” Standard Method figure for Oxford of 1034dpa. This is 36% higher than the 2014-based Standard Method figure (762dpa) even though the 2021 Census population is 4,000 less than the 2014 projections suggest. It is difficult to understand what “adjustments” the consultants have made to produce their Census adjusted figure. However, as CDWA has shown in independent reports, the consultants have a long track record of inflating housing need by upward “adjustments” and one should therefore be deeply sceptical of their figures.

Oxfordshire’s figures. The HENA also includes figures for Oxfordshire and the other Oxfordshire Districts. As it was only commissioned by Oxford and Cherwell Districts and, we understand, it is not endorsed by the other three this would seem a very dubious approach. Responses to the HENA consultation in March 2023, as submitted by South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council, demonstrated their clear belief that there were cross boundary strategic matters relating to the Plan which had not been dealt with. We do not see any evidence in this draft Plan to indicate that these matters have been addressed, let alone resolved, suggesting that there has been a failure to co-operate which would mean that the Plan is not effective and therefore is unsound.

Nevertheless the HENA suggests a population increase for Oxfordshire of 27% by 2040 which compares with a 7% increase from 2020-2040 in the latest, 2018-based Sub National Population Projections (SNPP). The corresponding SNPP figures are 11% for Cherwell, 8% for England and **minus** 4% (i.e. a decrease) for Oxford City. The HENA therefore appears to be continuing the trend of substantially overestimated population growth in the county, and particularly in Oxford, seen in the preceding assessments produced by the same consultants.

A further area where ‘need’ seems to have been inflated is in assumptions made by the consultants about in-commuting. They assume there will be substantial falls in in-commuting which inevitably increases their housing need figures.

Oxford’s Capacity. Oxford City Council continues to substantially restrict its capacity for new dwellings by consistently giving priority to new employment generating development over housing (for example at the Oxford North and Oxpens sites). By doing so, it also stokes the demand for further housing. At the same time the City Council does not take opportunities to increase housing densities and fails to robustly identify all possible housing opportunities.

Q5. What change(s) do you consider necessary to make the document sound or legally compliant?

There is no justification for housing need to be claimed greater than the Government’s Standard Method.

Oxford City Council appears to have failed in its duty to co-operate with neighbouring councils. This cannot be rectified after submission so CDWA believes that the Plan should be withdrawn.

The Plan should be resubmitted once the City Council has fulfilled its duty to co-operate. The re-drafted plan must be based on realistic assessments of density and capacity, and an assessment of housing need using the Standard Method.

Appendix

Response from Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA) to Oxford City Council's Housing Need Consultation (Regulation 18 Part 2)

26 March 2023

General Comments

Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA) is an alliance of five local groups which came together to oppose the large-scale development of Oxford's Green Belt via the Cherwell Local Plan Partial Review to 2031. 4,400 dwellings are planned for in this Partial Review, all on the Green Belt and, in our view, based on a grossly overstated housing need arising from Oxford City Council's (OCC'S) local plan to 2036.

CDWA believes that the Housing and Economic Needs Assessment (HENA) is more of the same with over-stated housing needs which OCC claims that it cannot meet. Meanwhile OCC continues its policy of allocating land to employment purposes instead of housing, thereby exacerbating the housing need further.

RESPONSES TO THE ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Are there other ways of identifying housing need that should have been considered?

CDWA would like OCC to seek to justify a lower housing figure than the Standard Method to reflect the constraints on building within Oxford (flood plains, Green Belt, restrictive city centre layout etc). This should be combined with concerted efforts to address the affordable housing need rather than building large amounts of market housing which are unaffordable to most people, and in particular for most key workers. The government has recently consulted on planning reforms. These are likely to lead to changes that could help OCC justify a lower housing figure than the Standard Method. So, rather than rushing to use its own dubious methodology (i.e. the Census-adjusted Standard Method and the Cambridge Econometrics baseline trend scenario), CDWA would like OCC to pause and see what opportunities the reforms might offer OCC. For example, it may well be possible to justify a different approach to enable a lower housing need to be adopted on the basis of exceptional circumstances.

Nowhere in the text of your consultation document is the latest Standard Method figure for Oxford of 762 dpa mentioned. Table 2.1 shows a figure of 1016 dpa which, without

careful reading, might be taken to be the Standard Method. Only in Appendix A is the 762 dpa shown. This is highly misleading.

It should also be borne in mind that the Standard Method already includes a substantial uplift of 40% on top of projected population growth to reflect affordability concerns. The Standard Method figure of 762 dpa should therefore be a maximum, **CDWA Response to Oxford City Council's Housing Need Consultation (Regulation 18 Part 2) 27/03/23**

2. Do you have any comments on the methodologies used in the HENA?

CDWA notes that the HENA has largely been prepared by the same consultants who produced the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA). The OGNA was the subject of a review by independent housing market assessment consultants Opinion Research Services Ltd (ORS) whose overall view was that the OGNA was not fit for purpose. We question OCC's ongoing use of the consultants who prepared the HENA.

CDWA believes that the HENA is flawed in similar ways to the OGNA and appears to manipulate the housing need figures upwards wherever it can.

CDWA also believes the approach of taking official figures and projections, and then adjusting them, as is done in the HENA is unacceptable particularly because the adjustments are almost invariably upwards and result in substantial increases in housing "need".

- **Standard Methodology:** This already includes a substantial allowance of 218 dpa to reflect affordability concerns. As national policy this should be considered by OCC as a reasonable option but as in (1) above CDWA wants to see a lower figure that reflects the constraints operating in Oxford City.

- **Census-adjusted Standard Method:** The Standard Method uses the 2014-based household projections, (which were previously criticised for being high and were indeed much higher than the two subsequent sets of projections, 2016-based and 2018-based). The HENA says that the adjustments made to the Standard Method are to take account of the Census. However, the 2014-based projections and the 2021 Census figures for Oxfordshire are, in fact, very similar (as shown below from HENA tables 3.6 and 3.7).

Oxfordshire	2014-based Proj'ns	2021 Census	Difference
2021 Population	706,600	725,300	+2.64%
2021 Households	286,500	288,100	+0.6%

(from HENA tables 3.6 and 3.7)

So the upward adjustment to the Standard Method for Oxfordshire by +39.3% is surprising to say the least. For **Oxford City** the 2021 Census shows population and households to be **lower** than the 2014-based projections by 2.6% and 11.1% respectively.-This suggests that any adjustment for the City should be **downwards**.

CDWA takes the view that the adjustments are merely a calculated manipulation of the 2014-based projections in a way that is neither justified nor acceptable. CDWA therefore rejects the use of this methodology completely.

- **Cambridge Econometrics (CE) baseline trend scenario:** This methodology is based on the opaque CE model which has been used to forecast jobs growth from which the level of associated housing need is derived. The level of growth proposed in this scenario is over 50% more than the growth experienced in the previous period. This is unlikely to be deliverable. If achieved, such a high level of growth would also be damaging to other parts of the country and the levelling up agenda.
- **Economic development-led scenario:** It is right that this scenario has been rejected.

However, we dispute the statement in paragraph 2.12 that this is the “highest realistic level of growth”. This level of growth is neither achievable nor realistic.

3. Do you have any other comments on the Scenarios?

No

4. Do you have any comments about the reasoning for selecting the most appropriate scenario of housing need?

Yes

For the reasons stated above CDWA disputes the assertion in paragraph 2.15 that either of the Census-adjusted Standard Method or the CE Baseline Trends forecast could be selected as an appropriate scenario.

CDWA strongly disputes the false justification and illogical conclusion put forward in paragraph 2.15 that the robustness of these scenarios is demonstrated by their similarity.

CDWA believes that the most appropriate scenario discussed in the consultation documents for calculating housing need is the Standard Method; but that the results from this should be adjusted *downwards* to reflect constraints particular to Oxford city.

CDWA disputes the exceptional circumstances used to justify the selection of the Cambridge Econometrics (CE) baseline trend scenario. OCC could and should chose to balance housing with economic needs by prioritising land for housing instead of prioritising land for employment as has been done and continues to be done on sites across Oxford City e.g. Oxford North and the West End.

It is actually OCC’s policy of prioritising land for employment that runs the risk of making housing shortages worse.

5. Do you have any comments about the methods for dividing the Oxfordshire housing need between the districts, leading to the need figure of 1,322 for Oxford?

Yes.

The statement issued by Council Leaders when the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 was abandoned made it clear that planning for housing needs was the subject of fundamental disagreement

“It is with regret that we were unable to reach agreement on the approach to planning for future housing needs within the framework of the Oxfordshire Plan”.

OCC is therefore fully aware of the contentious nature of housing market assessments in Oxfordshire.

OCC does not have a mandate to prepare an Oxfordshire-wide housing needs assessment. Nor does it have a mandate to apportion any housing need assessment between other Local Authorities. In so doing, OCC has acted beyond its remit and can not expect the Oxfordshire Districts to accept either its overall assessment of housing need or its methods of apportionment. OCC should restrict its activities to its own housing need and capacity or enter into open and transparent negotiations with all other Local Authorities.

CDWA agrees that the capacity of Oxford City is constrained. As a result, the larger the figure that OCC determines as its housing need the more housing it will expect to offload onto the surrounding Local Authorities. This is likely to create more pressure for development on the Green Belt which must be avoided. There have already been very substantial areas of Green Belt allocated in most of the recently adopted local plans and it would be contrary to both government and planning policy for further reviews of the Green Belt to take place.

CDWA does not accept any of the methods proposed by OCC for the allocation of what OCC considers to be the Oxfordshire housing need. CDWA further believes that apportionment which maximises the share for Oxford, such as the 2040 Employment Pattern, must be avoided because to do otherwise is to manipulate a scenario which maximises the pressure on the Green Belt. OCC is fully aware of the purposes of the Green Belt and the importance that the government attaches to it and should plan accordingly.

CDWA believes that the future employment projections are hugely overestimated and based on guess work rather than likely scenarios. And in any event, distributing need according to projected employment distribution is an unconventional and unsatisfactory approach which leads to creation of need rather than response to it.

6. Do you have any comments about the housing mix including the need for specialist housing and affordable housing?

Much of the increase in housing need is due to increases in the number of elderly households. Older people have specific requirements such as single level accommodation or special access facilities such as lifts. The needs of the elderly population need to be taken in account when planning for new housing.

7. Do you have any comments about the assessment of housing capacity?

OCC manipulates housing need figures to increase them as much as possible. OCC then prioritises the allocation of land for employment over housing. It does not take opportunities to increase housing densities. All these decisions restrict Oxford's capacity. OCC then offloads the dwellings that it says it cannot build to other Local Authorities. This is unreasonable and should not continue.

8. Do you have any comments about this conclusion to our approach to assessing housing need and setting a housing requirement in the Oxford Local Plan 2040?

Yes.

CDWA wants OCC to reduce its housing requirement because it is not consistent with other priorities such as:

- Ensuring that infrastructure and services can expand to meet demand. Examples are sewage and waste water treatment facilities, water supply, educational and leisure facilities, and healthcare services such as hospitals and GPs.
- Protecting and enhancing biodiversity in Oxfordshire
- The levelling up agenda and reducing pressure on the over-heated south-east
- Carbon reduction ambitions.