

Matter 8E/South East England Regional Assembly



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Matter 8E: Central Oxfordshire

8Ei: Role and Economy

8Ei.1 What is the rationale for and role of the sub-region? Does the proposed strategy strike an appropriate balance between the future potential of the sub-region and protection of the environment?

8Ei.2 Does the proposed strategy make sufficient allowance for the growth of the Oxford/Central Oxfordshire economy (Policies CO1 and 2)?

8Ei.3 How realistic is the focus on previously developed land to accommodate employment needs in Policies CO1 and CO5?

1. The process of developing the sub-regional strategies has been undertaken by the Principal Authorities who provided their final advice to the Assembly in December 2005 for inclusion in the draft South East Plan. As such, the Assembly supports the statement of Oxfordshire County Council that led the development of the sub-regional strategy.
2. The Assembly's response to Matter 2A.4 sets out the background to the development of sub-regions contained within the draft South East Plan. This reiterates that distinct sub-regions will only be defined in the Plan where a defined area requires a co-ordinated set of policy responses across administrative boundaries and where a specific set of policies is required to address the needs of the area.
3. The sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire is built on earlier work on the sub-regional study, completed by the County Council in May 2004¹. This identified the key issues facing the sub-region and the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats. The sub-regional study was prepared to assist the Assembly in deciding whether the issues identified required specific treatment and policies in the South East Plan.
4. Particular issues identified in the study that justify a sub-regional policy framework include:
 - The area being the core of a city-region with the internationally famous university city at its centre surrounded by green belt and market towns and villages;
 - The development of the larger settlements as employment and service centres but with strong links to Oxford;
 - The attractive living and working environment and the need to protect and enhance this;
 - The transport network focused on Oxford as a hub, with growing congestion problems;
 - A prosperous, creative and diverse economy with low unemployment but with pockets of deprivation;

¹ http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/southeastplan/key/study_areas/initial_studies/cental_oxfordshire.pdf

Matter 8E/South East England Regional Assembly

- Pressures on the housing market (affordability) and skills shortages;
 - Provision of infrastructure not meeting the needs of growth.
5. The vision statement for Central Oxfordshire is set out in paragraph 4.6.3 of Section C of the Plan. This is reflected in the introduction to the sub-regional strategy in paragraphs 1.1-1.3 of section E7 and sets the context for the sub-regional policies. Central Oxfordshire was identified as a sub-region as a coordinated policy framework is required across the local authority boundaries to address the following²:
- How best to realise the potential of the sub-region's dynamic and innovative economy, including its role in the wider Oxford-Cambridge Arc;
 - Congestion on rail and road and the need to strengthen public transport and promote alternatives to the car and road freight;
 - Identification of major infrastructure requirements;
 - How best to protect the character of Oxford in the longer term in a manner that is compatible with sustainable development and wider development needs.
6. The Assembly believes that the policies and spatial strategy address these issues and strike an appropriate balance between the potential of the sub-region and the protection of the environment.
7. Policies CO1 and CO5 provide appropriate guidance for the growth of the sub-regional economy. The strategy aims to build on the sub-region's strengths while protecting the built and natural environment, itself a major factor in the sub-region's success. Policy CO5 seeks to provide a range of opportunities and an appropriate framework for the development of the sub-region, in line with the vision and core strategy in Policy CO1. Providing for additional land release in Didcot and Bicester will help to increase employment opportunities, and improve the balance between jobs and labour in these growing settlements. The policy for Oxford city seeks to enable economic growth while avoiding exacerbating the existing imbalance between jobs and labour in the city of Oxford, recognising the scope for new employment within major redevelopment schemes, and protecting the character of the city.

8Eii: Housing and Green Belt

8Eii.1 Are the housing provision figures set at the most appropriate level, taking account of the economic pressures and environmental assets of the area? (Policy CO2)?

1. The Assembly's statement on Matters 1H and 4 sets out the rational and reasoning for the overall housing provisions set out in the Plan. The level of housing proposed for Central Oxfordshire in Policy CO2, and its spatial distribution, is regarded as appropriate.

² Brief for the preparation of the sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire, August 2004. http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/southeastplan/key/study_areas/briefs/final_central_oxfordshire_strategy_brief.pdf

8Eii.2 Is a level of “at least 50%” affordable housing justified and capable of being implemented (Policy CO4)?

1. The Assembly response to Matter 4A sets out the Assembly’s view of affordable housing. This makes it clear that it is not intended that the target will be applied uniformly across the region. Given the detailed work undertaken in determining the sub-regional strategy (and the Oxfordshire Structure Plan) and the imperative for affordable housing within the sub-region, the provision above the overall regional target of 35% is appropriate. Failure to achieve higher levels of affordable housing in the past should not be reason to set a target that would fail to address the ongoing and growing need. It is important to acknowledge that delivery will be dependent on a range of factors complementing planning policy, including adequate funding.

8Eii.3 Has the potential for expansion of Oxford itself been sufficiently recognised? Is there a case for a strategic review of the Oxford Green Belt (Policy CO3)?

1. The potential for expansion of Oxford has been recognised with 7,000 additional dwellings proposed over the period of the Plan. The Assembly’s statement on Matter 2B sets out its views on Green Belt. The Assembly agrees with the advice provided to it by the County Council that the growth proposed in the sub-regional strategy can be accommodated without the need for a strategic review of the Oxford Green Belt. In preparing its advice to the Assembly, the County Council considered and undertook consultation on alternative spatial options, including urban extensions to Oxford that would involve development of Green Belt land. These options were also subject to sustainability appraisal.

8Eii.4 How realistic is it to rely on focusing growth at Bicester, Didcot, Wantage and Grove? Are there constraints to focusing growth here and if so how might they be overcome (Policies CO1 & CO2)?

1. The spatial strategy to focus development at these locations was based on consideration of a range of options tested by the County Council in preparing its advice to the Assembly.
2. They were identified as being relatively free of physical constraints, with potential for employment growth, and well placed in terms of transport networks. The sub-regional strategy sets out measures required to enable continued growth and overcome potential constraints - particularly provision of necessary infrastructure in a timely manner, provision of high value added research and science based employment, improved public transport, and improvement of education and skills.

8Eii.5 Does the proposed housing distribution core strategy provide sufficient housing opportunities to support the social and economic well-being of local communities outside the main locations for development (Policy CO1, last paragraph)

1. Policy CO1 provides for substantial housing outside of the main locations for development. Paragraph 2.4 outlines the amount of housing planned for Bicester (4,300), Didcot (7,300) and Wantage and Grove (3,400). With 7,000 proposed for Oxford city, this leaves about 12,000 of the 34,000 dwellings proposed in Policy CO2 to be built in the other settlements.

8Eiii: Infrastructure and Implementation

8Eiii.1 Have the water supply and waste water treatment, flood risk and transport implications of the growth proposals been adequately considered (including Policy CO6)?

1. The Assembly is aware that key statutory agencies and utilities were consulted throughout the development of the sub-regional strategy, in accordance with the briefs provided. Information on infrastructure requirements and implications of spatial options is set out in documentation supporting the draft sub-regional strategy advice³. The implications of the pattern and scale of growth was also considered in the sustainability appraisals undertaken by the County Council and by the Assembly's consultants.
2. The Implementation Plan sets out more specific proposals for key infrastructure development in the sub-region, including schemes identified through consultation with Thames Water, the Environment Agency, the Highways Agency and rail operators.
3. With regard to water quality, upgrades to some infrastructure are required but would not pose a constraint to the proposed scale and pattern of development.
4. A major new reservoir is currently being promoted by Thames Water in the sub-region (recognised in Policy NRM2 of the draft South East Plan). Environment Agency modelling (through the Water Resources South East group⁴) indicates that without this new resource and improved standards of water efficiency in new housing there could be supply-demand deficits (in headroom) by 2016 and 2026 in the water resource zone that includes Central Oxfordshire and Swindon. The reservoir would predominantly provide water to London, via the river Thames. Other specific water supply infrastructure has also been identified by Thames Water to provide for planned growth.

³ http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/southeastplan/key/study_areas/draft_strategies/cen_oxon/annex_5-infrastructure_needs_assessment.pdf
http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/southeastplan/key/study_areas/draft_strategies/cen_oxon/annex_2-summary_of_consultation_responses.pdf

⁴ Library Document Ar4

5. Flood risk was identified as a potential issue at Didcot and a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment has been undertaken to inform the distribution of dwellings around the town.

8Eiii.2 Are the proposals in the Implementation Plan (including for social and green infrastructure) clear, justified and well related to the spatial strategy? What are the priorities?

1. The Assembly response to Matters 1D and 10A sets out how the implications for infrastructure have been considered and how the proposals in the Implementation Plan are related to the spatial strategy. For the first time at the regional and sub-regional levels the Implementation Plan specifically identifies the roles, responsibilities and actions required by specified organisations and other key stakeholders to deliver the objectives and policies in the Core Strategy and Sub Regional Strategies. These will be a mixture of investments, policy decisions and behavioural change.
2. The Assembly has worked closely with Principal Authorities to develop the sub-regional infrastructure investment frameworks which identify the sub-regionally significant infrastructure investments required to deliver the spatial strategy and informed the Implementation Plan. These were informed by liaison with the statutory infrastructure providers, including the Environment Agency, energy and water utility companies, the Highways Agency and Network Rail. The priorities for each intervention are indicated by a combination of the need for infrastructure prior or alongside development, and the time period indicated for that intervention, all of which are linked back to the implementation of the sub-regional strategy.
3. It is acknowledged that this will require further refinement through the local development framework process. However, considerable effort has been expended to ensure they are based upon robust assumptions and have been fully informed by infrastructure providers.