

OGP Policy Working Group: Background to Housing Policy

What is happening in Oxfordshire now

The recent Housing and Growth Deal has secured an initial investment of £215 million over the next 5 years with the intention of supporting the delivery of 100,000 homes across the County. This growth brings opportunities and challenges for the people of Oxfordshire.

This funding was awarded to the County primarily to allow its economy to continue to grow (it has grown by 3.9% per year since 2006) and increase the £23bn it delivers to the UK Treasury each year. The lack of housing was seen as a blocker to achieving this growth.

This perception of housing as little more than a barrier to growth must be challenged.

We cannot achieve the health outcomes we need, or tackle the climate emergency, without addressing the poor quality of existing housing and its lack of affordability – to both own and rent.

- The initial Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal investment amount is nowhere near the amount needed to ensure the huge increase in population will be properly catered for in terms of infrastructure, healthcare etc.
- Properties in Oxfordshire had an overall average price of £411,066 over the last year.
- House prices are more than 10 times the typical County salary. In Oxford the situation is much worse.
- The average Oxfordshire rent is more than £1500pcm – more than half gross average earnings. In other words, more than half of earnings are spent on rent.
- In the most deprived wards, more than 12% of residents suffer from fuel poverty.

Whilst it might seem initially sensible to try and build our way out of the problem, if at the same time the economy is growing at a faster rate than houses can be built, the affordability will only get worse. Not only that, but building houses that are anything less than carbon neutral, or are carbon positive, over their lifetime will actually add to the climate crisis. Yet not one Council within Oxfordshire has written proper carbon neutrality (as defined by the UK Green Building Council) into their Local Plans. There is little evidence to support the idea that building more homes will make some more affordable while relying solely on the private sector. Homes needed are social homes for rent in perpetuity, giving stability to families on low incomes and for key workers.

This level of development also adds to Oxfordshire's problems with water – in terms of the demand for water in an area already water stressed, and flooding when green space that would otherwise absorb water is built over. The increase in population also adds to problems of water pollution. (See the background notes on Water.)

Far from solving the County's housing or climate problem, the Housing and Growth Deal is actually making things worse. This is what is happening and will happen in the future unless priorities change.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/datasets/ratioofhousepricetoworkplacebasedearningslowerquartileandmedian>

What the Green Party needs to do

The Greens stand alone in challenging the thinking behind the Housing and Growth Deal.

We should not be over-heating Oxfordshire's economy but spreading the benefits more evenly across the County and around the country.

Only six months ago this would have been seen by conventional politicians as impossible, but the COVID crisis has redefined the workplace by demonstrating how, for many, remote working is not only possible but more productive, cost-effective and leads to improved quality of life and better environmental outcomes.

Nationally, more support is needed to transition those sectors of the economy impacted by the changes in work-life patterns where remote working is not possible.

In Oxfordshire, the County, City and Districts need to rethink their approach to housing provision.

They need to borrow to invest in social and other genuinely affordable housing models (the payback from rents more than covers the loan repayments), build genuinely carbon neutral housing, introduce living rents and, where possible, rent controls, as well as locate housing in locations which do not degrade the natural environment.

The Greens will ensure that the ratio of housing to jobs is monitored as part of the planning process and is improved over time.

Further, the development of new homes by private housebuilders will not solve the problem of affordability as many of these properties are beyond the reach of most people. Only a comprehensive range of initiatives like: Direct Council Housing, Cooperatives, Community Self-build units, Land Trusts and Social Housing Organisations are likely to produce housing at acceptable costs.

For rented housing in Oxford, the Greens are pressing for Housing of Multiple Occupation licensing, a Council lettings agency and the return of Local Rent Tribunals.

As a recent development, the economic fallout from Covid presents an opportunity to convert some commercial properties now empty in our town centres into housing.