

OGP Background briefing for jobs and income

The coronavirus pandemic has turned the world upside down, exposing major weaknesses in our economy and deep-seated inequalities that have meant the most vulnerable people have been hit the hardest. As the local economy recovers, we have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to build back better than before. Current County policy lacks an industrial strategy linked with climate emergency and biodiversity loss. Existing industry needs to be repurposed and new industry encouraged towards Green New Deal jobs/enterprises, with training and apprenticeships for these.

What is happening in Oxfordshire now

Oxfordshire generally has a low unemployment rate, varying across the county in 2019–20 from 2% in West Oxfordshire to 2.7% in Oxford city, compared with 4.8% in the United Kingdom generally. However, as a result of Covid-19 unemployment will increase as government support to businesses and the furlough scheme for employees end. Some businesses have already disappeared, including high-street shops in Oxford, Banbury and Bicester; and many hospitality businesses are fragile. There will inevitably be structural changes to the local economy.

Despite its low overall unemployment rate, Oxfordshire also features great and longstanding inequality. While places like Oxford, Henley and Chipping Norton are affluent, there are also clusters of poverty. Some key facts comparing the picture in Oxfordshire with the rest of England:

- 10 neighbourhoods are in the 20% most deprived in England (6 wards in Oxford, 3 in Banbury, 1 in Abingdon).
- Oxford is the least affordable place to live in Britain, with houses costing 17 times the local annual income.

For those on the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage, life in Oxfordshire is tough. (Rates currently range from £4.62 per hour for under 18-year-olds to £8.91 for workers aged 25 and over). Oxford City Council tries to persuade employers to pay an Oxford Living Wage that recognises the high cost of living in Oxford (£10.31 per hour), and a number of businesses, colleges and services have signed up to this.

What Greens need to do now

We need to work to rebuild society with a transformative Green New Deal, decarbonising the economy in a way that tackles inequality and enhances lives, creating new, well-paid, secure jobs to replace those that are lost or already insecure through the gig economy. And we need to ensure that everyone has a level of income that relieves them of the stress of poverty. For this reason, the Green Party has long campaigned for a Universal Basic Income.

Greens need to press councils to:

- Recognise the changing shape of our economy (for example, the growth in home working and online shopping) and maximise the opportunities this presents while mitigating the negative impacts.
- Focus rebuilding efforts on small, local businesses, cooperatives, and the public sector, and protect key facilities threatened by the recession, such as arts venues.
- Encourage job creation and training in work that tackles the climate crisis, such as retrofitting buildings, supplying local food, working in repair shops etc.
- Support a more localised circular economy with more shared, reused and recycled materials, minimising waste.
- Encourage employers throughout the county to pay an Oxfordshire-based living wage.

- Support fair conditions for teleworkers and other home workers, and push for improved broadband internet access.
- Invest in people; ensure that policies and investments are fairly applied, rather than propping up big business.
- Protect and invest in our public services; they must be properly funded, protected from privatisation and available to all.

Note on Oxfordshire's growth agenda

Oxfordshire County Council (through the Oxfordshire Growth Board) is currently committed to the government's agenda of economic growth, creating hi-tech jobs as part of a supposed Oxford–Cambridge Arc (which the government sees as the UK's Silicon Valley). This will involve huge building programmes for science parks and housing developments. While new jobs in some sectors are needed, this agenda represents a bonanza for developers, and will result in the loss of much valuable green space and to far more housing than the county needs for its own population, little of which will be affordable for locals. This overdevelopment means loss of precious amenity land as well as wildlife and biodiversity, and brings increased air and water pollution in many forms. Covering the countryside in concrete and tarmac also prevents water being absorbed into the soil and therefore makes land more prone to flooding, while existing traffic problems will increase. These will be long-term costs, borne by the community as a whole.

The Green Party opposes this policy because Oxfordshire does not need job creation on this scale, while other areas of the country, such as the north-east, do; and more jobs will only increase the demand for more housing. Further, the social rented housing that Oxfordshire really needs tends to comprise just a small proportion of such new developments, which often seem designed to attract London commuters. The people who benefit are the landowners and developers making huge profits.

We welcome the cancellation of the Expressway, the planned major road linking Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge, but we suspect that this means that the route will now simply be upgraded piecemeal and new smaller roads will be built in the course of the development of the Arc. We fully support the promised East–West rail link as an alternative and will press to make sure its development is linked to the needs of the communities through which it will pass, with proper links to local buses and a requirement to carry bicycles on the trains, and to make adequate provision for travellers with mobility issues.