

Oxfordshire County Council: Local Transport and Connectivity Plan – Vision Consultation

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's
Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

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POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

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Overview

1. Drawing on the consultation exercise on 2020, the County Council has attempted to identify the key elements of its Vision for its new Local Transport & Connectivity Plan (LTCP). While this is a perfectly reasonable starting point, it is only of any value if it is then turned in to a detail Plan which is then pursued and implemented with determination and consistency.
2. The current Local Transport Plan (LTP4) was a broadly sound document, but it has proved largely irrelevant to the way transport matters in the county have been taken forward; the declared policies have frequently been ignored, notably in relation to new development proposals and the most recent round of district council Local Plans in particular. Given this, it can be no surprise that the published evidence base demonstrates the failure of LTP4, with traffic levels and congestion rising and bus use falling, (not helped of course by a county council decision to withdraw virtually all its funding support for bus services).
3. The Climate Emergency demands a radical change from past practice. While the Government's plan for decarbonising transport is still awaited, there can be little doubt that it will set out the twin priorities of increasing walking, cycling and public transport use, and reducing the use of private vehicles. It is to be anticipated therefore that future government funding will be prioritised to support this approach and the new LTCP must reflect this to ensure that Oxfordshire County Council is ready to maximise its share of the funds available.
4. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that Oxfordshire's residents can adapt to substantial change in behaviour and many of them were able to relish an environment not dominated by the noise and intrusion of motor vehicles. It illustrated in particular the huge potential for increasing levels of cycling given more conducive conditions on our roads. There will also be a permanent shift towards greater use of IT for many purposes and less need for physical movement. Looking beyond the immediate challenge of restoring confidence in the safety of public transport travel, this experience offers encouragement that there is now a significant opportunity to adopt bold and innovative measures for the future.
5. While needing to have regard to adjoining areas and cross-boundary issues, this fundamentally must be a plan for Oxfordshire and its residents. It should not be directly shaped by external forces such as those arising from the Oxford to Cambridge Arc.

The New Plan

6. To be effective the Plan will need to satisfactorily address the following issues:
 - a) Maintenance: Currently the county council struggles to maintain the highway network. The conditions of many of its roads actively discourage people from cycling and walking, with the outside metre-width of carriageways normally the most damaged and footpaths and cycle tracks also often overgrown with vegetation. Pedestrians and cyclists too often feel like second-class citizens.
 - b) Funding: Much of the capital expenditure on Oxfordshire's road network is linked to new development (and this often in the wrong locations). Priority is consistently given to increasing the vehicular capacity of the road network as opposed to looking at how you can maximise its capacity for person trips by prioritising provision for public transport and cycling instead. Substantial sums have come forward from the Growth Deal and government's Housing Infrastructure Fund, but the priority for expenditure continues to be for road capacity measures. An example of this is the Eynsham Garden Village where the county council claims to be supportive of the Eynsham to Farmoor cycle route, but has not secured funding for it. It is essential that the county

council allocates a substantially increased proportion of its expenditure to public transport and cycling facilities, and where appropriate, fights for such funding.

- c) Delivering on Priorities: The county council needs to be much more proactive in progressing measures and securing funding. LTP4 identified a rapid bus transit network that would provide regular frequent links between most key locations in the county and form the cornerstone of its strategy to increase use of public transport. Has any of this been delivered? When the Northern Gateway development was under consideration, there was an opportunity to secure a congestion free route for buses through the junction, but this was not taken and buses will sit in queues with other traffic when they reach the end of the A40 bus lane.
- d) Sticks as well as carrots: The level of change needed to deliver the vision will not be achieved by simply providing some better facilities for cycle, walking and public transport. These will need to part of a comprehensive approach which will require a degree of restriction on the movement of motor vehicles, whether by using pricing of travel and/or parking or physical restrictions, coupled with effective enforcement. Achieving this will involve significant cultural change and demand strong leadership.
- e) Accessibility not Connectivity: While widespread connectivity is a priority for internet access, unlimited connectivity for physical movement is undeliverable and impractical. For physical movement the priority must be to provide residents with access to the full range of essential facilities, preferably within walking and cycling distance – the concept of the “15-minute neighbourhood” - or by way of public transport. There must be an end to allowing development in locations that build in car-dependency, and policies put in place to resist the tendency to rationalise facilities, such as healthcare, which result in increased travel.
- f) Population Levels: The draft vision refers to 85,000 new jobs and 100,000 new homes between 2011 and 2031. This is a more rapid rate of growth than at any time in Oxfordshire’s history. The transport implications of this are huge and the misguided allocation of many of the proposed new homes – in locations which will be car-dependent – serves only to magnify the scale of the challenge. There is moreover reference to more huge increases in housing and employment in the following years linked to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc, possibly doubling the population by 2050. To be credible, the Plan must be clear what level of growth and movement it is catering for.
- g) Carbon Emissions: The Plan must also make clear what level of carbon emissions it is seeking to achieve. Vague talk of net-zero by 2030 or 2050 will need to be explicitly defined. The Plan can then work backwards to set out intermediate targets with dates so that progress can be measured. There also needs to be clarity about what the target actually represents. Switching from diesel- or petrol- fuelled engines to electricity will not eliminate the carbon emissions arising from transport. A major part of a car’s lifetime carbon emissions are embedded in its manufacture, particularly in batteries, while the electricity fed in to the national grid must also be accounted for.
- h) Pollution: In parallel with reducing greenhouse gas emissions, there is a need to reduce other harmful emissions from motor vehicles. While some of these will fall as more electric vehicles come on to our roads, other harmful substances – such as from tyres – might actually increase due to the increased weight of vehicles. Noise pollution arising, for example, from tyre noise and wind resistance, will remain a major problem.
- i) Consistency of Application: As outlined in paragraph 2 above, the current policies have been applied partially and inconsistently. In future the county council needs to

show integrity and honesty when facing unpopular choices and when resisting pressure from developers and government agencies.

- j) Trust: The failure of the county council to implement and defend its policies, particularly in the context of development pressures, has resulted in a high degree of cynicism across the county, such that many people openly argue that there is no point in engaging with development of this and other plans. The onus is on the county council to demonstrate it can be trusted to pursue its plans with honesty and openness.
7. POETS set out a number of other specific requirements in its response to the previous consultation, (see <https://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-local-transport-and-connectivity-plan-consultation-response-170520.pdf>).

Comments on Specific Questions in the Vision consultation

Q Have we identified the key challenges and changes required?

- 8. Broadly yes, but there should also be reference to the impacts of traffic noise and the physical intrusion of traffic. There are many places within the county, both urban and rural, where people are physically intimidated when walking or cycling, resulting in trips either being suppressed or undertaken unnecessarily by motorised modes. This also links in to the health and well-being agenda.
- 9. The issue of parking policy needs to be covered more in more detail. Huge areas of our towns and streets are visually scarred by parked cars which also represents a huge opportunity for valuable land to be put to more productive use. This also links to place-shaping and in particular the potential post-covid for more housing to be established on previously developed land in our towns. Availability and pricing of parking in our larger towns is of great importance, but looking ahead we need to develop a new approach to parking in residential areas.
- 10. With car ownership and use falling amongst younger people, it is clear that there is an opportunity to move more towards a model of shared ownership and car clubs, such that while less cars are personally owned by residents, they still have access to a vehicle when they need one. This would result in far less parking space being required in the future, resulting in more land becoming available for other purposes. More parking (and servicing) space would be communal, with less provision within the curtilage of individual properties. This would be particularly significant when planning new development. Another positive consequence would be that more local trips would be undertaken by other modes if people had to actively book and pay to use a car.

Q Has the Engagement Activity identified the key points?

- 11. Broadly, yes.

Q Has the Key Evidence Base been identified?

- 12. Broadly, yes.

Q Do you agree with the draft vision?

13. Broadly yes, but the vision needs to explicitly state what is meant by “net-zero”

Q How should connectivity vary between urban and rural areas.

14. The main difference is that less trips in rural areas can be undertaken by walking and cycling. This emphasises the fundamental importance of providing a comprehensive network of public transport services in rural areas to provide access to essential facilities and the need to resist future development in such locations.

Q Do the key themes and policy focus areas reflect the wider priorities?

15. Broadly yes. Reference does need to be made to light and noise pollution.

Q How should Park & Ride be developed?

16. Park & Ride still has a role to play in the future. As a priority, Oxfordshire must have a much more comprehensive public transport network which links places and facilities together such that the need for car trips can be minimised.
17. However, much of Oxfordshire is rural and there will always be some settlements which are unlikely to be served by such a network. For those localities and for visitors to Oxfordshire from beyond the county boundary, Park & Ride offers an alternative to driving into larger towns and parking there. Their provision can reduce the amount of trips made within towns and the amount of valuable land sterilised for the parking of cars. Use of Park & Ride facilities must however be priced such that use of direct public transport services is always more attractive financially where people have these available.
18. The provision of Park & Ride around Oxford is well established. As well as access to the centre of the city it also offers niche provisions such as to Oxford’s main hospitals which are currently essential to avoid gridlock in their vicinity.
19. If the improved comprehensive public transport network the county needs is provided then it is unlikely that the total amount of Park & Ride provision for Oxford will need to increase significantly although there is the possibility that some of the car park locations might change. There could be a useful role for new Park & Rides in some of Oxfordshire’s larger towns, such as Abingdon, to enable the volume of traffic in towns to be reduced and the environment improved.
20. It is clear that the council’s previous Park & Ride policy – and in particular the safeguarded new sites – needs a comprehensive review.

Q Are the proposed measurable for monitoring appropriate?

21. The headline list is appropriate, but clearly there needs to be much more detail behind what is actually measured and tracked and what will be broken down by mode.
22. One specific detail should be to track the mode of journeys to school, which the county council has a great opportunity to influence.
23. The LTCP must set out clear targets which will be informed by these “measurables.”