

## Housing Group

### Purpose

Oxford can be proud of being top of UK and international leagues in some areas. But it is also top for **unaffordability of housing**. Average house prices are quoted as between 8 and 16 times annual salaries – way above the national average and any recognised criteria for levels of affordability.

This has social and economic consequences - employers have increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff, especially in support roles. Many of those who work in the city commute over ever-longer distances, contributing to pollution and traffic congestion. Quality of life for all is at a premium – not just for the commuters, but for those dependent on their services.



Attempts to expand the supply of housing in Oxford – freehold or rented – include proposals to develop beyond the City boundary, raising issues of the role of Oxford's Green Belt.

Faced by this situation, the Society set up a new Working Group on housing policy at the end of 2016. Its remit is to look at all these aspects of housing policy - and more:

- existing and future demand for housing in Oxford and its surrounding area;
- the quality of the existing housing stock;
- the quality of future residential buildings, both in terms of architectural merit and standard of accommodation;
- the mix of housing types and household sizes;
- location of future housing development;
- forms of tenure, both present and potential new forms;
- density of new housing development;
- housing sustainability and energy efficiency;
- the contribution of new housing to best practice in place-making and sustainable urban development;
- Government and other initiatives – reviewing and responding to consultations.

### Membership

The Group includes individual members of OCS and also representatives of some of Oxford's major public institutions (University of Oxford, Oxford Brooke's University, OU Hospitals NHS Trust).

### Meetings

Meetings take place every six weeks or so, though more frequently if the workload requires. A lot of communication is through the e-mail group. Meetings are usually held on Friday afternoons at Oxford Brookes University.

## The Group's work

As the Group is very new, it has few examples of its work. But more or less simultaneously with its first meeting, in February 2017, the Government published its White Paper on Housing Policy, covering many of the issues the Group seeks to look at. We therefore decided to devote much of first meetings to developing a detailed formal response to the White Paper, on behalf of the Society. At the same time we were also part of a - rather less detailed – joint paper submitted with the Oxfordshire branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, and the Oxford Community Land Trust.

The key messages in our response to the White Paper were:

- It fails to address the complexity of the issues affecting housing supply and affordability
- The enormous uplift in land values when sites are designated for development is not recognised as an opportunity for funding infrastructure, and no proposals for doing this are discussed, to the detriment of good design for communities
- Public bodies should be enabled to acquire suitable sites at near-existing-use values, to facilitate infrastructure provision
- We support the discouragement of deliberate delays in development when consent has been granted and the 'hoarding' sites, but believe taxation solutions are likely to be the most effective
- We support the simplification of Local Plans, and the empowerment of local communities in contributing to design
- We encourage higher density development, especially in urban areas, and the 'future proofing' of homes, for example in regard to energy generation and conservation, water conservation, recycling and waste disposal, and a shift to sustainable transport modes
- We believe in the maintenance of Green Belts, but too few places are protected by them and their protection is inadequate. Where exceptional circumstances dictate the encroachment of Green Belts, compensatory areas should be designated as such. Green Belts are no substitute for proper, effective spatial planning.
- Community-led housing solutions should be better encouraged, and charities enabled to dispose of sites at 'best value', not just highest price, taking account of social and longer-term benefits
- We support proposals for longer-term secure tenancies, where appropriate, and for greater incentives to bring empty properties into use
- The White Paper fails to recognise that the housing market is constrained in many ways. Prices are dictated by many factors other than supply and affordability cannot be addressed simply by more building.

A full text of the OCS response can be found at: <https://tinyurl.com/y7hnxqlb> .

## Contacts

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