Oxford's Economic Strategy Consultation

Response of the Oxford Civic Society – January 2022

1. Introduction

1.   Who is the Strategy aimed at? It seems fairly certain that, without radical changes in policy at national level, and much better integration of essential contributors to the strategy, 'success' is likely to be illusory.   If the draft strategy is intended to encourage these kinds of changes, it has validity, but only if it more clearly proposes essential policy reforms at national and local levels and identifies essential organizational, institutional and financial resourcing arrangements.

2. Question 1 - Have we identified the right themes and guiding principles for Oxford's Economic Strategy? What might be missing?

2.1. Themes

2.   The three themes are welcome, especially the relative significance of inclusivity. The theme of the stronger global city is perhaps not well conceived. Currently Oxford's international significance is because the University of Oxford is competing with leading world universities, and the city in which it is located is drawn into competition with the cities which host other world universities. The success of the University relies to some extent on a comparable (or better) quality of life being available in Oxford as it is in other world university cities, to help to attract post-doctoral researchers and others vital to keeping the University at the cutting edge. It is understood that to some extent creative industries / start-ups are attracted to the Oxford city-region which are not direct spin-offs of University of Oxford initiatives – if this is occurring it would be a welcome contribution to the city-region economy and would provide some resilience to the local economy, if the University should slip in world rankings and attractiveness to investors.   Moving towards a zero-carbon economy is clearly imperative.

3.   Given the apparently equal weights given to the three themes perhaps the title is wrong – it is more than an economic strategy. Given that the spatial implications of the themes are indicated, how does it relate to the Oxford Local Plan? Is its purpose to underpin the Local Plan?

4.   Are these three themes (pretty much currently the basic standard for development planning) adequate in Oxford. Perhaps not. The city is not an island. Although the County Council, some county organisations and the Oxfordshire LEP are mentioned as contributors, it seems that our neighbouring district councils are not mentioned as contributors or even collaborators. Were they consulted in the preparation of this draft strategy?

5.   In discussing Oxford's economic geography, the draft strategy notes that 'within Oxfordshire places like Bicester, Didcot, Banbury and Abingdon are all fundamentally linked to the city's economy.

All these areas have major economic assets and growth opportunities (e.g., Begbroke Science Park, Motor Sport Valley, Culham Science Park and the Harwell, Didcot and Milton Park Enterprise Zones). Better connecting these places to the city and each other, will be integral to the creation of a stronger economic ecosystem'. If so, why not prepare and implement a development plan (economic, social and environmental) for the city-region, in collaboration with the districts and county? The mandate of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership could be extended to include this?

6.   Further justification for a city-region approach is provided in the draft strategy when it is noted that 'Oxford is an integral part of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc and that it is also a key part of the Oxfordshire 'Knowledge Spine' which includes important knowledge intensive areas from Bicester in the north to the Science Vale business cluster in the south. There are also several important nodes for housing growth such as Bicester and vital urban extensions are planned adjacent to the city (e.g., in the north in Cherwell and to the south in South Oxfordshire)'.

7.   Would it be more a more effective strategy, even if administratively difficult, if the strategy was for the city-region?   To some extent such a strategy could underpin the Local Plans of our neighbouring districts at least when dealing with the interconnectedness of the economies of the districts and the city?

8.   The Delivery Plan of the draft strategy notes that the Oxford Economic Strategy needs to be considered in conjunction with 15 other strategies. That's a lot of strategies for a relatively small region and it is not enough for this draft to say just this. The reader needs to know what the connections are – the stage of preparation or implementation of the other relevant strategies and their impact on the draft strategy[1].

9.   To what extent is the draft Oxford Economic Strategy dependent on policies emanating from these 15 strategies? The dependencies need to be clearly spelt out in the draft. This is particularly important when looking at the resources necessary to implement the draft strategy. The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS), now partially complete, describes a huge shortfall in funding for infrastructure required in Oxfordshire by 2040. The OxIS suggests a multi-criteria analysis to prioritise infrastructure investments – should the draft strategy describe the prioritisation status of infrastructure investments needed to support the draft strategy? Similarly, the emerging Oxfordshire 2050 Plan will shortly reach the stage when a spatial development plan for the county will be agreed by the districts and city. In reality, the distribution of employment and housing are set by the existing local plans of the districts and city for the next 10 to 15 years, but the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan may influence the distribution of employment and housing in the longer term. It may also influence the extent of planned employment and housing growth. Is the draft of the Oxford Economic Strategy an input to the final stages of this plan? Will the spatial strategy recommended by the Plan make any difference to the draft Oxford Economic Strategy?

10.   A transformational approach to the city's development should be anchored in the three themes. But to be effective it needs to be a collaborative strategy prepared with the neighbouring districts and county for the city-region. It needs to be synchronised, coordinated and best of all, integrated into the key strategies affecting the city-region – the industrial, spatial, transport, net zero, and infrastructure strategies. In an ideal world these strategies would be synchronised, coordinated

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[1] Can these 15 strategies be clustered to form perhaps only two or three strategies? This may not be the task of the those preparing the city economic strategy, but it would be helpful to development planners in Oxfordshire generally. The proposed city economic strategy would then fit into one or more of the other strategies?

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and best of all, integrated as well. Such an approach will require organizational and institutional changes and these are discussed below.

3. Guiding Principles

3.1. Inclusive City

11.   The extent of deprivation "issues" is well set out with 7 bullet points, but the reasons for each of these and therefore possible targeted remedial actions ideally need to be addressed directly in the principles. The 10 Guiding Principles for an Inclusive City are almost all suggestions for how deprivation can be reduced. It's not clear where the money is coming from to support these principles, or how they relate to the proposals for more science-based businesses and more tourism.   It is noted in the draft Strategy that "It is important to note that an inclusive economy requires better access to decent, affordable homes". This is agreed and it should be included in the principles and in the delivery plan. There is a heavy emphasis on expanding the (presumably) well-paid knowledge economy, but no recognition of the key roles played by many lower-paid service workers whom Covid-19 has shown are essential to the proper functioning of society. Where are they going to live?

12.   Principle 8 for an inclusive city has surely been overtaken – we now need to look at the pros and cons in practice. Surely Principle 9 (cheaper travel) doesn't need exploring – it just needs money, or the much bigger revision of the whole travel system.

3.2. Global City

13.   Principle 1 needs to be supported by the strategy to both support the University of Oxford in creating a city which is attractive to its researchers and investors and which creates an economy which is resilient if the University slips in global rankings.

3.3. Zero Carbon City

14.   The principles as stated are all agreeable – although not very explicit. The action Plan helps to explain what is intended.

4. Delivery Plan

15.   Our biggest concern with the Delivery Plan is that the city council has little control over the key elements of the draft Strategy.   Clearly, one of the biggest problems is provision of affordable housing, but there are strict limits to the powers of the City Council to deliver. Central government policy reform is needed to empower LPAs.   Likewise, substantial improvements in transport are a key part of the strategy presented, but the City Council has very little influence on Network Rail, so all the proposals regarding new stations, opening lines and 'transport hubs' are wishful thinking, until and unless Network Rail becomes radically more cooperative than it has ever shown to be in the past.

16.   Measures relating to the roads or buses can only be implemented by the County Council, which in the recent past has been anything but sympathetic. Policy may have changed, but there seems to have been little input from Oxfordshire County Council into the draft Strategy. In any event, as long as national policy is to have public transport services generally only provided as a commercial operation, rather than a public service, provision of good services is bound to be compromised, and solutions adopted successfully in Europe, for example, are unlikely to appear.

17.   Our next concern is that the Action Plan timescale is broadly 5-years but there is no further breakdown into 'action' timescales. No dates are mentioned, and there are no Gantt charts.   We are also interested to know how far the "Who" partners have signed up to deliver the proposals, or

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whether it is a list of organisations that could be, or should be, involved. It will need them to commit to a lot of work.

18.   There are 23 collections of activities in the list to be delivered in the next 5 years by the City Council, working with its partners, most of which are expressed in general terms, rather than specific projects or items. However, many of these "partners" are not organisations with full time support staff, which will slow progress substantially. There is a significant degree of repetition within the 23 items, particularly those concerned with education/apprenticeships and low carbon issues, but this still leaves a huge list. Where is the officer support going to come from to follow up and work on so many?

19.   **Focus on: Space for Growth and New Ideas** - we agree with the aim to significantly increase the quantity of commercial space around the city, but are sceptical about bringing forward the West End Innovation District at pace, based on the slow pace in evidence over the past decade.   We also agree with the prioritisation of city centre workspace for small and creative businesses and creating flexible policies that support new models of workspace. Oxford is not the only English city with these aims and networking with other cities is recommended to share ideas and, where necessary, gain a louder voice for national policy influence.

20.   **Focus on: Oxford City Centre** - is good, but please note: (i) the city is not short of green space, with the flood plains of the Thames and Cherwell and the rivers, and College gardens and quadrangles, though these are only open sometimes; (ii) people still need to access the city, so reducing car use of central streets is only part of the solution – the other part is better public transport, and a "metro" system (not in tunnel, so trams plus buses) is needed to save the many hours wasted in congestion by the 45,000 who commute to work.

21.   **Focus on: Evolving Oxford's Visitor Economy** - unaccountably stops short of setting up a city and county tourist organisation to coordinate the various improvements and developments that are suggested. The Oxford Pass sounds a good idea, but what does it include? It is doubtful that Oxford needs more tourists: too many tourists and the present lack of any control make the centre of the city unattractive for its citizens, and for other tourists.

4.1. Delivery Principles

22.   It is noted in the draft strategy that the draft 'marks a shift in thinking about Oxford's economy and a step-change in the City Council and partners' approach to economic development. It is more holistic than previous strategies, responding to significant local, national and societal challenges in terms of inclusion and climate emergency'. This is agreed and welcome.

23.   It goes on to say that 'the public sector has fewer resources than ever before, whilst COVID-19 and Brexit will have persistent and fundamental impacts on the city's businesses and residents. The successful implementation of the strategy will need new collaborations and enhanced partnership under the strategic leadership of the City Council and the Economic Growth Board'.

24.   The question we ask is what are these new collaborations and enhanced partnerships and an additional delivery principle is recommended which is 'appropriate governance of the strategy'. As we understand it, the Oxford Economic Growth Strategy Steering Board includes representatives from businesses and business groups, universities and colleges, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the City and County Councils. Does the composition of this Board need to change, particularly with regard to innovative financing? If the strategy is expanded to the city-region, the composition of the Board would also change – even if the city-region approach is not taken should the Board include

representatives of neighbouring districts to ensure compatible policies? Given the holistic approach does the Board need to included specialists in inclusivity and zero carbon programmes? The Terms of Reference for the Group will also need to be revised.

25.   Overall, the delivery principles described on Page 2 of the Delivery Plan look very city-centric. This is not ideal for the development and management of an urban economy which spreads beyond the city's boundaries.

4.2. Delivery Action Plan

26.   There is in general a lack of detailed targets, which in turn would allow progress in achieving the objectives to be measured. Examples of targets could be: (i) connected cycleways on or off-road to allow anywhere within the ring road from anywhere else within it to be reached by cycle in 30 minutes by a reasonably fit person; and (ii) ability for any person in the city to reliably reach anywhere else within the ring road in 30 minutes using public transport and 5 minutes' walking.

Selected comments on Action Plans

Action Plan 1 - Increasing the quantity and quality of commercial space - this is surely under the control of developers. Notably, the universities are mentioned as partners.

Action Plan 2 - Expedite connectivity improvements and infrastructure - the station is mentioned here, as is Network Rail as a partner – it won't be NR, but Great British Railways, whose structure and functionality are yet to be specified. Otherwise, the emphasis is on a new Transport Strategy, not delivering it.

Action Plan 3 - Covid-19 business recovery - this must surely depend upon government finance.

Action Plan 4 - Deliver Oxford West End at pace - this seems to consist of setting up planning organisations. Considering that the concept of Oxford West End has been around for several years now, it is surprising that more planning has not been done. There is no mention of the strategic importance of the West End to the City, or how it will be required to relate to the rest of it, quite possibly resulting in determination by developers. The roles of the University and the Colleges are not mentioned, though they are crucial.

Action Plan 5 - Boost domestic and international investment - it is not clear that the city is in the best position to do this. Since the local politics are different from those of HM Govt, help from government departments is likely to be limited. Why are the Universities not mentioned as partners – they seem to be rather good at getting money for their developments?

Action Plan 6 - Retain a greater proportion of spin-outs - this is the space-balance problem again. If spin-outs lead to manufacturing, where will the facilities be (Oxford Instruments is outside the city boundaries at Besselsleigh)? The universities are mentioned as partners here.

Action Plan 7 - Recovery of the visitor economy - this includes building a "commissioning relationship with Experience Oxfordshire". It is good if this becomes the responsibility of a focussed organisation, and also that it includes the county as well as the city. The City's limited previous support for this organisation may not help to build confidence. It's not clear how the "negative environmental impact of the visitor economy" is to be "mitigated", when the rest of this item is devoted to expanding it. Some hard choices may have to be made.

Action Plan 8 - Making the City's workforce a more distinctive factor in its success - this is mainly about more non-university education, such as apprenticeships. Not clear how this makes the workforce a more distinctive factor; it's more about re-balancing the national emphasis on a university degree as the main measure of achievement. While more local apprenticeships are desirable, more money may be needed as well as moral encouragement. Has anyone tried to estimate the number of apprenticeships that local industry needs, assuming that there were no financial implications? Or is this a more general policy (the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell used to take on 3 times the number they required; this resulted in a surplus, who never found problems in finding jobs elsewhere)?

Action Plan 9 - Recovery of disadvantaged areas - this appears to be a longer-term problem of culture and education. The measures suggested sound good (and how many are already in place?), but the problem is deeper.

Action Plan 10 - Oxford Living Wage Initiative - this seems more likely to depend on finance. If it resulted in increases in productivity, it would be good; otherwise, some low-paid jobs may disappear, which will not help more inclusivity.

Action Plan 11 - Support social enterprise - Good.

Action Plan 12 - Support local procurement - good in principle, but requires the local capability to carry out the work, which should be established by due diligence (see apprenticeships?). Small firms usually have limited financial resources to overcome problems that may arise, which means they may go bust, with deleterious effects on projects on which they are working.

Action Plan 13 - Support local skills training - good, but where's the money coming from – apprenticeships again?

Action Plan 14 - Inclusive Economy Charter – currently a vague concept, probably better achieved through some of the other measures. How would it be enforced?

Action Plan 15 - Deliver affordable workspace - this is basically the space problem again, though short-term provision may be possible during redevelopment. This would seem to be limited to work such as office-based jobs that do not require installation of major capital items such as machine tools. It's surprising that good IT facilities are not mentioned.

Action Plan 16 - 15-minute neighbourhoods - nothing here about the planning "change of use" permissions that would be needed to replace housing by businesses or services; the reverse seems to be happening. Some services, e.g., schools, require substantial land take. The 15-minute neighbourhood needs to be accompanied by good public transport to allow inhabitants to reach services that are not provided within it, and destinations outside.

Action Plan 17 - Affordable travel - this includes: (i) reductions in travel costs; and (ii) better active and public transport networks. While reduced public transport journey times mean more efficient use of vehicles, and therefore potentially cheaper fares, this requires major improvements. Why is there no mention here of the Rapid Transit proposed in LTP4? There seems to be an assumption that those in deprived communities will only want/need to travel to central Oxford – what about the hospitals, care homes etc? There are no ideas about what the proposed Bus Service Improvement Partnership is required to achieve – previous Quality Partnerships have failed to increase bus ridership.

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A comprehensive and coherent public transport network is needed, and in zero-carbon terms could this usefully include trams for N-S, E-W and Eastern Arc services?

Action Plan 18 - Encourage socially- and environmentally-responsible business practices - this appears to assume that such practices do not exist. The adoption of them where they are absent is likely to be determined by national legislation rather than local initiatives.

Action Plan 19 - Reducing negative environmental aspects of economic activity - this is mainly about continuing existing zero-carbon initiatives, mostly expressed in general terms, with little detail. Exploring the setting up of urban consolidation centres around the outside of the city is mentioned; the potential for replacement of some HGV's by rail, and the implications for the location of such centres (e.g. at Oxford Parkway) mean that Great British Railways should be involved.

Action Plan 20 - Mitigating the environmental impacts of housing growth and new developments - the aim here should be for new developments to be zero-carbon. Getting developers to accept and implement sustainable developments will be a major problem unless there are firm governmental requirements.

Action Plan 21 - Growth of green and low-carbon technology sectors - the emphasis here seems to be mainly on demonstration projects. Surely the need now is to use mainly existing technologies to achieve low- or zero-carbon results. It's not clear how the City can influence the National Grid, though the provision of adequate electric power for a zero-carbon future is a major problem. There may be a need to prioritise e.g., electric public transport over electric charging for all vehicle owners. 10 organisations are listed to help achieve the growth (including both universities), which suggests that this will be a huge project.

Action Plan 22 - Achieving zero-carbon - supporting measures, particularly businesses to achieve zero-carbon. Will this involve money?

Action Plan 23 - Delivering the Zero-Emission Zone - this is specific, but is surely involved in some of the other items.

5. Question 2 - Prioritisation of the guiding principles, how well do you feel they meet the strategic objectives and how important are they to you?

5.1. Five fundamental investments

27.   'It is noted that the successful delivery of the strategy is predicated on more efficient, sustainable movement of people and goods. Without these five investments we believe our inclusive, global and zero carbon ambitions could be compromised:

- *Investment in a new station for Oxford*
- *Investment in the Cowley Branch line extension*
- *Connecting Oxford: to reduce congestion, free up essential movement for the economy and allow for re-prioritisation of road space*
- *Improved bus provision, information and infrastructure, to better connect people to jobs*
- *Major investment in active travel modes, to mobilise a greener workforce*

We will work to secure social value benefits across all major investments with partners.'

28.   The importance of these investments is a major concern. Expansion of passenger and freight rail services through Oxford is necessary, but it needs to be part of an improved transport hub for sustainable and public transport services. With Network Rail being replaced over the next 2-3 years by a new organisation (Great British Railways) whose structure and responsibilities are as yet undefined it is not clear how this will be achieved. In the meanwhile, adjacent developments at the Oxpens, Osney Mead and the Island Site between Park End Street and Hythe Bridge Street are going ahead without reference to the hub and the City's transport needs.

29.   It should be noted that HM Government's recently announced Integrated Rail Plan failed to provide even the funding for the so-called Phase 2b to build the proposed new platform 5 and the new Botley Road railway bridge. This does not include any plans for the next Phase (3) which involves rebuilding of Oxford station.

30.   Investment in the Cowley Branch line extension - this has become something of a political shibboleth for some years now, but without any progress. Costs are likely to be very high, due to the potential disruption of mainline freight and passenger services and the likely need for a grade separated junction at Kennington, and extra platform space at Oxford station to accommodate the new services.

31.   Passenger services on the single-line branch will be limited (half-hourly, compared to a 5-minute peak service on buses 1 and 5) and will connect few destinations in Oxford (somewhere around the Oxford Business Park, the Magdalen Science Park and Oxford station). The case for a tramway serving not just these three locations, but many others, giving much better connectivity and guaranteed zero-carbon transport, needs to be examined.

32.   Connecting Oxford: to reduce congestion, free up essential movement for the economy and allow for re-prioritisation of road space. The aims are laudable, but the details need to be specified, tested and if necessary, changed. "essential" is as yet undefined. Why is the private car and the space required to park it not mentioned specifically? And there are no "carrots" to encourage modal change to cycling, walking and public transport.

33.   Improved bus provision, information and infrastructure, to better connect people to jobs. It should surely be in the interest of the bus companies to provide these, to increase ridership and revenues. But bus ridership has remained more or less constant for several years. Buses are slow, services too often unpredictable and infrequent away from main radial routes, and most offer poor connectivity for people who wish to cross the centre of the city, since most routes terminate there at a variety of different locations.

34.   "Connecting people to jobs"/Commuting to work is just one of the reasons people travel: access to essential facilities such as schools, healthcare and retail centres are three more that are important and should be included.

35.   Major investment in active travel modes, to mobilise a greener workforce. For cycling to be more popular and safer, coherent, joined-up cycle tracks and lanes are needed. Many of Oxford's workforce travel in from surrounding towns, where active travel such as cycling is not a realistic means of "green" travel for most of them.

5.2. Other priorities

36.   Oxford City covers a relatively small area, defined by the Thames and Cherwell River flood plains and the Ring Road. Yet this plan demands more science-based businesses, more tourists and

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more housing, but without indicating which take priority. There is no indication of whether or how the present jobs: housing imbalance will be corrected, e.g., the emerging Oxpens plan includes provision for a substantial number of jobs, but a limited number of residential uses.[2] This may be the best use of the Oxpens site for economic development reasons, but when agreeing the housing / employment mix on the Oxpens, we need to know where an adequate number of affordable social and key worker housing will be located. This is particularly the case with Oxpens, with partial land ownership by the city council.

6. Question 3 - Innovative ideas that would enhance delivery against the strategy's guiding principles

- Persuade the neighbouring districts to collaborate in this plan insofar as their economies are part of a single urban economy in central Oxfordshire – the city region.
- Clarity needed on the relationship of this holistic strategy which has spatial / land use implications with the Oxford Local Plan
- Link this strategy into (even absorb into, if appropriate) one or several of the many development strategies in or emerging into Oxfordshire currently.
- Demonstrably link this strategy to other strategies where essential (OxIS and investment prioritisation, Oxfordshire 2050 Plan for the longer tern distribution of employment and growth and the national and local industrial strategies – as examples.
- The 3 themes will require a level of integrated development planning and management hitherto not practiced – it will require organizational and institutional changes to be effective.
- A county-wide Transport Executive would be helpful, especially if it ensures better links with the rail authority and access to central government.
- Innovative public sector, private sector and PPP financing will be essential for this strategy to succeed. An organizational and institutional change may be the establishment of an investment office with a range of skills available.

7. Question 4 - participation and collaboration in the design, development and delivery of the strategy

- Neighbouring LPA's need to be involved. The draft strategy has been produced by the Oxford City Council, but a great deal of the strategy is intertwined with the policies of the surrounding areas and key employment sites, and there is no evidence that any of the surrounding LPAs have had a hand in its production, or are sympathetic to it. More relevant, or appropriate, would be a city-region economic strategy
- Comparable cities are the well-known Grenoble and Freiburg-im-Breisgau. Grenoble is one of several European cities twinned with Oxford, from which we could potentially learn a lot, but we have limited links. And why not twin-city links with other university cities in Europe and elsewhere?
- Much clearer links between this strategy and other strategies and explanations of how approval and implementation can be synchronised, coordinated and even better, integrated
- During the last 50 years Oxford University has changed from being primarily an undergraduate-based university mainly within the historic centre of the City, and grown into a university with a

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[2] Partially due to the constrained site as the postal Sorting Office has not yet been relocated from the Oxpens site.

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majority of postgraduates, and a large number of postdoctoral research assistants who are often on short-term contracts. This continues to have major spatial, transport and housing implications as the University extends further out from the historic centre, taking over housing either by direct conversion into departmental annexes, College residences or residential house rentals by groups of students. To what extent has the University contributed to the preparation of this draft Strategy? How satisfactory are city – university links (both universities) and are they adequate for the implementation of this strategy?

- If the strategy ends up as a separate strategy of the city council (i.e., is not part of the background work of the Local Plan, or part of a joint-authority city-region plan) the business community and communities including interest groups and groups with an interest in a geographic area will need to be engaged. This will be enormously time consuming for the city council (especially as this is not the only strategy being implemented). But such engagement is essential if the strategy is to be successful.