



The countryside charity
Oxfordshire

Campaigning to protect our rural county

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Oxford City Centre Action Plan – CPRE Oxfordshire response, January 2022

The aim of the City Centre Action Plan (CAP) is to strengthen the resilience of the city centre. It states that: “resilience needs to be defined for - and by - Oxford's communities, so it is clear who benefits, why and how” (CAP p12). But it is not clear how the wider community has been or will be involved.

Leigh Sparks, Professor of Retail Studies at Stirling University, highlights "the often-stated desire to return post-pandemic 'normal' [which confronts] questions over whether the pre-pandemic 'normal' was resilient, sustainable, or indeed desirable." (CAP p.12)

“Oxford city centre has a limited value retail offer to serve its communities” (CAP p12). This is possibly because it has evolved to depend on students, and the 150,000 visitors per day (CAP p11) that used to visit the city centre pre-pandemic, and means that the appearance of a pre-pandemic normal is essential for the city centre businesses to thrive. Oxford City Council (OCC) notes that it expects the situation to “re-establish in the years ahead” (CAP p 11), but no evidence is presented to support this. Even before the pandemic, there were retail vacancies caused by the opening of the Westgate centre, and clusters of vacancies around the town. In spite of this, the fact that retail rents were rising before the pandemic, and some new businesses are already appearing, are seen by the council as signs that the pre-pandemic normal will in fact return.

OCC outline a range of strategies to solve the problem of vacancies, including diversifying types of business and improvements in the public realm and animation, but all rely on attracting visitors. Explicit mention is also made of “student and residential development to bolster footfall and overall vibrancy” (CAP p.16). But when the CAP talks about “a strong and increasing demand for city centre space” (CAP p.16), the need for housing is not mentioned. There is no discussion of the possibility of re-zoning/re-purposing vacant properties in the city centre for residential use. Staff shortages are already a problem, yet the only housing mentioned in the CAP is new-build housing in the West End, and this is not for families. Overall, the CAP would create far more jobs than homes.

- CPRE notes the difficulty of responding to the quantity of action plans and consultation documents being produced by the council, especially as many of these have different or conflicting stated aims and priorities. Even within the CAP, the “stakeholder priorities” (diversity, inclusion and accessibility) differ from the City Council’s “corporate priorities” (Zero Carbon, Thriving Community, Inclusive



Economy and More Housing). It would help if the Council could clarify its priorities and vision in a way that is more transparent and open to debate.

- CPRE supports moves to improve connectivity and access, and to improve the public realm.
- CPRE does not support moves to create more jobs than homes as this makes the city centre less resilient to future changes in student and visitor numbers. It increases house prices near the city centre, drives the need to build on recreational spaces and green spaces across the wider city and beyond, including the Oxford Green Belt, and bakes in future dependence on transport.
- The unaffordability of housing in Oxford also drives social and economic exclusion. Relegation of homelessness to the section on getting the basics right, just above effective street scene management and cleaning and waste regimes, reflects an emphasis on homelessness as a symptom, while exacerbating the underlying cause: the high price of local housing.
- On all sites, high density space efficient development must be employed to minimise land take as well as providing direct advantages in low travel needs, low cost purchase and maintenance, and high climate efficiency development.