

OXFORDSHIRE OPEN THOUGHT



Phase I engagement summary

December 2020

Table of Contents

Part 1 - overview

Introduction	2
Design and development	3
Engagement summary	5

Part 2 - responses

1. Living and working	8
2. Climate change	16
3. Connectivity	22

Part 3 - analysis

Conclusions	29
Limitations.....	31

Part 1 - overview

Introduction

The district councils in Oxfordshire are working together to produce a Joint Statutory Spatial Plan (known as 'the Oxfordshire Plan'). The Oxfordshire Plan will provide a strategic planning framework for Oxfordshire to 2050, setting out housing, employment and infrastructure needs whilst seeking to protect and enhance our natural environment and improve quality of life for all.

An initial public consultation (Regulation 18 - Part 1) called 'Introducing the Oxfordshire Plan' took place from 11 February – 25 March 2019. The purpose of this consultation was to ask for views on what the vision, aspirations, objectives and broad spatial strategy for the Oxfordshire Plan should be.

The results of that consultation were summarised in a report published in June 2019. A prevailing view from respondents was that the vision and aspirations for Oxfordshire needed to be bolder and more innovative.

A new way of engaging with stakeholders was needed that could supplement the more formal statutory stages of consultation. This engagement was vital given the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 is a new concept, looking far more long term than other planning documents such as Local Plans, with bigger opportunities to affect change.

Open Thought also created the opportunity to explore whether those who posed the challenge of being bolder or more innovative might have the answers. The engagement process could tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience Oxfordshire is lucky to contain, including that of two top universities, which could massively benefit the Plan and explore the ideas it covers. It would also mean there would be a range of voices willing to contribute to the conversation.

By giving the public the chance to answer the questions, they would be given more ownership of the process and the next Plan consultation document.

The timing of the engagement meant we could think about these big concepts with our communities in advance of drafting policy and future formal consultation on preferred options for the Oxfordshire Plan.

The consultation platform was arranged under three overarching themes of Living and Working, Climate Change and Connectivity with a series of subcategories aimed at stimulating thinking around these important themes (more detail in Part 1). There are clear interrelationships and synergies between these themes and a sustainable plan for Oxfordshire will have to address issues and set the vision and objectives for the Plan in a balanced way.

This summary report aims to provide an overview of the key issues that stakeholders raised through the Open Thought process as well as capturing suggestions for how the Oxfordshire Plan can respond to these. It also seeks to draw links with the earlier round of Oxfordshire Plan consultation where a proposed vision and a series of objectives were presented. The format of this report is set out as an overview of the responses received in relation to the three main themes and sub-categories.

Design and development

In order to ensure the room for creativity and inspiration needed to provide the sort of bold and innovative ideas demanded by our communities was created, it was clear business as usual would not be suitable – this could not be a formal consultation with a weighty document, restrictive response process and sterile ‘town hall’ discussions. A new approach was required to generate the sort of responses sought by the Plan team and the public alike.

The first step was to recognise that limiting the landscape to matters contained within the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 would simply constrain the type of free-thinking needed for innovation. Instead, the remit needed to be wider and grander to allow people to think big and bold.

Analysing the initial Plan document and responses resulted in the identification of three main challenges facing Oxfordshire in the future: how we live and work, how we move around and how we tackle climate change. These were agreed as ideal starting points from which to generate conversation and debate.

In order to help guide the conversation, a number of sub-topics were selected. Additionally, several ‘starter for ten’ questions were written for each sub-topic to get the debate going.

The platform to deliver this engagement also needed to move away from business as usual. Relying on existing consultation strategies would again risk receiving responses that did not meet the requirements of being bold and innovative.

With the Coronavirus pandemic creating uncertainty over in-person events, the most engaging and effective method would be online. This would also increase accessibility, with a site available via PC, tablet and mobile. Secondly the website needed to look fresh and bright - reflecting the feel and intention of the project. A deliberate decision was made to resist council branding on the website so as not to put people off and to set it apart from local authority consultations. .



A bespoke form was developed that was easy to use and highly accessible, simplifying the submission process as much as possible.

2 → Hey _____, tell us a little bit about your idea *

Please tell us about your idea in no more than 300 words. We might use this publicly so don't tell us anything you don't want to share. You'll be able to add supporting information in the next step.

Type your answer here...

Shift ↑ + Enter ↵ to make a line break

The submission form was placed at the bottom of each sub-topic so users could immediately offer their ideas. The website was beta-tested with a select group of users and refined accordingly before being launched on June 1.



[Home](#) [Strategic Vision](#) [Living & Working](#) ▾ [Connectivity](#) ▾ [Climate Change](#) ▾ [About](#) [Contact](#)



The site was promoted across the Oxfordshire Growth Board's social media platforms with particular focus on LinkedIn to appeal to academics, local business leaders and organisations. An eight-week social campaign highlighted the different sub-topics, utilised the poser questions, and encouraged users to discuss and interact. A complementary communication campaign also sought press coverage, direct mail marketing and was shared on partner channels.

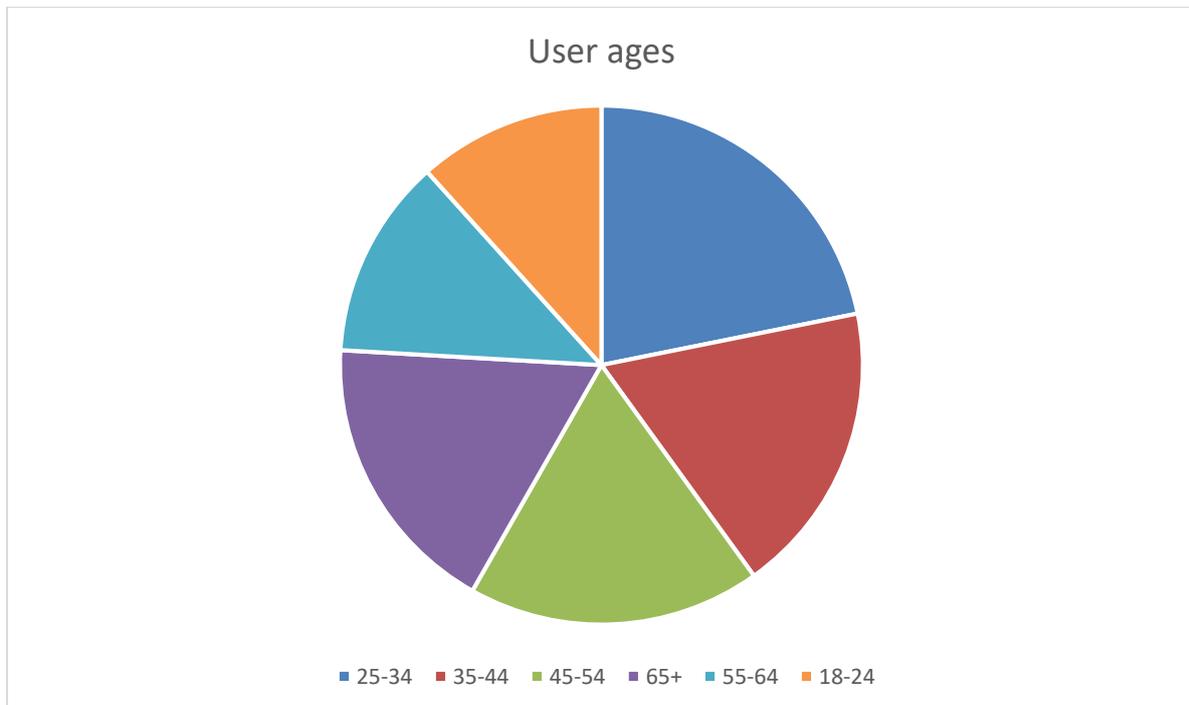
Engagement summary

While Open Thought was viewed as an open-ended engagement platform, the first phase required a cut-off in order to allow time for submissions to be considered for the next Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation document. As such an initial deadline of July 31 was given. This was subsequently extended to August 14 due to demand and several people expressing their intention to submit views. Below is a breakdown of engagement on Open Thought between June 1 and August 14.

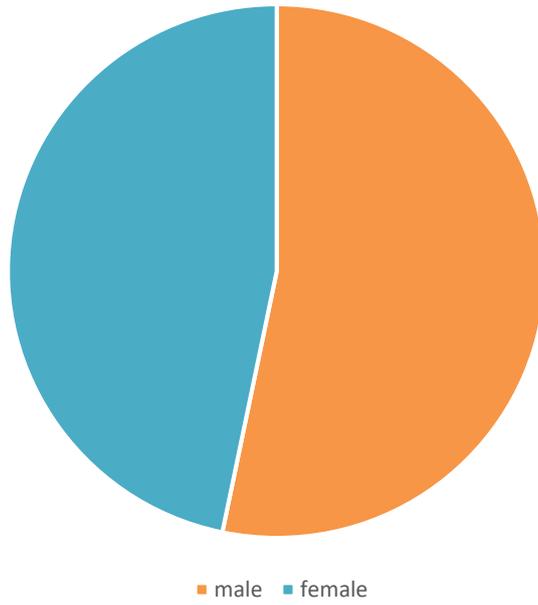
Headline website analytics (June 1 –Aug 14)

- 2,366 unique users
- 3,508 sessions
- 10,101 page views
- 52.85% bounce rate*
- Just under 300 submissions received

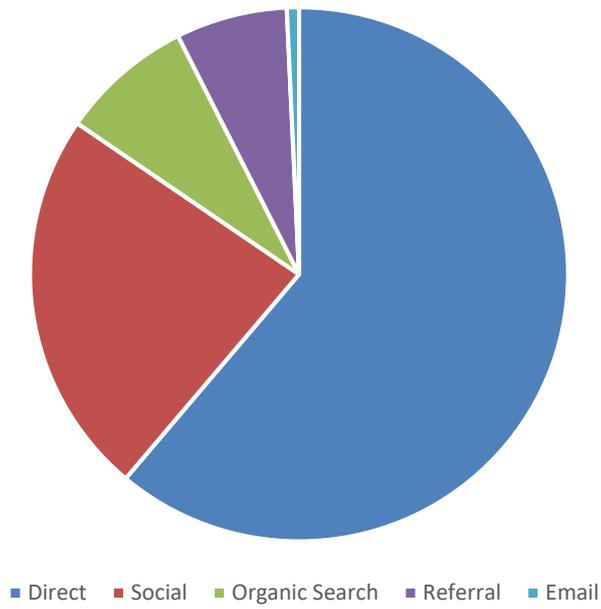
*percentage of visitors who enter the site and then leave before viewing other pages within the same site

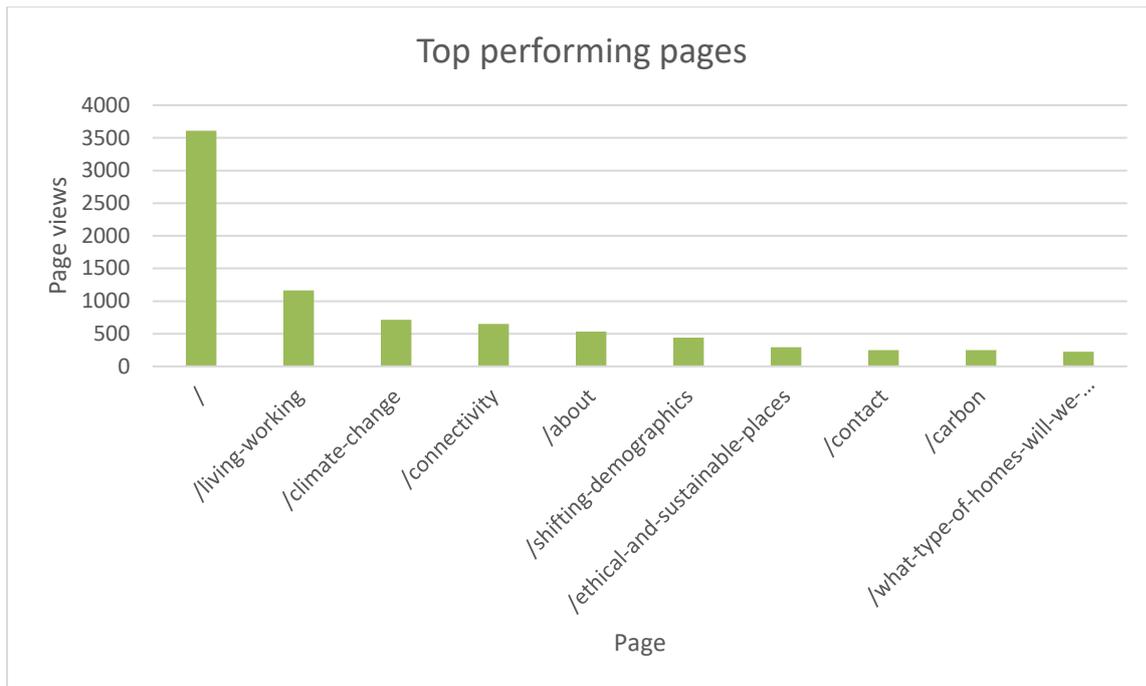


User gender



Traffic sources





In total, just under 300 submissions were received and a summary of them is included in the next part of this report. While the responses have been collated under the three main topics of living and working, climate change and connectivity, there was inevitably a degree of overlap in answers. As such some repetition occurs across these topics, although efforts have been made to minimise this where possible. It also demonstrates the interconnectivity between the topics that will need to be considered when looking at possible policies for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, which will be covered later in Part 3.

Part 2 - responses

1. Living/Working

In this section, we highlighted the successes of Oxfordshire: its diverse and wonderful mix of areas of natural beauty and world leading scientific facilities; the county rated well above the UK average for employment levels and life satisfaction ratings; an economy that is one of only three net contributors to the UK - delivering £21 billion per year of national output. But we also pointed out this success is not without its challenges. A lack of affordable homes and the need to accommodate growth whilst protecting and enhancing Oxfordshire's special natural and historic environments are issues that will impact our lives through to 2050 and beyond.

We asked respondents:

- How can we develop a sustainable response to population growth?
- How we could meet the needs of older people?
- How can we create a fair and equal Oxfordshire?
- How can our places support Low Carbon living?
- How can we become climate resilient?
- How can we protect and preserve our natural resources such as water?
- How can we enable access to green and blue spaces where we live/work/play?
- How can we enhance the relationship between urban and rural areas?
- Will technology augment or replace jobs?
- How will our post COVID experience shape the world of work in 2050?
- Will new technology give us more leisure time?

Achieving Sustainable Communities:

Build back better

There are two major themes that emerged from the responses to this section: how to rebuild following the Covid-19 pandemic, and how to tackle climate change. In many ways these two themes overlapped as respondents sought to suggest ways in which we could collectively plan for a more sustainable future.

A recurring idea was to 'build back green' following the Covid-19 pandemic, with many respondents keen to see the opportunity that has arisen from the pandemic to place even more emphasis on the climate in future decision making. Some went further and recognised that this change in focus would result in the creation of jobs in new, greener industries and felt it would therefore necessitate the learning of new skills for many in the work force. They suggested that educational programmes would need to adjust their approach to include a stronger focus on vocational training.

In addition, some respondents suggested that the responses of communities to the pandemic, particularly in relation to supporting its more vulnerable members, should be encouraged to continue. This would mean building on and expanding community support groups that sprang up to share food and transport and reduce waste.

A link was drawn out through a number of responses between resilience to climate change and community resilience in response to the Covid pandemic. Protecting and enhancing the natural environment and ensuring that communities have access to open, natural green space were seen as essential in supporting the health and well-being of communities and healthy environments.

Getting full community involvement in creating Neighbourhood Plans that would encourage communities to live in a more sustainable way was suggested as something that could play a role in delivering the Oxfordshire Plan.

Changes in the way we work

Several respondents noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has not only demonstrated that the increased flexibility that working from home offers is attractive to many people, but also that many businesses have discovered that it is possible to operate with staff working remotely. Many respondents felt that this new way of working should be continued where it is mutually beneficial. For this to happen, several highlighted a need for investment in improved broadband speed, access and digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. In addition, many respondents saw a need to provide dedicated workspaces or sufficient space for homeworking in new homes, or shared workspaces where private space is limited, as well as social hubs and access to green spaces for people working from home - either within their immediate communities or that can be easily and safely reached on foot or by bicycle.

Healthy communities

Some suggested that higher density developments, including taller urban housing, would reduce the amount of greenfield land required for new housing and protect the countryside, but they must also be designed to mix housing with leisure and community office and green spaces. Access to green spaces was clearly seen as being essential for mental health and happiness, as was having the right facilities to allow people to take part in sport and activity. Respondents suggested careful planning could create opportunities for this to happen, resulting in stronger communities with better levels of health and mental wellbeing. One response highlighted the new Oxford Green Belt Way and suggested creating a programme of activities that encouraged people less confident in accessing their local countryside to explore parts of it, improving health and well-being at the same time.

Ensuring communities have facilities that enable social interaction to build on health and well-being was also raised by several respondents. For communities that don't already have key local facilities such as shops and post offices, it was suggested that there should be financial incentives to encourage people to open them. Others felt that communities should be encouraged to integrate and use local facilities such as allotments and village halls.

Oxfordshire has an aging population and county council forecasts suggest this trend will continue. Several respondents stressed the importance of factoring this into the Plan to give older people access to the facilities, services and care they need while ensuring they are not left isolated in their communities. They believe that providing more appropriate housing for elderly people will allow downsizing and free up larger properties, in turn playing a role in tackling housing affordability for all. One respondent highlighted the need to increase the number of local community hospitals to support an aging population without increasing the need for extra journeys.

Affordable housing

The role played by affordable housing in building sustainable communities was highlighted by several respondents. Many felt that there was a real need for more affordable homes, and that this must be a key part of any future plan. One person suggested that a rethink of approach needs to happen to ensure that the right type of homes are built. Others commented that affordable homes should be high density, high quality and supported by investment in - and protection of - the surrounding environment. Goldsmith Street in Norwich was given as example of how this can be done well. It was also suggested that in order for homes to be affordable, the distribution of the wealth generated by land development needs

to change to achieve more parity and enable people to get onto the housing ladder. One respondent stressed the importance of capturing the value of land so that more can be invested in truly affordable housing and the necessary infrastructure to support development. Some respondents felt that community led housing would result in genuinely affordable homes, more cohesive communities and improved well-being by providing higher levels of ownership of all parts of a housing development.

Green communities

It was clear from many respondents that renewable energy and connectivity need to be a focus for new developments rather than being later 'bolt-ons'. High quality build and design, solar panels, electric car charging points, systems to re-use greywater, and rainwater harvesting were all suggested. In addition, it was suggested that communities will need to learn new skills and habits to ensure we are able to transition to a carbon neutral society and that education at all levels should be provided to enable this. In addition to building new sustainable homes, several respondents stressed the importance of retrofitting older homes to make them more energy efficient. Others went further with ideas about bringing empty retail premises back to life, refurbishing them as housing and making a proportion of them affordable housing with the rest being rented at affordable rates.

One respondent also raised the issue of light pollution, stressing that new developments should not contribute to the problem and that existing areas with severe light pollution should be targeted with action to reduce it as it wastes money and energy and impacts on the health of humans and on wildlife (by interrupting migration and feeding patterns for example).

Transport infrastructure

Many respondents felt that healthy communities needed to be connected but recognised that issues with congestion, air pollution and destruction of the countryside meant that building more roads was not a desirable solution. One person responded that before beginning any new plans for housing, a radical vision for infrastructure needed to be created.

It was suggested by others that local government should be given more power to compel landowners to facilitate the building of new cycle paths to connect communities and encourage healthier lifestyles. Other ideas included making Park and Ride services free, investing in more zero-emissions buses and charging for non-electric vehicles entering Oxford. Others proposed new public transport systems such as underground trams into Oxford city centre or pointed to Cambridge's research into an Affordable Mass Transit System.

Spatial options

In terms of where new homes are built, some respondents felt local people should have more of a say. Others felt that the assessment of spatial options as part of the Plan should be flexible in looking at sustainable sites outside of the Green Belt and where development will not harm the landscape of Oxfordshire. Several respondents emphasised how 'brownfield' sites including former military bases should be explored to maximise the protection of green spaces, the rural nature of the county and its AONBs.

Many respondents agreed that the Plan should apply Garden Town and Village principles to the design of new settlements and new strategic development sites so they are both sustainable and attractive places to live with community needs at their heart.

Creating a Fair and Equal Oxfordshire

Several respondents suggested Oxfordshire could be a pioneer in measures to improve the county's socio-economic outcomes in a sustainable way.

Achieving Sustainable Living:

New homes

Respondents had many suggestions as to how the Plan could help lifestyles become more sustainable. Several focussed on the construction of new homes, proposing that all new housing be built to the same high standards both in terms of construction and environmental impact. Passivhaus was given as an example of how to make this possible and another idea proposed the creation of an independent regulatory body to ensure developers are held to account over poor quality building.

It was suggested by many that all new buildings should be zero-carbon and none should have a gas supply. Ground source heat pumps, solar panels, rainwater collection and electric car charging points were all considered essential to hitting carbon neutral targets by 2050.

Many respondents commented on the need they saw to ensure new homes are built on main public transport corridors linked to railway stations, existing or new, to reduce the dependence on private cars, whilst others focussed on connecting communities by having electric community rental cars and e-bikes.

Community facilities

Others proposed shared community facilities such as meeting spaces and central facilities including laundry rooms in higher density housing. One respondent stressed the importance of building a feeling of community ownership of such resources. Another suggested the Plan strive to reduce food poverty by incorporating community larders, suggesting that 'waste' food can feed those who need it most. Broader suggestions included investing in health and social services as well as leisure facilities.

New ways of working and living

With Covid-19 having changed the way in which many people work, it was suggested that businesses that now have staff working from home and who no longer have the overheads associated with large office space, should consider contributing to a proportion of their employees' rent or mortgage. There was also a suggestion that those businesses whose staff are not able to work from home should create homes adjacent to their place of work, even by adding a new storey to an existing building. This could ensure that new homes are built in existing urban areas rather than in the countryside, retaining green spaces to be accessed to improve health and well-being.

Reducing zero-hour contracts and ensuring equality of opportunity for all were also suggested as ways to build sustainable lifestyles.

Strengthening Oxfordshire's Natural Assets:

It was apparent from many respondents that Oxfordshire's natural assets, including large ANOBs, chalk streams, woodland, rivers and Sites of Special Scientific Interest are extremely valuable to much of the county's population, in terms of health and well-being, for their role in providing precious habitats for wildlife, and in offsetting some of the carbon produced by modern lifestyles. Several respondents felt positively about efforts designed to

increase biodiversity in urban areas but stated that however much work was done in this area, it could not replace existing long-standing and complex biodiverse environments (such as ancient woodland), which should be protected. There was a suggestion that we should move away from 'growth' as a measure of success, towards 'thriving' or 'restoration of biodiversity'.

AONB and Green Belt

One respondent felt that it was essential that the conservation and enhancement of the AONBs was fully addressed during the preparation of all plans and incorporated into all emerging policy documents. Another stressed the importance of local authorities, statutory bodies and third sector organisations working together to positively impact the county's nationally important landscape and local biodiversity. A third suggested creating new Green Belts around the garden towns of Bicester and Didcot to limit urban spread and protect the countryside. Some expressed strong feelings that the focus for development needs to shift to high density urban housing near public transport hubs to reduce encroachment into the countryside.

The subject of the Green Belt did bring some difference of opinions however, with some suggestion that as that the concept of Green Belt was created in the 1950s, it may not be as relevant today as it was and as such it should be considered for release if doing this might have other environmental benefits, especially in tackling climate change.

Farming and agriculture

Increasing the receptiveness of landowners to discussions about green farming methods and land use was suggested as a potential positive outcome of local authorities adopting a 'positive planning' approach to growth.

Another suggestion to protect biodiversity from modern intensive agriculture was to move away from the current EU approach of area based subsidies and towards more directed subsidies to encourage the protection and creation of features such as hedgerows, ponds, patches of woodland, meadows and marshes and routes for wildlife from one area to another. Increasing the size of natural margins at the edge of agricultural fields was another suggestion to protect biodiversity as was ensuring farmers are using sustainable soil enhancing practices.

To protect farmers' livelihoods, one idea proposed some system of rotating between fallow fields, crop rotation, and areas left to re-wild.

Wildlife corridors

The importance of creating corridors to connect different natural areas, enabling wildlife to pass between them, was one point that several respondents put forward with one person suggesting that connectivity for wildlife should be given at least as much priority as connectivity for humans. 'Nature recovery networks' were stated to be a positive ecological step with several respondents keen to see them expanded.

Net Environmental Gain and Natural Capital Accounting

One respondent voiced concern over the use of Net Environmental Gain and Natural Capital Accounting, highlighting lessons that can be learnt from Germany and Australia. The same respondent also voiced concerns over DEFRA's biodiversity metric.

New ways of working in 2050:

Working from home

As addressed earlier in the report, Covid-19 has increased the number of people working from home and as such, in the eyes of many respondents, has demonstrated the importance of ensuring all communities having access to good reliable internet services. Many respondents were keen to see these higher levels of homeworking continue, but suggested that for the model to be successful, co-working spaces and social hubs need to be created to boost local economies and the vitality of individual communities. The provision of good local leisure facilities was also cited as being important to homeworkers.

It was noted that working from home has increased the demand for home deliveries which in turn has seen growth in the number of delivery vans on the roads and may in time increase the number of large distribution warehouses. One respondent felt it was important that there is capacity to support the logistics surrounding this shift, and suggested investing in motorway junctions as well as exploring the role of rail freight in connecting rail and strategic road networks.

One respondent identified the challenge of balancing catering for globalisation of the workforce (with remote working, Oxfordshire based businesses could recruit staff from across the world and all could be based at home), with promoting the local community and having everything within 15 minutes reach and suggested the Plan look at how to achieve this.

Impact on town centres

The growth in the number of people working from home would also have an impact on the viability of town centres in their current model, many people suggested. Several proposed converting former commercial spaces into residential buildings with good access to green and open spaces. One person was keen to stress the importance of ensuring this conversion of town centres be done in a managed rather than piecemeal way to ensure the focus can be on sustainable redevelopment whilst creating warm and secure places in which people want to live and visit.

The future

Several people felt that in the future many jobs may become automated. Others saw a shift towards growth in green technologies and suggested that for Oxfordshire to capitalise on this it needs to ensure investment is made in training and reskilling to support this growth from within the county.

For those people who can't work from home, it was suggested that staggered start and finish times and other flexible working opportunities should be encouraged in order to reduce congestion on the roads.

One respondent stated that the Plan should support the continued growth of the Science Vale, as well as business parks within the county's 'Knowledge Spine'. It was also proposed that the Plan should consider the economy as a central issue, alongside housing, and should have some flexibility to allow it to adapt to the pace of technological change that will likely be seen over the course of its life.

Connected everything

The prospect of Oxfordshire's already congested roads becoming worse was clearly a concern for several respondents, one of whom suggested that a radical vision of the county's

infrastructure was needed before further planning and building of houses. It was suggested that building in places where walking and cycling are viable alternatives to private vehicles would reduce dependence on cars and give more of the population access to urban centres and facilities.

One person suggested that for sustainable growth to be achieved, focus should be on developing sustainable settlements. Banbury was given as an example of one such settlement due to its rail connections to the north and south.

Future transport

One suggestion was to provide communities with an electric rental car and e-bikes. This person also identified a need to provide cycle routes suitable for all levels in every community in order to promote sustainable travel.

Balance between urban and rural

One respondent felt that there was a disparity between the investment in Oxford city, in which approximately only 20% of Oxfordshire's population lives, and in rural communities where they felt that in many places there were no facilities and high levels of deprivation.

Carbon

Respondents had many ideas about how to move towards a carbon-neutral society. These included ensuring every house, public car park and office were fitted with electric car charging points where prices were identical or lower to domestic supply rates, ensuring all new buildings were built to be zero-carbon, and retrofitting existing buildings to reduce their carbon footprint. It was felt to be key to give proper consideration to the construction of new buildings to ensure that they do not need to be upgraded before 2050 to meet the zero-carbon target. One person felt that existing lifestyles also need to be addressed in order to move to a carbon-neutral society but that this would be a far bigger challenge than changing the way new buildings are constructed.

One respondent felt strongly that the Oxfordshire Plan should have a zero-carbon future as a focus throughout, with every policy requirement showing how it will impact the transition to zero-carbon, and providing strong and clear guidance on zero-carbon standards for all new buildings in Local Plans.

Water

Proposals were also put forward making grey water recycling and other water efficiency measures mandatory in all future new-builds and only permitting new developments if they can demonstrate how they will use recycled water to meet a significant part of household water needs. It was suggested that water supply and treatment issues should be looked at in the same way as protection of the Green Belt when considering permission for new developments. One person voiced concerns about pollution levels and micro-plastics in the Thames.

Energy efficiency

One respondent wanted to warn against using non breathable insulation to retrofit all old buildings because of the risk of mould and its impact on the health of occupants. They also advised against using the same insulation for all housing, suggesting that pre 1919 housing stock is already sustainable and potentially low carbon emitting.

Circular economy

The concept of transforming from a linear to a circular economy (in which waste is dramatically reduced through more efficient use and re-use of resources) was suggested. The motivation behind the desire for this shift was overuse of already stretched resources.

2. Climate change

In this section we briefly set out the challenge we face tackling climate change as the world is getting warmer and more extreme weather has a serious impact on human populations.

We asked respondents:

- What we can do about carbon emissions, particularly the 81% of total emissions in Oxford coming from energy and fuel use in buildings?
- How can we address air pollution - as 22 sites across Oxfordshire are currently breaching air pollution limits – both now and in the future?
- How can we reduce our water use, prevent water pollution and protect our waterways?
- How can we rebuild our biodiversity and protect our under-threat flora and fauna, creating more habitats?
- How can we change our reliance on natural gas, petroleum and coal as our energy sources given global warming and climate change?
- How can we become more sustainable with our use of resources?

Carbon:

Building

One respondent commented that retrofitting thousands of existing buildings that were designed to be heated by fossil fuels was a very big challenge and felt that this will make hitting net-zero targets by 2050 difficult.

It was suggested that all new buildings should be zero-carbon. One person felt that there should be investment in training to fill any skills gap and allow successful implementation of the zero-carbon homes building programme as well as government funding and incentives to ensure everything is carried out to the same high standards.

Other ideas included planning further ahead when looking at large scale developments; rather than planning to create green barriers and wildlife corridors during the construction of large scale development, managed forests could be planted 30 years before the development begins, thus sites would be carbon neutral before building starts.

One respondent cited the National Planning Policy Framework: “new development should be planned for in ways that [...] can help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as through its location”, stating that this should be at the heart of preparation of the Oxfordshire Plan.

One person drew attention to examples of new styles of architecture where no air conditioning is necessary and the carbon footprint of the building is therefore reduced, suggesting that this sort of property be considered in Oxfordshire.

Shopping and packaging

Several respondents voiced concerns over single use materials, with many suggesting that they, along with many types of plastic packaging, should be banned to reduce waste generation. A ban on ‘Buy One Get One Free’ offers on food was also put forward as a way to reduce waste of perishable items.

One suggestion was to introduce a product labelling system to make the item’s carbon emissions clear to the purchaser, including the embedded carbon produced during manufacture and transport, rather like food labelling of sugar and fats. The issue of

embedded carbon was raised by several people, with one person asking whether the goal of making Oxfordshire net-zero would include offsetting the carbon embodied in imported goods.

Transport

Making Oxfordshire a trailblazer by penalising or banning diesel cars by 2025 was one suggestion made to reduce the county's carbon footprint; as was improving access to low energy public transport.

It was suggested that the impact on carbon emissions should be a guiding factor in all decisions made by councils. For example, comparing the impact on carbon emissions of spending £1m on roads and £1m on walking and cycling when producing a transport budget.

One proposed solution to any problems funding the shift to zero carbon homes and transport was to create an uplift levy and carbon tax which is redistributed to low-carbon sustainable infrastructure programmes.

Other ideas

Several respondents suggested that growing plants and trees to reduce carbon would be a good idea and that it would also slow rainwater run off resulting in fewer floods. Another suggested way to reduce flooding was to reduce tarmac on roads and carparks to a minimum.

It was proposed that landed estates could play an important role in connecting communities with green paths and cycle networks to move away from the use of cars as well as adapting their land management systems to demonstrate negative carbon footprints.

One respondent suggested that humanity needs to be encouraged to maintain a sustainable size of population in order for any positive impact to happen on climate. It was proposed that heavy investment needs to be made into educating people about climate change and leaders need to make brave decisions to enable meaningful change.

Air:

Many respondents felt that addressing air pollution must be a big feature of the Plan; that new developments that would lead to more air pollution should be rejected. In addition it was suggested that the Plan should ensure that Oxfordshire meet the clean air targets set by the World Health Organisation and that it pledges to make CO2 reduction or removal, and climate heating mitigation and adaptation central to every policy, procurement and action that councils are responsible for.

The effect that vehicles have on the county's air quality was raised by a number of people with some suggesting that the main way to improve air quality would be to reduce the number of vehicles (HGVs and commercial vans as well as private vehicles) on the roads or reduce the emissions of vehicles. Supporting active travel and reducing the need to travel were also proposed along with building houses with ducting to allow charging of electric cars by residents. It was also suggested that there should be more pavement and lamppost charging points for electric vehicles across the county to cater for residents who don't have off road parking.

One person suggested the county could use detectors with on-street signage indicating air quality which could help people not only acknowledge the issue but avoid the area if

possible. It was recognised that getting these systems set up would be expensive and it would also be difficult to detect the source(s) of any spike in pollution.

Whilst several respondents commented that roofs should primarily be used for generation of electricity, it was suggested that where possible, green roofs could also be created to absorb air pollution. Another idea was to create 'green lungs' in existing smaller green spaces which would assist in reducing carbon. A further suggestion was to plant trees along busy roads to reduce the effects of pollution.

Water:

A number of respondents stated that planning to grow the population in an already a water stressed area would be highly detrimental to efforts to reduce pollution, water wastage and flooding.

Water pollution

Several respondents lamented the pollution levels in Oxfordshire's river network with one citing the European Water Framework Directive and stating that 5% of the county's water bodies to be at 'Good' status. One person said that the Chilterns' chalk streams in particular were internationally important and need to be protected. One idea to improve the situation was to create a Blue Flag standard for Oxfordshire's rivers with a clear vision in the Oxfordshire Plan about the quality standards the rivers need to meet. It was suggested that investing in water treatment plants should be explored to ensure that storm overflows can be managed to avoid the discharge of sewage into the county's rivers. The issue of plastics in the county's waterways was put down to lack of education around the wider impact of littering and engaging communities to build interest in, and responsibility for the county's rivers to solve this problem was also suggested. One respondent suggested that the Plan look at the effects of farm runoff on water courses.

Water wastage

Ensuring new homes and developments were 'water-smart' by making water meters mandatory was one proposal put forward to reduce the amount of water wasted by households, another being the waterless toilets that are becoming more common in France and Switzerland. One person suggested offering discounted water butt systems to residents. Incorporating water recycling and rainwater harvesting systems into new buildings, whether residential or commercial, was another popular suggestion, as was encouraging community responsibility for water wastage by creating a network of 'water champions' to provide advice and stimulate community projects. One person highlighted the amount of water wasted through leakages. Several respondents proposed that the Plan include best practice on using Sustainable Urban Drainages (SUDs) to reduce waste and provide water to the local community. One person suggested that Thames Water build small reservoirs with leisure and biodiversity potential and not large reservoirs as planned for Abingdon.

Flooding

Planting to reduce rainwater run off during heavy rain was mentioned by several respondents, as was increasing natural flood defences and creating wetlands. The reintroduction of beavers and increasing engagement with farmers in creating riparian woodland were also suggested.

Energy:

Many felt that making Oxfordshire carbon-zero should be a key feature of the Plan and saw achieving this as soon as possible to be essential. Several respondents felt that looking at the energy we use would be vital in this transition and ideas such as making solar panels and heat pumps mandatory in all new homes as well as retrofitting existing properties were popular suggestions. Providing incentives to residents to install this technology was another idea, as was ensuring that panels were fitting on east and west facing roofs in order to provide energy at peak periods. Other proposals were creating community renewables, using microgrids and switching all energy tariffs to 100% renewable.

To reduce wasted energy, one respondent suggested improving insulation in existing buildings. Along with fitting solar panels and heat exchangers; this could be done on a village by village scale to reduce costs by economies of scale. It was suggested that communication about such schemes should be provided by councils in a way that is easy to obtain and clear both about cost benefits and about the impact on the environment.

One respondent was keen to ensure that whilst renewable energy sources should be encouraged, care needs to be taken in the Chilterns to protect them from any negative impacts on the landscape.

It was suggested that electric or hydrogen powered vehicles should be pursued but it was recognised that the infrastructure needed for them and the maintenance of that could be expensive.

Several people commented that we have the know-how and technology to transform the way we heat our homes and power our vehicles and that the way to begin to make a big difference in this area was to have the political impetus to bring about change; the Oxfordshire Plan was said to have a significant role to play here. It was also suggested that the Plan should support energy from waste.

Biodiversity:

There was an appetite to improve the county's biodiversity from many respondents, several of whom suggested the Oxfordshire Plan should lead the way in creating policies to support this. One respondent commented that local authorities also needed robust policies and adequate resources not only to challenge development proposals but also ensuring that policies were adhered to.

Some respondents wrote of the need to build effective partnerships between public, private and voluntary organisations, whilst others highlighted the role that local communities could play in supporting biodiversity, with one suggesting that local community conservation projects would benefit from access to expert groups and funding to encourage community driven woodland or rewilding projects. It was suggested that there should also be an emphasis on educating children and adults on how to grow food as well as on animals and other wildlife. It was also stated to be important that there was a clear overall vision of what needs to be achieved and then all parties can play their part in implementing priorities.

One respondent suggested the Plan encourage carbon gardening, writing that it is possible to capture carbon in our own gardens and allotments by not digging and disturbing the mycorrhizal fungi under the surface of the soil as well as by growing as many native plants as possible. It was suggested that soil health be included in policies within the Plan to reinforce what is due to be announced in the forthcoming Agriculture Bill.

Turning unsuccessful farmland into woodland or meadow, whilst creating a system to turn unused land including grass verges into biodiversity havens was also mooted. To increase connectivity for species, one person suggested building nature bridges and creating a nature

network across Oxfordshire and thought all schools and businesses with land could have a wilding area.

Some respondents commented on insect-friendly planting, suggesting that new developments could be planted with minimum maintenance plants that flower and produce nectar followed by berries later in the year. Another suggestion was to obtain a recommended list of species to be planted and of plant and seed sources (with the help of local organisations that can consider habitats). Investing in cut and collect technology and adopting the Plantlife guidance on management of verges and green space was another suggestion as was planting native wildflowers rather than annuals in parks and urban areas. One respondent felt that 'swift bricks' should be included in all new builds to provide swifts with safe places in which to build their nests.

Circular economy:

Many respondents felt there needed to be a mind shift amongst residents in order to transition from a linear to a circular economy and education would be one way to do this. An environmental levy was also suggested as a way to make it easier for people to do the right thing rather than throw away clothes and electrical products. Tied in with shifting focus and habits was another idea, that the work of the Oxfordshire Growth Board be reviewed with a focus on sustainability, health and a 'thriving' economy rather than a growth one. Ensuring the Oxfordshire Plan be guided by a regular review process that includes engagement and alignment with the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was a further suggestion.

Another suggestion was to see repair workshops and innovation in recycling waste – using products that would otherwise go to landfill become more commonplace. The 'Library of Things' that is growing throughout London and through which people can rent items such as DIY tools or cooking equipment, was put forward as something Oxfordshire could model. Indeed, another suggestion saw Oxfordshire taking a lead in pursuing a 'circular economy' model by encouraging such holistic businesses to base themselves in the county and providing such businesses with set-up grants. Another idea was to encourage local industries to produce goods for the local market with incentives or tax breaks for the production and sale of sustainable items made from locally sourced materials.

Development was raised by several respondents. One suggested that part of creating a circular economy was ensuring the right kinds of development were located in the right areas, in terms of natural assets. It was felt that it was important not to build on sensitive sites or biodiversity hotspots and to encourage establishment of wildlife corridors. Using brownfield rather than greenfield sites for development was also stated as being important.

Sustainable communities:

Some sites for development were proposed and were presented as having sustainable locations close to public transport hubs, being capable of being self-sustaining and carbon-neutral.

It was suggested that environmental sustainability should be embedded in new communities and that this could be achieved through collaboration within communities and by ensuring environmental sustainability is considered in all funding and investment decisions. It was suggested that using GDP as a measure of what people value largely ignores things like quality of community life, beautiful landscapes and buildings, open space or biodiversity. As such, for communities to be healthy and for climate change to be impacted in a positive way, making biodiversity a focus of the Oxfordshire Plan was considered to be vital.

Sustainable lifestyles

Respondents had many ideas about how to achieve more sustainable lifestyles. These included ensuring that all new housing included land for growing food, incentivising local industries to produce goods for the local market and ensuring these goods are durable and sustainable. Having repair cafes and zero-waste shops in every town was also suggested as was securing more government funding to support growth in carbon-free heating and travel.

Working from home

Many respondents agreed that the changes to the way we work that have come about as a result of Covid-19 should be continued into the future to tackle congestion, improve air quality and reduce road traffic accidents. With more people working from home in the future it was said by several to be extremely important to consider the location of new developments and ensure they are built with good access to health, education, leisure and community facilities as well as local employment sites for those unable to work from home. One respondent suggested that the Plan encourage employers to stagger working hours as much as possible to reduce the impact of peak travel.

Deliveries

The increase in the number of delivery vans on the roads since buying habits changed during lockdown was noted by several respondents. One person suggested investing time in creating local delivery hubs where parcels for the same postcode were sorted and also encouraged the use of bike couriers whilst recognising the challenge of reaching some rural communities by bike.

Connected everything

There was a suggestion to transform minor rural roads, unsurfaced roads, disused railway lines, cycle paths, parkland and areas of open countryside into high-quality cycle and walking corridors; that this could play an important part in connecting new developments to town centres and other facilities. Other respondents commented that encouraging more active travel would improve the health and quality of life of much of the population by reducing the incidence of diabetes and obesity and in turn would reduce costs to the NHS.

Future transport

It was suggested that discouraging HGVs from using rural roads would dramatically improve air quality and that charging these vehicles to use local routes instead of the motorway network would be one way to do this.

One respondent also raised a concern about the environmental impact of the use of cobalt (and the ocean mining needed to extract it) in batteries for electric cars, suggesting that hydrogen fuelled vehicles could be a better way to reduce carbon emitted by vehicles.

Another proposal was to reduce the speed limit on roads in town centres as well as on A and B roads. Alongside this the idea was to run a campaign to enable people to understand that slower is better not only for the environment but also safer for cyclists.

3. Connectivity

In this section, we set out the challenges Oxfordshire faces with an over-reliance on private vehicles and an ageing transport infrastructure struggling to cope with capacity and considered the impact of new technology and industry ‘disruptors’ – such as Uber – on mobility.

We asked respondents:

- How will we plan to move around in a changing world?
- How will the rollout of 5G and increased digital connectivity facilitate movement and cut out unnecessary travel?
- How could we incorporate a micro metro and mobility interchanges in Oxfordshire?
- Can we reclaim highway space for other purposes by increasing the efficiency of our transport networks?
- What could changes in last mile freight look like in a more connected world?
- Could automated vehicles and drones help provide services to rural communities?
- What impact could ideas such as ‘Mobility as a Service’ and artificial intelligence have on how we move?

Connected Everything:

Transport Infrastructure

It was suggested that Oxfordshire should not be car focused; that it should be possible to get anywhere in the county easily and pleasantly without using a car or taxi. Travel for cyclists and pedestrians should be made easier, and travel by car should be made more difficult.

It was suggested that public transport throughout the county should be both free of charge and reliable.

Concern was raised about the quality of existing bus routes in Oxfordshire in terms of journey times, service frequency and cuts to services. Concern was also raised that existing bus routes are too focused on providing connections to Oxford City and that other areas of the county are less well served.

It was suggested that the Oxfordshire councils should work with the NHS to improve transport connections to the Oxford hospitals. It was also suggested that Oxford should have a tram service connecting Botley, the city centre and the John Radcliffe Hospital, with all roads used by the tram being pedestrianised.

It was suggested that there should be continuous, segregated cycle lanes throughout Oxfordshire so that people of all ages and abilities would feel safe and happy cycling.

One respondent suggested that sustainable travel could be increased through improvements made to multi-mode ticketing, real time information and easy journey planning to avoid congestion.

Equalities

The need to ensure that everyone is able to access and benefit from improved connectivity, including older people, young people, people with disabilities, people on low incomes and people in rural areas, was highlighted.

New Development

It was suggested that the focus should be on creating neighbourhoods where essential day to day services and facilities are provided within 15 minutes walking distance from all homes.

It was suggested that all new developments should have a 'mobility hub' – a central point with good public transport links, secure cycle parking, and connection to safe local cycling and walking routes.

Personalised Freight:

The current reliance on HGVs and vans for many freight movements was identified as problematic in terms of their contributions to poor air quality and carbon emissions.

It was suggested that freight consolidation at the edge of urban areas, supported by a more sustainable local distribution system, might be a more efficient system. It also suggested that more goods could be transported by rail.

A number of concerns were raised in relation to the use of drones to transport goods: load size/weight limitations; battery power limitations; legal responsibility where there is loss of control or function; security risks; privacy risks; safety risks; noise; impacts on biodiversity. It was suggested that the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 should have a policy to avoid, reduce and mitigate the negative impacts of drones.

It was also suggested that the number of deliveries made could be reduced through the introduction of a delivery tax.

Taking Services to Rural Areas:

It was highlighted that a significant proportion of Oxfordshire's communities live in rural areas. There was concern that the needs of rural communities are often overlooked.

It was highlighted that people living in rural areas may need to travel further, more frequently and be more car dependent than people living in urban areas. It was suggested that supporting rural communities to reduce their need to travel and to access more sustainable travel options would help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Suggestions to support this included: improving digital connectivity; creating rural mobility hubs; integrated public transport ticketing; supporting electric private vehicles and electric vehicle sharing schemes; making some routes car-free to encourage cycling; autonomous vehicles (on standard routes).

Concern was noted about the feasibility of providing new pedestrian and cycle links between small rural communities. It was suggested that rural communities should not be penalised if there are no viable alternatives to private car use available.

Site promoters also highlighted the potential for development to deliver services and facilities in rural areas.

One respondent felt that rural isolation should be addressed by reinstating bus services to these areas.

It was suggested that local centres would benefit from being charged lower business rates in order to enable them to provide better services.

It was suggested that the use of apps for several people to consolidate their journeys may be a better way to increase mobility for those who are isolated.

Air Quality

It was stated that vehicular movements, particularly HGVs, are the most significant source of air pollution. It was suggested that goods should instead be transported via electrified railways to distribution points at the edge of urban areas where goods can then be delivered using small electric self-guided vehicles.

Biodiversity

It was suggested that that connectivity for wildlife and continuity of habitat should be prioritised.

Micro metro

Respondents were generally supportive of a metro system for central Oxfordshire. It was suggested that a metro for Oxford could be a lower carbon alternative to relying on cars and buses and could also help to resolve parking pressures in the city. A metro was suggested as a way to link existing park and ride locations and Oxford's hospitals and therefore the reduce the need for more bus lanes. This could also provide inter-urban connections, for example along the A40.

However, the benefit of having a micro metro system in Oxford was questioned by some respondents, who felt that it wouldn't benefit wider Oxfordshire and small rural communities. It was also raised that not all rural residents need to travel to Oxford.

Some respondents stated that the term 'metro' needs to be defined as it can mean different things. One respondent also said that 'small-scale' metro needs to be defined, in terms of whether it means small in a physical sense or small in tunnel mileage as these have different issues.

It was raised that providing an underground metro is very expensive, and some respondents compared the cost of providing an underground system with the cheaper alternative of an over ground system.

It was raised that Autonomous Rail Transit (trackless trams) results in small particle generation and have higher running costs than electric vehicles. The issue of running costs was raised by several respondents. A concern with driverless ART being hazardous for other road users, with no tracks to run on, was raised. The issue of safety generally with autonomous vehicles was made by several respondents. One respondent said that we need to first understand the barriers to delivering ART initiatives and then to unlock them in order to position Oxfordshire at the cutting edge of transport research and implementation.

A respondent referred to a report prepared by URBED on a vision for an integrated transport system in central Oxfordshire, and the benefits this could bring, along with ideas on funding.

It was suggested that an integrated metro system would support LIS ambitions.

One respondent felt that an improved rail system 'Metrorail' should be at the core of county transport planning. It was suggested that the Oxfordshire Plan should consider how rail can play a greater part in making shorter, more local trips.

Future Transport

Several respondents stated the importance of ensuring the Oxfordshire Plan aligns with the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan being prepared by Oxfordshire County Council and with the review of the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy. It was suggested that future transport planning must address poor access to affordable transport options, congestion, and the impact that this has had on jobs, the economy and the environment. Improving access by public transport to health services was raised, as well as providing more local health services.

Respondents raised the importance of reducing the need to travel in order to lower carbon emissions. A suggestion was made of having a 'transport ceiling' - a target setting out the maximum number of trips made on a monthly basis, with new development designed to limit trip generation.

The Oxford-Cambridge Expressway was mentioned as having a negative impact on the environment and the Chilterns AONB. The need for an Expressway was questioned given the impact of Covid-19 on working and travel patterns. Several respondents stated that road building should be stopped, and the funding used for other more sustainable travel modes. One respondent raised a concern about the impact of transport growth on the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation.

Many respondents commented on the importance of future developments having good walking and cycling links and good connectivity to public transport, with respondents feeling strongly that new development must not be built around car dependency. 'School streets' and the importance of providing safe walking/cycling routes to school was suggested, as well as the impact that poor air quality due to car use can have on public health.

As well as the provision of more and better cycles routes, the integration of cycle routes between places so that they are connected and there are continuous routes between places was mentioned by multiple respondents. It was also suggested that all new developments along the routes contribute towards the cost of the route. Abingdon in particular was mentioned as needing safe segregated cycle routes around the town and to it.

In addition to creating cycle routes, the provision of adequate cycle parking in towns and cities was raised, with the suggestion that car parking spaces should be given over to cycle parking. It was also suggested that active travel routes should link to Park and Ride sites. It was suggested by some respondents that on-street parking should be removed to allow room for separated cycle lanes.

The rural nature of the county was recognised by several respondents who stated the importance of ensuring that towns and villages are connected to each other (by active travel and public transport) and not just to Oxford.

Many respondents also emphasised the importance of having future development focussed around rail improvements, including a suggestion to reopen old railway lines (e.g. to Eynsham). The Stratford-Honeybourne line was suggested as being an important link in the Stratford-Oxford (and beyond to London) corridor, and the boost this would give to tourism in the area. There were also calls to increase capacity and reduce journey times on the North Cotswold line.

As well as reopening railway lines, it was stated that railway projects in the pipeline should be accelerated. A new station at Grove was suggested as an opportunity for an interchange.

15-minute cities

Some respondents commented on the concept of the 15-minute cities principle where facilities and services are provided within 15 minutes of home. Some were in favour of this concept and felt it should be pursued and would be effective in reducing car use. Others suggested that it would still result in people using their cars unless the range of services provided was improved to include those not usually found in local service centres.

It was suggested that the 15-minute principle applies more to cities than to villages, where it would be very hard to achieve, due to the rural nature of Oxfordshire. It was also suggested that the 15-minute principle could be extended to cover 15-minute cycle rides.

Re-use of land

One respondent felt that more flats (and affordable housing generally) should be built on repurposed land. Building flats above car parks, as well as other commercial properties was also suggested. It was suggested that redundant land could be repurposed for 'nature recovery networks'.

One respondent cautioned that enough land near to railways should be safeguarded for future rail needs, rather than for other uses.

Interchanges

Many respondents felt that mini-interchanges and hubs should be used to connect Oxfordshire more widely. The importance of providing secure cycle parking, and interchanges being linked with cycle and walking routes was raised several times.

Interchanges were generally supported but it was pointed out that they don't have to be on the edge of Oxford. Again, the rural nature of Oxfordshire was raised, with respondents stating that the rest of the county needs to be well connected, with links to places other than Oxford needed.

It was suggested that higher densities should be delivered around interchanges, and car use discouraged. One respondent thought that rapid mass transport systems backed by localised public transport system was needed.

It was suggested by some respondents that Development Corporations or Public Asset Corporations were a way of ensuring land value capture for infrastructure. These corporations could also oversee the design and construction of developments, ensuring interchanges are designed into the development.

Drones

The issue of drones interfering with aviation, and overflying of private property was raised as a barrier to wider use of drones.

It was suggested that there may be problems including issues of security, safety, noise and impacts on biodiversity with the use of drones and that therefore the Oxfordshire Plan should include a policy on drone deliveries to avoid, reduce and mitigate any negative impacts.

AI

It was suggested that the management of congestion would require a large majority of those travelling to use apps.

Autonomous vehicles

Several respondents raised the concern of potential safety issues with the use of autonomous vehicles, both in urban and rural areas.

One respondent felt that on-demand autonomous vehicles might work but would require a safe, well managed, maintained and more resilient highway network.

Electric vehicles

Some respondents felt that electric vehicles would be a more cost effective, and simpler to implement, solution compared to autonomous vehicles. One respondent also stated that hydrogen powered vehicles should be used instead of battery powered ones.

It was suggested that the electric buses that used to run in Oxford be reinstated. Examples were also given of other cities that use trams such as Manchester, Nottingham, Edinburgh and Sheffield.

Freight

It was suggested that HGV traffic should be transferred to electrified railways with deliveries then made by self-guiding electric vehicles.

Personalised mobility:

Mobility/transportation as a service

It was suggested that for improved use of public transport, real-time information is needed for the different modes of transport required for a journey. This would require cooperation from the providers, if necessary, by law – which may mean re-thinking of competition law. This would be much easier if transport were the responsibility of a local Transport Authority.

An example was given of the Netherlands OV-chipkaart, where you pay for each stage of a journey with a single, nation-wide value card, which you load with money from a credit or debit card.

It was suggested that personalised transport does not overcome the issue of congestion and needing parking provision.

There was support for demand responsive and rural bus services.

Other ideas:

Air

In relation to air quality and emissions, one respondent stated that road transport is responsible for 80% of Nitrogen Dioxide emissions, while rail accounts for just 1.6%.

Sustainable Communities

Some site promoters highlighted submitted development locations that could provide opportunities to create sustainable, well connected communities.

Oxfordshire's Natural Assets

It was suggested that there could be better integration of green infrastructure and transport infrastructure, for example having cycle lanes separated from cars by green verges.

The benefits of communities being connected to green spaces was highlighted, particularly the importance of ensuring public access to the countryside surrounding Oxfordshire's urban areas. It was suggested that the Green Belt is important to communities' health and wellbeing.

It was suggested that everyone in Oxfordshire should have access to a range of high-quality green spaces and that there should be sustainable transport connections to Oxfordshire's key green spaces to encourage their use. It was proposed that there should be ongoing funding, support and infrastructure to ensure the benefits of green spaces were fully realised, including providing opportunities for people to engage with green spaces.

New Ways of Working

Whilst it was recognised that digital connectivity may reduce the need for some journeys, it was suggested that not all activities can be undertaken virtually, and that physical connectivity will still be important in the future. It would therefore still be important to locate new homes close to jobs, services and facilities.

The importance of reliable, high-quality digital connectivity to support new ways of living and working was highlighted. There was concern that ensuring that all areas of Oxfordshire benefit from good digital connectivity would be expensive, complex and possibly unrealistic, particularly in rural areas. Concerns were also raised about the quality of current digital connections as well as potential vulnerability to hacking.

It was suggested that digital connectivity should support greater levels of communication and engagement between the Oxfordshire local authorities and Oxfordshire's parish councils and neighbourhood forums.

Part 3 - analysis

Conclusions

A key theme that ran through each of the areas of focus of the Open Thought site was that the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 should be bold and ambitious in the policies that it contains, particularly in relation to transforming Oxfordshire into a pioneering example of green living and working, and sustainable development.

Living and Working:

Many respondents felt the Covid-19 pandemic has created the opportunity to build stronger, more sustainable communities and there were many ideas put forward about how to build community engagement around this concept.

Keeping residents active and healthy in body and mind was a common theme in this section and consideration clearly needs to be given to how the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 ensures access to green spaces and facilities that enable social interaction. It was clear that many respondents highly value Oxfordshire's natural assets and consider that their protection should feature strongly in the policies contained within the Oxfordshire Plan. Many also suggested creating wildlife corridors and changing the way in which land is farmed to protect and enhance the county's biodiversity.

The Oxfordshire Plan was seen to be an opportunity not only to ensure affordable housing plays an important role in future developments but that these developments are green and sustainable with many people putting forward suggestions about locations for developments as well as ideas on how to ensure they are community centred and attractive places to live.

The rise in working from home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has offered a glimpse at a new normal and most respondents wanted to see homeworking continue. In order to achieve this, there would need to be continued investment in high speed broadband as well as consideration for creating co-working spaces, social hubs and designing new homes with office space.

Others addressed the changes in the way we work that will come because of advances in technology and suggested that the Oxfordshire Plan should seek to embrace new technology and harness its potential to benefit all in society.

Thought needs to be given to how the changes in shopping, exacerbated by the pandemic, can be accommodated in the future. Deliveries of goods, as well as food, has increased with respondents suggesting improving infrastructure. They also wanted to see use made of previous commercial properties that are now vacant as trade shifts from the traditional high street.

Climate Change:

Among respondents there was a desire to work towards making Oxfordshire a carbon-neutral county. Clearly this is a major challenge that would require significant changes in policies and behaviours. It was also rightly highlighted that education must play an important role in making people aware of what can and needs to be done to reduce our carbon footprint both individually and collectively. There were some bold ideas such as adding information on products' carbon footprint so consumers could make informed choices while shopping.

As buildings and transportation are collectively responsible for a significant proportion of total carbon emissions, new development will need to meet strict standards and infrastructure will need to be designed with walking, cycling and electric vehicles at its heart. Locating new development in areas with good transport links, employment opportunities and incorporating renewable energy sources ought to be prioritised. Additional challenges remain in retrofitting current housing to meet low/zero-carbon standards in order to achieve carbon neutrality. Innovative solutions suggested included creating 'carbon gardens' that capture emissions, green roofs and open spaces that could serve as 'green lungs', and introducing a carbon tax.

Water was another topic seen to be important to many respondents, not only in terms of protecting Oxfordshire's waterways, but also in relating to reducing water waste and preventing flooding. There were plenty of practical solutions such as incorporating water capture and recycling into new developments, but also some more radical ideas such as installing water-free toilets, and some wider ranging thoughts such as creating new wetlands and other natural flood defences.

Another popular topic was the concept of building a circular economy - where we keep resources in use for as long as possible, extract the maximum value from them while in use, then recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of each service life. It was felt this approach would reduce the amount society wastes as well as ensuring that new developments were built on brownfield rather than greenfield land, protecting the county's natural assets and reusing land that has already been developed.

Clearly, many of these suggestions go beyond the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 remit but demonstrate the desire to work towards carbon neutrality and beyond.

Connectivity:

There was significant overlap between how we live and work in the future and how we connect with each other.

But respondents were clear that not all job roles could be performed remotely, from home. This means that it is important for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 to consider locating future homes near employment opportunities to reduce the need to travel, or at least along strong public transport corridors. All new developments ought to be designed around and promote the use of sustainable transport modes

It was also noted that care was needed to prevent those in rural locations from becoming isolated both physically by ensuring access to public transport and through better digital connectivity in more remote areas.

Respondents wanted the Plan to help reduce the number of journeys made around Oxfordshire to help reduce congestion, improve air quality and reduce carbon emissions. One option was incorporating the '15-minute cities' concept into new developments – ensuring employment, leisure and retail are within a 15-minute journey of any resident. But there were valid concerns that this approach would be difficult to implement in rural settings, and to be truly effective should be limited to 15-minute walks or cycles only to reduce the necessity of cars.

There was a clear theme on the extension of the use of rail, including the role of rail in shorter trips, improving rail connectivity, locating new development in rail corridors and reopening former railway lines. It was felt to be important that the Oxfordshire Plan should be aligned with the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan as well as the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy.

Ambitious suggestions included a micro metro for Oxford. Further suggestions and comments were made around freight and the potential role of drones in the future. The use of drones was of particular concern to many respondents.

Measuring success

Having considered the three main topics, several respondents suggested that the Plan needed to think about how it measured the success of any policies it adopts. Some suggested this should be achieved by placing a focus on creating healthy, thriving communities.

Limitations

Open Thought was purely an online engagement tool – necessary during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown rules – but by its very nature will exclude the small section of the county's population that either do not have access to a computer/smartphone/tablet or the Internet, or are not comfortable with online-only engagement. Consideration therefore needs to be given to the nature of the responses as a result.

By designing the site to be highly accessible across web, mobile and tablet, with engaging content and a 'fresh' look, we were however able to appeal to a wider demographic than usual. Of those recorded on Google Analytics, 52% of respondents were under the age of 44, with 23% under 34 – a significant representation of younger people that is often not seen with traditional consultation methods and generally with whom it is more difficult to engage. In reaching these groups, it is hoped a conversation has begun that can be continued into future consultations and engagements, creating a relationship with a wider and more diverse audience than before. The engagement also supplements other exercises we've held and will continue to hold, which will all be considered during the Plan-making process.

Traditionally, engagement exercises receive more responses when focussing on tangible issues in locations near to respondents. Open Thought sought to engage on wide-ranging concepts and ideas and specifically how we might tackle them in the future. As such, response numbers were, as expected, smaller than for example Local Plan consultations. But targeting academics, industry experts and businesses - as well as the general public - resulted in high quality responses that featured good knowledge, analysis and innovative ideas.

We must also consider the responses within the context of the time they were submitted – during a pandemic that had an enormous impact on the everyday lives of the general public and ramifications that are still yet to be fully seen and understood. Social isolation, increased anxiety, job insecurity and economic uncertainty are all likely to have influenced the responses provided.