

## Land Use Planning and the City of Oxford

In its own terms, the Oxford Green Belt works. Urban sprawl has been constrained and developers forced to use the city's resources of formerly industrial land. To the surprise of many observers, the city has met the targets imposed on it for housing development and the incursions into the Green Belt have been extremely limited.

Nevertheless, the Barker review appears to conclude that the Green Belt should cease to be so restrictive. This conclusion may or may not be a good one; there are strong (and passionately held) arguments on both sides. However, the Barker review is so incomplete, and its supporting data so flawed, that a reasonable observer must think that the review did not approach the question with an open mind.

### Clusters

Many people believe that innovation and improved productivity are enhanced by the development of 'clusters' of businesses devoted to a particular industry. The evidence for this from around the world is reasonably persuasive.

The review suggests that planning restrictions have impeded the growth of these clusters. In particular, it points to the Oxford bio-medical industry and suggests that it has suffered from tight controls over land use. Rather surprisingly, the review has only one piece of support for its general view that planning impedes cluster growth. In 1999, Lord Sainsbury, the minister for science, wrote that planning restrictions can be a 'significant barrier' to the growth of science-based industrial clusters. There is no evidence adduced to support Sainsbury's comment but this single phrase is used four times in the report. As far as I can tell, it is the only justification provided for the view that scientific dynamism is affected by planning policy.

Unmentioned by the review is that Sainsbury himself is now extremely flattering about the cluster of biotechnology industry around Oxford. Here are some comments he made last year.

'I am delighted that six years on from the 1999 Biotechnology Cluster Report, in which analysed key cluster success factors and made recommendations for government policy makers, we are able to see the evidence of the continued success of Oxfordshire in meeting the crucial challenge for UK clusters to grow into successful, established businesses.'<sup>1</sup>

Today, Sainsbury does not say that growth is being impeded by the shortage of space of expansion. In fact, his new comments are supplemented by a survey that says that only 1/3 of the biotech companies had experienced difficulties in finding the right location for their business. I doubt whether this figure would be any better anywhere in the southern half of England. I believe that the review should not have used one phrase from a 1999

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxfordshire Bioscience Network 2005 Cluster Report.

report as the basis for multiple assertions that planning, and the Green Belt in particular, makes life tough for nascent scientific clusters.

### **Tight labour markets**

What about other implications of the strict Oxfordshire planning rules? The review talks about 'tightening labour markets' as a result of the growth of scientific industry, this time without any evidence whatsoever. In fact, the survey of biotechnology companies quoted above reported that 71% have no difficulty with staff recruitment – despite Oxford's famously high house prices. The survey results 'indicated that ... availability of quality staff is top of the list of advantages offered by the Oxfordshire cluster'<sup>2</sup>.

### **Land shortages**

The review obliquely acknowledges the success of the local estates, particularly Oxford Science Park and Didcot's Milton Park, which is the location of a large number of internationally renowned biotech and computer firms. However, lest it seem that these developments indicate that planning policies are actually succeeding, the review goes on to say that the Oxford Science Park is 'nearing capacity' and 'land restrictions are likely to impede further development'. Before writing this comment, which is unsupported by data, it might have looked at the Science Park's website<sup>3</sup>. After fifteen years growth, the development is now 430,000 sq. ft, but can grow to about 700,000 sq ft, or over 60% larger than today.

Similarly, a cursory look at Milton Park shows vacant spaces for scientific laboratories in eight different buildings<sup>4</sup>. Milton Park lies at the far side of the Green Belt, but is less than half an hour from Oxford. As an investor in several Milton Park technology businesses, I can see no evidence whatsoever that this distance has been a disadvantage to the 'cluster'. The software industry south of San Francisco extends over a hugely greater geographic extent.

I believe that there is no shortage of land for employment use inside the boundaries of Oxford. Substantial office properties remain empty. The review might perhaps investigate this topic. Analysis of the local property market and the Local Plan's land zonings are surprisingly absent from the review.

### **Traffic congestion**

The review moves on to discuss the impact of planning restrictions on Oxford's traffic congestion. It tries to associate development restrictions with increasing problems moving about the city. Once again, it uses an extraordinary limited base of evidence for this assertion. It reports a qualitative survey of the managers of shop chains that identifies

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxfordshire Bioscience Network 2005 Cluster Report.(p15)

<sup>3</sup> www.oxfordsp.com

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.miltonpark.co.uk/lettings\\_show.php?category\\_select=2&Submit=Find+Spaces+For+My+Business](http://www.miltonpark.co.uk/lettings_show.php?category_select=2&Submit=Find+Spaces+For+My+Business) (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> August 2006)

Oxford as the worst of 32 shopping centres for congestion.. This informal data seems to be only justification for the view that Oxford's traffic problems are particularly severe and are getting worse.

Government figures cast doubt on the validity of this conclusion. The Department for Transport publishes measurements of actual traffic speeds around large cities in the UK. The last survey that included Oxford seems to have been in 1999/00<sup>5</sup>, when traffic speeds at peak times were 17<sup>th</sup> of the 26 urban areas surveyed. Speeds were 19.6mph compared to an average of 21.6mph. Off peak speeds were close to the national average. Oxford may have got slightly worse over the years, but towns like Leicester – hardly a high-tech hotspot – have far lower traffic speeds. The implicit assertion that Oxford is uniquely bad is nonsense.

### **The impact of forcing housing development into satellite towns.**

The land use review goes on to say that current proposals to increase housing development in Didcot – about ten miles from Oxford - are likely to make congestion worse, and quotes a report from a business advocacy organisation<sup>6</sup> as the only support for this view. In fact, this report appears to refer to the impact of housing growth *on traffic volumes on the arterial A34*, running north-south across the county, and not on inner-city traffic at all. Though the source report is sloppily written, careful reading should have alerted review staff to the ambiguity of the wording. And whether one should base arguments for a major change in planning policy on an off-hand remark in a lobbyist's glossy report is moot.

### **Jumping the Green Belt**

All the other evidence adduced to show the extent of the problems caused by planning restrictions, and the Oxford Green Belt in particular, is similarly flawed. In an evocative phrase, the interim report says that large numbers of commuters are 'jumping' the Green Belt every day to get into the city. This may well be true - most large towns are net importers of commuters – but the data is wrong. The review says that Oxford 'now has 27,000 more jobs than residents'. The source is stated to be 'Census data', but I could find no support for this assertion. The 2001 Census shows Oxford to have a resident population of 134,248 and the official estimate of today's population is somewhat higher. However, the most recent official labour market survey shows that the city has only 108,000 jobs<sup>7</sup>. Many people are flowing into the city every day from outlying districts, but this is not a uniquely Oxford phenomenon. Middlesbrough, a similar sized urban centre but with no Green Belt to protect it, imports almost half its total workforce every day<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Traffic Speeds in English Urban Areas, 2004. Published by the Department for Transport

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.oep.org.uk/eds/edso.pdf#search=%22Oxford%20Economic%20Partnership%2C%20Economic%20Development%20Strategy%3A%20Oxfordshire%202006%E2%80%932016%20\(Oxford%2C%202006%22](http://www.oep.org.uk/eds/edso.pdf#search=%22Oxford%20Economic%20Partnership%2C%20Economic%20Development%20Strategy%3A%20Oxfordshire%202006%E2%80%932016%20(Oxford%2C%202006%22) (see page 27)

<sup>7</sup> [www.nomisweb.co.uk](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk). Labour Market Profile Oxford section entitled, Labour Demand, Jobs density

<sup>8</sup> Middlesbrough Local Transport Plan

## **The real problem – withdrawal from the labour market?**

Oxford does have an acute mismatch between the skills and interests of its resident population and the needs of its high tech industry. Even after a long period of economic growth, the city has a large and rapidly growing number of people of working age who are no longer seeking a job. The number of 'economically active' people living in the city has decreased by almost 10,000 in the last five years, a very much greater proportionate decrease than the average for the South East<sup>9</sup>. Oxford has 20% of working age population defined as 'not wanting a job', compared to 13-14% in the South East as a whole<sup>10</sup>.

As this figure has grown, increasing numbers of people inevitably have to commute every day from outside the city boundary to fill the jobs that local people don't take. But with great respect to the Barker review, this worrying trend is absolutely nothing to do with planning restrictions but rather more the result of social issues in the less prosperous parts of the city. Enforced travel into the city is not a consequence of planning restrictions, but of the rapidly increasing percentage of working-age Oxford people who have withdrawn from the labour market.

The Oxford Green Belt remains a highly contentious issue, with local people genuinely divided on whether it should be breached for the development of housing. (I have never met a resident or local business person who perceived a shortage of office, industrial or laboratory space). Many residents would strongly welcome proper analysis of the issues surrounding the Green Belt. Unfortunately, the review has tried to make the case for removing restrictions by using a series of inaccurate or erroneous assertions. Planning is an important (and highly emotive) issue and I believe that the review might have collected its information with considerably more care.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.nomisweb.co.uk](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk). 77,000 March 1999-February 2000. 67,600 October 2004 – September 2005.

<sup>10</sup> [www.nomisweb.co.uk](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk). Labour Market Profile Oxford section entitled, Labour Supply Economically inactive