

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse DCs: Comments on draft Strategic Economic Plan

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse DCs welcome the opportunity to comment on this updated SEP for Oxfordshire. We note the aim to produce a shorter, clearer and higher level document. We identify with these sentiments, however, we suggest that this generic document could do more to showcase the unique character of Oxfordshire and its towns and villages.

Our view is that the central theme of this SEP refresh, that all of Oxfordshire converges in Oxford city is not borne out by evidence, including travel to work patterns. The changing character of Oxfordshire where key geographic areas such as Science Vale continue to strengthen as independent, sustainable centres should be recognised as part of an organic process of change.

Our general comments are

- We would wish to see a less Oxford-centric document and to see greater recognition of the R&D hubs of Culham, Harwell, Howbery Park. The refresh document assumes all research and spin-outs come from Oxford University
- As for the original SEP the excellence of Oxfordshire's research base is properly lauded but there is little reference to how the LEP is going to improve the conversion of R&D into private sector business growth
- There are many general assertions in the document about the excellence, scale of innovation, enterprise and research in the county, yet evidence isn't provided to support these claims.
- As the document is a refresh it would be more persuasive if there was a section that analysed hard data to give the reader a greater understanding of the nature of the Oxon economy. This could include analyses of jobs growth by sector and geographic area, scale of inward investment by sector and geographic area, all compared with other competing employment centres, regional and national averages. To know we're doing well we need to have comparators
- In considering Oxfordshire's strengths we should also look at employment types that are doing less well. We should be analysing which companies are leaving the county and why,

- The Oxon economy is dominated by companies of under 20 employees. This is more pronounced than other high tech economies, however, there is no aspiration to try and redress this balance. Is the LEP satisfied with the unchanging proportion of micro-businesses.
- We would wish to see a breakdown by size and type of business and consideration of whether there should be a focus on nurturing high potential companies and high value sectors
- There is a passing reference to self-employment, which is one of Oxfordshire's fastest growing employment forms. Trends towards self-employment and home working needs to be analysed and an assessment made of the types of support required
- There is little reference to the high proportion of public sector jobs in Oxfordshire. These need to be stripped out of analyses to give a true picture of the Oxfordshire employment base
- As there are three identified hubs in Oxfordshire, Bicester, Oxford and Science Vale, we would like to see equal weight given to these and a recognition that if employment growth were to be spread more around the county then the pressures on the roads, on Oxford itself and the green belt, would be greatly reduced
- The section on connectivity is heavily weighted towards physical connectivity. For Oxfordshire to gain a competitive edge regionally, nationally and globally it needs to get ahead of the game in mobile telecommunications and broadband. Our broadband roll-out is already well behind the performance required by business, yet this issues is given little prominence and objectives for this crucial area are weak
- Although the refresh rightly identifies the importance of skills development there is no reference to the importance of suitable business accommodation. Companies leaving Oxfordshire and those that have viewed and gone elsewhere often say there wasn't business space that met their needs. We think a strategy is required to support the accommodation needs of growth companies

We have a number of specific comments as follows

- Under spatial economy please reference the South and Vale settlements separately. Our councils have shared services but are independent districts
- Under key facts on page 11 there is a table giving total housing completions. This is out of context and doesn't add value.

- One short bullet point notes the momentum linked to Science Vale and two Enterprise Zones. Oxford is in the enviable position of having the only two enterprise zones in one local authority district in the country, and in having been awarded two garden towns. These assets are demonstrating their worth in attracting companies to Oxfordshire and the SEP should recognise this
- Paragraph three on page 17 advises that Oxford is the most unaffordable city and that Oxford's housing is now the most unaffordable housing in the country. The ratio of house prices to incomes has always been higher in South Oxfordshire than in Oxford city and remains so. Affordability is, as noted, a major issue across Oxfordshire. It would be wrong to infer that the problem is most acute in Oxford.
- Paragraph 4 on page 17 notes that the under 64 population is set to decline. Can this be checked. A recent ONS publication suggested that in some areas of the south east an under 65 population increase is expected
- The first reference to schools performance appears in a schedule of priorities on page 18. This is an extremely important area as our schools feed the jobs market. An Oxon-wide strategy for schools and further education to better support the local economy would be a good objective
- Bullet point three on page 23 recommends that a county-wide design guide would improve the design and sustainability of new development. There is no Oxfordshire housing vernacular and the complexity and extent of this proposal makes it unworkable. Districts have their own design guides. The remedy to the problem of poor design lies elsewhere in the cost of land and the need for extensive infrastructure to support new development
- Under Enterprise on page 26 reference is made to specialist funds and support for high growth businesses. Oxfordshire has a plethora of organisations providing support, some overlapping, and it would be good to see a review of these in order to harness scarce resources most effectively
- On page 20 bullet point one suggests that encouraging businesses to adopt energy efficient approaches will improve productivity. While energy efficiency is desirable it isn't a primary route to improved productivity and we suggest these should be separate points
- In setting out Oxfordshire's key sector propositions (figure 5 page 29) there is an over-emphasis on research, particularly in life sciences. Milton Park now has around 70 life science high growth companies. The SEP needs to focus more on business growth and success. It's ambition is being hampered by the tight links to research

In summary, while we welcome the SEP refresh, we wish to see greater LEP ambition for the conversion of R&D to technology readiness and manufacturing. We would like to see strategies to alter the balance between micro-businesses and medium/ large enterprises and to see integrated skills and business development programmes to improve the coherence of the Oxfordshire offer to business.

We recognise that extensive revisions to the SEP require time and input from all partners and that this may cause some delay to the publication date. As there is no external deadline for this document we would prefer to take more time to ensure it captures the issues identified above. Partners, particularly business partners, may be able to provide additional insight and data to strengthen the plan and such increased involvement could ensure a great degree of ownership of the challenges and the means of addressing these.