



**Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government**

**Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local
Government**

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Mark Stone
Chief Executive
South Oxfordshire District Council
135 Eastern Avenue
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Dear Mark

Thank you for taking the time to come to London on 5 September and for you and your team's proactive engagement with the department over the last few months. As you know I have invested significant time as Deputy Chief Executive at Homes England and back here in MHCLG as Director General to help deliver the Oxfordshire Growth Board's ambitions in a way that blends local leadership and national investment. I believe this is essential as we aim to increase the long-term provision of housing so that all members of the community are able to access affordable homes, and that we do so in a sustainable way. I am grateful for the open and constructive dialogue throughout the last eighteen months.

In response to your email on 17 September, I am writing to provide clarity on the Department's position following these discussions so that you and your Cabinet are fully informed and that this is taken into account as part of your decision-making process. This complements the letter the Secretary of State sent to Cllr Cooper on 29 August.

At our meeting on 5 September it was helpful to discuss in more detail your ambitions for the sort of sustainable growth you want to achieve in South Oxfordshire. We share these goals and they are at the heart of the Government's vision for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. The ambitions that you have on the environment, for creating sustainable communities and investing in infrastructure upfront to support growth are ambitions that we and your neighbouring authorities share and can be achieved through continued collaboration. That is why we entered into a long-term partnership enshrined in the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal.

Whilst we understand the rationale for considering whether or not to withdraw the Local Plan following the recent election, our view is that withdrawing the plan will put at risk your ability to deliver on these ambitions. It is hard to see that this is in the interests of either current or future local residents, your council or communities alongside authorities in wider Oxfordshire.

We do not believe your existing plan undermines your ability to deliver your wider ambitions as you expressed them to us. Moreover, you argued that one of the main reasons for withdrawing the plan was as a result of the evidence base and sites contained within being out of date. However, the direct consequence of withdrawing the plan would result in your authority reverting to the previously adopted plan from 2012. Not only is the evidence base for this plan likely to be less robust and up-to-date, relying on an out-of-date plan would open the authority up to the risk of speculative development.

During our discussions we have tried to better understand your rationale for seeking to withdraw the plan and to see if there are any ways in which these can be accommodated without the need for withdrawal. We believe that there are a number of ways that this can be achieved:

- On concerns on oversupply of homes in your submitted plan, it is not uncommon for major and minor modifications to be sought during the examination process where there is a compelling and strong case for changes to improve the soundness of a plan. We have shared examples of these with your planning colleagues. If the case is robust and is designed to improve the soundness of the plan the Inspectorate will take these into account at examination.
- On the environment and garden communities it is possible to explore how these can be enhanced and introduced by submitting supplementary documents during the examination, underpinned by a robust argument for their inclusion as relevant evidential documents. This evidence could then be used to suggest modifications to the plan. Moreover, much of this can also be achieved in implementation and alongside your active contribution to both the JSSP and collaboration as part of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.
- You have also explained the capacity constraints you may face in managing the work associated with the Local Plan currently at examination, alongside restarting the process for a new plan, in order to support those longer-term social and environmental ambitions. Whilst many of these can be achieved through the JSSP and Oxford-Cambridge Arc, we are willing to work with you to better understand these capacity constraints and explore whether we can provide additional financial support to manage both processes simultaneously, allowing you to progress this plan through examination and have an up to date plan in place relatively quickly.

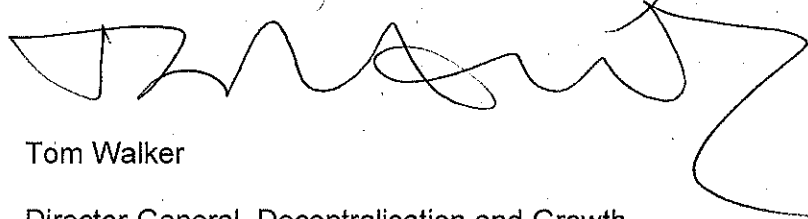
Importantly, if you and your colleagues do decide to withdraw the plan it will not be without consequences. It would immediately put at risk the significant investment that the Government has made available to South Oxfordshire and the wider County, including jeopardising the £218m recently allocated through the Housing Infrastructure Fund (Didcot Garden Town). This is because the funding is dependent on the delivery of specific sites. Without certainty that the full number of homes will be delivered and that these are dependent on the infrastructure ask, the funding will not be contracted. Withdrawing the plan will also undermine the wider ambitions and commitments of the Housing and Growth Deal and therefore potentially impact future investment to support your ambitions either directly or as part of the Growth Deal or Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

We remain committed to working with partners to continue to deliver the ambitions of our partnership.

I would be grateful if you can keep my colleagues and I sighted on developments and that you inform us officially of the decision taken on 10 October.

For transparency I am copying this letter to the Leaders and Chief Executives of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal.

Yours sincerely



Tom Walker

Director General, Decentralisation and Growth
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government