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Dear Caroline,

### **South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041**

1. I refer to the representations dated 12 November 2024 that Oxford City Council (Oxford) submitted to the Proposed Submission version of the Joint Local Plan 2041 (the JLP). As I expect you know, those representations seek to suggest that there has been non-compliance by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils (the Councils) with the legal duty to co-operate in the preparation of the JLP. That contention is not accepted by the Councils and it is disappointing that Oxford has seen fit to make such a suggestion for the first time at such a late stage in the preparation of the JLP, noting that no such claim was made in Oxford's earlier consultation responses or in the successive Oxfordshire Planning Policy Officers group (OPPO) meetings, where there has been considerable opportunity for raising this.
2. The purpose of this letter is not to enter into detailed arguments about that matter but, in summary terms, the Councils consider that there has been more than sufficient engagement with Oxford on all strategic matters that fall within the scope of the duty (noting, of course, that in contrast to the position with the OLP the JLP does not seek to identify any unmet needs that are sought to be displaced elsewhere). In the Councils' assessment, the issues raised by Oxford are matters potentially relating to soundness and not to the duty to co-operate and these are issues that it should be possible to explore (and hopefully resolve) in the on-going dialogue on a statement of common ground.

3. Instead, the purpose of this letter is to seek to understand what Oxford now intends to do in relation to its own Oxford Local Plan 2040 (the OLP) and future plan-making for its area, having regard to the most recent letter from the OLP examining Inspectors, dated 20 November 2024.
4. Of course, it is unfortunate that the Inspectors were faced with having to decide whether the duty to co-operate had been complied with by Oxford in the preparation of the OLP, but that situation arose from Oxford's decision to submit the OLP for examination at a time when the Councils had urged that that step should not be taken. No doubt you will recall that in my letter to you dated 19 January 2024 (some two months before the OLP was submitted for independent examination), I stated:

*“Our recent representations to your Regulation 19 stage Local Plan 2040 [i.e. the OLP] reiterate our earlier responses to state that, as matters stand at present, your emerging Local Plan fails the legal duty to co-operate...”*

*We would ask you to reflect carefully on your current intentions to submit your Regulation 19 local plan, as presently formulated, for independent examination and would ask that instead, you engage with us on a more appropriate and productive way forward...”*

5. Notwithstanding that clearly expressed concern about the duty to co-operate (which echoes the point made in our letter dated 17 March 2023 in response to the Regulation 18 consultation on the OLP) and that explicit request for engagement on a more appropriate and productive way forward, Oxford proceeded to submit the OLP shortly thereafter and there was no such engagement on any alternative approach to the matters where it was apparent that Oxford and the Councils were not in agreement. Those disagreements were therefore, regrettably, played out in front of the OLP examining Inspectors, with the results that we have seen, as expressed in their letters dated 11 September 2024 and 20 November 2024. Those letters confirm that the Councils were justified in the concerns they raised and that there was a failure of the duty to co-operate by Oxford in the preparation of the OLP. I make these points not for the purpose of vindication of the Councils' actions but to highlight that the outcome was one that the Councils sought to avoid so far as they reasonably could.
6. I appreciate that when it became clear in September 2024 that the OLP examining Inspectors shared the concerns raised by the Councils, Oxford in the first instance sought (in its letter dated 25 September 2024) to invite the Inspectors to review or amend their findings, but it is now clear from the letter dated 20 November 2024 that there will be no change to the Inspectors' conclusions. The OLP has, therefore, sadly but predictably reached the end of the road.

7. That then leads us to the position of what Oxford will do now. The letter dated 20 November 2024 presents Oxford with a choice in terms of procedural routes to be followed, but they both lead to the same result, namely that the OLP will not proceed to become an adopted local plan. Whilst the decision on that choice is obviously a matter for Oxford's full council, I understand that at the OPPO meeting on 7 November 2024 it was indicated that Oxford will be making that decision in January 2025 based on advice from its officers. I also understand that meetings of Oxford's cabinet and full council are scheduled for 26 and 27 January 2025. Are you able to tell me at this stage what Oxford will be advised by officers to do, or (if not), when you will be in a position to do so?
8. In addition, on the reasonable assumption that the OLP will not now progress further, I would be grateful if you can inform me what steps Oxford will be invited to take as regards future plan-making and the timetable for that.
9. Notwithstanding the earlier disagreements between Oxford and the Councils on how to assess and meet needs, which were ventilated at the OLP examination, I assume that, for a whole variety of reasons (not least the Inspectors' findings and the proposed new National Planning Policy Framework), Oxford will be starting afresh in how it seeks to identify the needs that should be met by any new local plan and that, at present, no work has been done in that regard. I would be grateful if you could confirm this assumption or, if not, share any work that Oxford has undertaken to quantify its needs and how they are to be met.
10. I ask these questions because, as you are aware, the Councils are working to submit the JLP for examination before Christmas 2024, and it would be helpful to understand the latest position with the OLP and any replacement for it before they do so. An early response would be appreciated.
11. Separately, I understand that planning officers at both the Councils and Oxford are engaged in the preparation of one or more statements of common ground for the purposes of the JLP and that that exercise is proceeding. I am grateful to Oxford for its involvement in that process and the requests in this letter should not be seen as superseding or replacing that on-going dialogue.

Yours sincerely

**Mark Stone**  
**Chief Executive**