# West Oxfordshire faces uphill battle to solve housing crisis amid policy and planning setbacks



Duncan Enright, deputy leader of West Oxfordshire District Council, has raised alarm about a persistent housing crisis in Oxfordshire, arguing that inadequate housing supply has been a long-standing issue exacerbated by Conservative policies. He noted, “for many years under Conservative Governments we haven’t been building the homes we need.” This sentiment resonates within the local community, particularly among young professionals. Ruth Smith, the Labour leader of Witney Town Council, highlighted that many households are overcrowded or forced to adapt spaces in homes that are not designed for living. Such challenges have placed significant strain on young and early-career individuals trying to find affordable rental options.

The debate surrounding housing policy has not been without its counterarguments. Jane Doughty, a Conservative member of the district council, contended that the overarching problem lies in the absence of a clear strategy within Oxfordshire’s housing landscape. She claimed that local council priorities have been misguided and that the delay in progressing key projects, such as the Salt Cross Garden Village, has hindered potential housing developments. This proposed community is set to include 2,200 new homes, with Doughty asserting that 40 per cent of these would be social housing, along with affordable part-rent, part-buy options.

Despite this optimistic vision, actual new home completions paint a stark picture. According to recent reports, only 683 new homes were finished in the 2023-2024 financial year, falling significantly short of the district's annual target of 900 homes. The failure to meet these targets has resulted in persistent pressure on local authorities to provide adequate housing solutions. The current atmosphere is compounded by resistance to developments like Mactaggart and Michael’s project, which aims to build over 400 homes on Burford Road, illustrating the complex dynamics of local opposition to new housing initiatives.

The Salt Cross Garden Village project has faced legal challenges, with campaigns arguing for adherence to net-zero building standards. These standards are increasingly recognised as vital in the context of climate change and are now being revisited in light of recent judicial rulings. A High Court judge ruled that planning inspectors had acted unlawfully when they opted to ease the stringent environmental requirements initially set by West Oxfordshire District Council. This ruling, alongside broader discussions around sustainable housing, underscores the need for future developments to be environmentally sound.

Oxford’s housing situation is dire and reflective of a broader national trend. With over 5,000 families waiting for affordable housing in Oxfordshire, the county is in urgent need of at least 100,000 new affordable homes by 2031 to meet demand. Current housing policies have often failed to adequately support key workers, such as teachers and nurses, who are increasingly priced out of the market. The average house price in the region exceeds £400,000, while rental costs continue to skyrocket, with modest two-bedroom properties commanding rents above £1,500 per month.

In addition to the immediate pressing demands for housing, factors contributing to this crisis include high levels of under-occupation and significant numbers of long-term empty homes. Furthermore, a growing trend of short-term holiday rentals has exacerbated the situation, pushing rental prices further beyond the reach of many.

Plans to tackle the crisis are underway at the governmental level. Labour’s recent strategy indicates an ambitious aim to permit over 5,100 new homes annually across Oxfordshire, a leap from the previous administration's target of around 3,200 units. While this increase could alleviate some pressure, it brings concerns about infrastructure capacity and potential impacts on the surrounding countryside. Community leaders have stressed that any increase in housing must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure to ensure sustainable growth.

As the West Oxfordshire district grapples with these multifaceted challenges, there is a palpable commitment from local leaders to push for solutions. Mr Enright affirmed their intention to rejuvenate over a thousand empty homes and assured that any new developments would be balanced with considerations for infrastructure and community needs. Such efforts, if correctly implemented, could help navigate the intricate landscape of housing shortages that have beleaguered Oxfordshire for years.

### Reference Map

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25154236.oxfordshire-blame-game-housing-shortage-witney/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23462671.campaigners-issue-high-court-challenge-salt-cross-garden-village/> - Campaigners have initiated a High Court challenge against the decision not to require homes at Salt Cross Garden Village to be net-zero. The development, one of 14 garden villages endorsed by the Government in 2017, is set to include 2,200 new homes, schools, and a business park. The planning inspector approved most plans but did not approve the requirement for the new homes to be built to net-zero carbon standards. Rights: Community: Action (RCA) argues that the decision is outdated and inconsistent with current climate change policies.
3. <https://cubixproperty.com/affordable-housing-crisis-in-oxfordshire/> - Oxfordshire is facing a severe affordable housing crisis, with over 5,000 families on waiting lists. The county needs at least 100,000 new affordable homes by 2031, but development has lagged. Key workers, such as teachers and nurses, are particularly affected, as average house prices exceed £400,000, making homeownership unattainable. Rental prices are also high, with modest two-bedroom properties renting for over £1,500 per month. Many families earn too much to qualify for social housing but cannot afford private rents, leaving them in a difficult position.
4. <https://www.oclt.org.uk/the-housing-problem> - Oxfordshire remains among the least affordable places to live in England, with average house prices over 10 times average household earnings. The situation is worst in Oxford city, where the average house price is 12 times average household earnings. Renters are also affected, with average rents consuming a significant portion of their income. Factors contributing to the crisis include under-occupation of housing, long-term empty homes, and a surge in short-term holiday lets. As of late 2024, nearly 3,500 households are on the waiting list for social housing in Oxford.
5. <https://www.leighday.co.uk/news/news/2024-news/planning-inspectors-were-wrong-to-water-down-west-oxfordshire-council-s-net-zero-plans-for-salt-cross-garden-village-judge-rules/> - A High Court judge ruled that planning inspectors acted unlawfully when they decided that the Salt Cross Garden Village development did not need to meet the net-zero standards set by West Oxfordshire District Council. The inspectors had deemed the council's net-zero ambitions too rigorous, citing a 2015 Written Ministerial Statement on energy efficiency. Rights: Community: Action (RCA) argued that this policy was outdated and inconsistent with current climate change objectives. The judge's decision mandates a reassessment of the development's environmental standards.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz9wwqg7wzlo> - Government figures indicate that nearly 2,000 more homes than previously planned could be built annually across Oxfordshire. The new Labour government aims to permit over 5,100 new homes each year, up from about 3,200 under the previous Conservative administration. Oxford City Council is expected to provide 1,051 homes annually, up from 762. However, some residents express concerns about the impact on the countryside, and council leaders emphasize the need for adequate infrastructure to support this growth.
7. <https://www.futureoxfordshirepartnership.org/partner-projects/homes-from-infrastructure> - The Homes from Infrastructure programme in Oxfordshire, allocated £150 million in government funding, aims to deliver strategic infrastructure to support the acceleration of planned housing. The programme has facilitated the completion of six infrastructure schemes and has 24 more in progress, leading to the acceleration of 6,730 housing units. This initiative is part of a broader effort to address the county's housing shortage by ensuring that necessary infrastructure is in place to support new developments.