Why we need 15-Minute Neighbourhoods

Alison Hill and Brenda Boardman

March 2022
Executive summary

15-minute neighbourhoods are places where residents can access amenities such as supermarkets, cafés, pubs, green spaces, schools, pharmacies, all within a 15-minute walk there and a 15-minute walk back from their own home.

CoHSAT undertook a survey of what amenities Oxfordshire residents considered were most important to them within a 15-minute walk from their home. There was remarkable consistency in what the 450 respondents considered to be their six main priorities. These were

- Green space / park
- Basic shop, selling newspapers etc
- Post Office
- GP surgery / health centre
- Pharmacy
- Supermarket.

In our survey we found that 75% of people were willing to walk up to 15-minutes to access local amenities.

We make the following recommendations to the city and district councils and to Oxfordshire County Council about how through their powers and influence they will ensure an increasing proportion of residents of Oxfordshire live in 15-minute neighbourhoods:

- We ask all the councils to adopt the term 15-minute neighbourhood as opposed to 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- All local plans and the Local Transport and Connectivity Plans developed from now on should include the term 15-minute neighbourhood.
- Interactive mapping of access to amenities should be developed.
- The Local Transport and Connectivity Plan must ensure there is a strong, consistent policy on healthy streets, particularly in existing areas, so that active travel to the basic amenities is a pleasant experience, along attractive paths.
- The current Oxfordshire Street Design Guide should be updated to meet national design standards. It should be written to address the needs of existing communities as well as for new developments.
- If there is to be new housing in an area, the primary need is for social housing and sheltered housing. This will improve the viability of the amenities.
- Communities must be supported to actively engage in the creation of 15-minute neighbourhood.
1. What is a 15-minute neighbourhood?

Over the last few decades, people have made fewer and fewer journeys on foot or by bike as services and amenities have become dispersed and located in places only accessible by car. The pandemic though has resulted in a rethink of how people will live. As home working has become accepted, people are increasingly aware of the value of staying local and not being dependent on cars for so many activities. This has ignited interest in the concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods.

Local neighbourhoods should be places where people are able to meet and connect with others. They should be places where it is possible to linger and enjoy being in the open air, places that do not require you to have a car, places you can get to for most of your daily needs and where your workplace is.

What does this mean for local communities? It means being able to access amenities such as supermarkets, cafés, pubs, green spaces, schools, pharmacies, all within a 15-minute walk there and a 15-minute walk back from your own home. It means that there needs to be workplace spaces within communities rather than in business parks in the periphery. It means neighbourhoods need to be more compact rather than a sprawl.

The benefits are a more thriving local economy when people spend more money locally, a better sense of community and improved social interaction, better social inclusion, particularly for people with limited mobility and without a car, better health through more walking and cycling.

All this of course depends on creating a planning system that makes sustainable neighbourhoods the obvious solution.
CoHSAT has begun to promote the concept with a view to helping local communities and to advocating for changes to policy and practice of our councils that impacts on developments, however small or large, to stop the current trend of building in car dependency into the everyday lives of so many people. This will mean finding ways, through policy change, of encouraging the provision of local amenities, moving away from out-of-town retail parks and supermarkets, and changing transport planning to enable more people to walk, cycle and take public transport. It means ensuring communities are empowered and engaged to champion more local services and work with their own councils as advocates for change.

In 2020 CoHSAT prepared a walkability index for all the streets in Oxford, in preparation for more detailed policy work on 15-minute neighbourhoods. The resulting map is in Appendix 1.

The focus of this report and CoHSAT’s initiative is on access to services and amenities, and the role of communities and of local council planning in enabling that access. Our recommendations are directed at Oxfordshire County Council and the city and district councils.

2. What people would like to have locally

The concept of a 15-minute neighbourhood (15MN) is that the amenities that are most important to you are within a 15-minute walk of your home. This is an idea in development and there is little evidence of what constitutes the ‘most important amenities’ for people in different localities, and of differing ages and socio-economic status – which is why we undertook a survey to identify which amenities people wanted to have in their locality.

CoHSAT devised a questionnaire asking people to identify the amenities that matter most to them, and those that are important, but less vital. The results will help to inform policy and assist in initiatives that make it more possible for basic amenities to be taken to people, rather than expecting people to travel to them, whether by car or expensive (and infrequent) bus. The effect would be a stronger community and less polluting car travel.

We hope that the results of this survey will help communities identify what else they might need and provide some guidance in how they might achieve the transformation. It will also help planners and other policy makers, help local communities, and identify what is needed in new developments. Some of the amenities can be provided with the help of the councils, for instance schools, others need collaboration with the Integrated Health Care System or the NHS or the CCG to provide for a general practice surgery or pharmacy or prescription delivery service. Other amenities, for instance a new shop, might depend upon the local community taking the initiative. In all cases, the information from our survey can help focus minds.
The full report on the results can be accessed here but there was remarkable consistency in what our respondents considered to be their six main priorities. Apart from small villages, the top six amenities for everyone else in Oxfordshire are (in order):

- Green space / park
- Basic shop, selling newspapers etc
- Post Office
- GP surgery / health centre
- Pharmacy
- Supermarket.

In small villages (population <2,000), provided they have a basic shop, they would rather have a pub than a supermarket and a playground rather than a pharmacy. This group includes Stanton St John, Tackley and Chadlington; there were some wishing for a day centre/community hall, for instance Didcot and Tackley. Didcot also wants a nursery/primary school, perhaps indicating a younger population than in some areas. In all cases, the specific solution also depends upon the geography of the area, its transport links to other localities with amenities, and the likely growth in the population.

### 3. 15-minute or 20-minute neighbourhoods?

The Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel (CoHSAT) is using the term 15-minute neighbourhood, in line with its origins. We know that many organisations, including the Town and Country Planning Association and Sustrans¹, are instead using 20-minute neighbourhoods – which means a walk or cycle ride of 10 minutes out and 10 minutes back.

In our survey we asked people what they thought was a reasonable time to spend getting to these basic amenities, using a sliding scale for the answers. Across the whole sample this is what we found:

- Walk for up to 10 mins 97% of respondents
- Walk for up to 15 mins 75% of respondents
- Walk for up to 20 mins 41% of respondents

That the majority thought it reasonable to walk 15-minute one way confirms our view that we should use the term 15-minute neighbourhoods.

We like 15-minutes as conceptually it is easier to explain that the distance to amenities is a 15-minute walk rather than a 10-minute walk there and back. Also a 15-minute walk there and back is 30-minutes which done five days a week meets the UK Chief Medical Officers’ recommended weekly physical activity. However, we also want to ensure that

¹ Sustrans What is a 20-minute neighbourhood 2020.
there is unanimity across Oxfordshire in the terminology so as part of this project we will address this issue.

And what is in a name? As the Town and Country Planning Association in their report on 20-Minute Neighbourhoods\(^2\) notes: “What matters is that, at its best, this is a holistic and transformational approach to place-making, with significant potential to improve people’s health and wellbeing.”

### 4. How to create 15-minute neighbourhoods

Although the 15-minute neighbourhood is a very simple concept and easily understood, creating one can be complex.

Everyone in Oxfordshire should be supported to be close to services and amenities whether in brand new developments or in old established settlements, whether village, town or city. Action therefore needs to be taken at every level, supporting existing communities and ensuring new developments contain these essential amenities.

Action can be driven by our six councils, by developers or by local communities, but whoever leads needs to bring the others along with them, working in concert.

The Town and Country Planning Association’s report “20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities”\(^3\) published in March 2021 in partnership with several local authorities, is guidance to local authorities. This excellent report should be used as a source of guidance for council planners and developers, and for communities.

The report sets out 10 principles for success in great place making. These are

- A compelling vision, well communicated
- Strong, inspiring leadership
- Empowered communities
- Research, data, and analysis
- Partnership and advocacy
- Addressing inequalities
- Adopting policy
- Investment
- ‘Hard’ and ‘soft’ measures
- Evaluation and adaptation.

---

\(^2\) The Town and Country Planning Association. “20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities”, March 2021

\(^3\) The Town and Country Planning Association. “20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities”, March 2021
We won’t repeat what is in the TCPA report. The focus of this report is on Principle 7: adopting policy as applied to Oxfordshire. We make recommendations on what local levers our district councils, the city council and the county council have currently, and need to develop to support existing communities and influence the siting and design of new developments to ensure that they are 15-minute neighbourhoods.

5. Implications for city, district and county planning in Oxfordshire

There are a number of national strategies and policies that help shift local policy towards 15-minute neighbourhoods. These are set out in detail in the TCPA report (page 72) and include the requirement to achieve a net-zero climate change emissions target by 20504, the requirement to decarbonise transport5, Manual for Streets6, the National Policy and Planning Framework7, the National Model Design Code8, the National Design Guide9, Tackling Obesity10.

At the time of writing the controversial planning reforms expected for 2021 are paused. Michael Gove, the new Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is said to have ordered a “complete rethink of the forthcoming Planning Bill”. It is very unclear what direction the new bill will take though it is hoped that it will look very different from the one originally proposed, and that it will strengthen council powers.

City and District councils

Responsibility for planning lies with the district and city councils, and the policies and proposals for the development and use of land in a local authority area determines most planning choices and decisions. The county council is responsible for highways, and therefore is a statutory consultee in all developments.

Currently the only local plan which appears to actively espouse the concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods, while not actually using the term, is Oxford City Council’s Local Plan 203611.

---

5 Department for Transport. Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge Dec. 2020
7 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. National Planning Policy Framework Feb. 2019
8 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Now Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities). National Model Design Code.
11 https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20067/planning_policy/1311/oxford_local_plan_2016-2036
However, even if created as a policy aim, the powers that planning authorities have to mandate developers to build in retail premises and other amenities is very limited and is usually exercised in resisting provision in unsuitable locations and thus, hopefully, encourage more suitable locations via their development control powers.

A recent example was a proposal to provide a drive-through confectionary shop on the Bicester ring road: unrelated to housing, inconvenient and unsafe for cyclists and pedestrians. Hopefully, it will have been refused and the developers will be looking at other sites preferably within accessible shopping areas, existing or designated in local plans.12

Unfortunately, local authority planning powers are being curtailed via expansion of permitted development. Funding reductions and “growth at all costs” imperatives are also undermining the abilities of LAs to get the right development in the right places.

We asked the POETS13 for their view on the powers of local authorities. This is their conclusion:

“…local authorities don't have any powers to require or assist in the provision of local services that are run commercially and where existing neighbourhoods are concerned we are not aware of any authority encouraging commercial uses to go to specific locations. Moreover planning permission is not required when retail premises change uses within retail and it has, unfortunately, recently been made much easier for retail premises to convert to residential use without the need for planning permission.

When planning large new developments local authorities can allocate land and require all local services (schools, shops, community facilities, bus stops etc) to be provided together to get spin off benefits of proximity. They could be located on the major internal distributor road and with good safe access for active travel modes. Sometimes authorities negotiate funding for bus services for an initial period and there may be examples of authorities and developers encouraging certain uses in those locations.”

There is a role for CoHSAT and its members and partners to input into the preparation of Local Plans – it would help to inform and shape policies and would be something to point to at the public enquiry stage of a Local Plan if there was a dispute between a landowner and the district council about policies to protect local assets from unwanted development.

The other role that CoHSAT can take is to respond to consultations on new developments, where we feel that the development is creating car dependency through lack of local amenities, and poor access for people cycling and walking. Working with

12 POETS personal communication
13 POETS (Planning Oxfordshire’s Environment & Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focused primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire. For more information go to www.poetsplanningoxon.uk
local councillors is key too to ensure they too can advocate for better liveability and more amenities within or close to developments.

**Oxfordshire County Council**
Oxfordshire County Council is a statutory consultee on all significant planning proposals made by the district and city councils.

In the draft Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity plan (LTCP)\(^{14}\) there is a section under Healthy Place Shaping on 20-minute neighbourhoods, which the county council is promoting, through policies shown in Box 1. CoHSAT supported the inclusion of these policies in the final Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, though it is only through transport planning that the county council has influence. We expect to see the county council standing firm against designs that do not maximise opportunities for cycling and walking.

**Box 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy 16</th>
<th>Oxfordshire County Council will work with District and City Councils to seek to ensure that regeneration schemes and new developments support application of the 20-minute neighbourhood model to create walkable, vibrant neighbourhoods.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy 17</td>
<td>Oxfordshire County Council will work with District and City Councils to apply the 20-minute neighbourhood concept in our market towns and rural areas. We will also seek to enable the sharing of facilities in smaller towns and villages by delivering policies to improve walking and cycling connectivity in rural areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Street Design Guide\(^{15}\) was adopted in November 2021 by the County Council. This document could potentially support safe walking and cycling in developments, but CoHSAT objected to it as it fails to meet the national Manual for Streets principles, it neglects the connection with other neighbouring communities – fundamental to creating 15-minute neighbourhoods – and is open to misinterpretation by developers. We asked that this document be substantially revised to ensure it encourages active travel and discourages car ownership and use.

**6. Recommendations**

- We ask all the councils to adopt the term 15-minute neighbourhood as opposed to 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- All local plans and the Local Transport and Connectivity Plans developed from now on should include the term 15-minute neighbourhood. These plans must strengthen policies to ensure their creation/completion so that communities can access all 6 of the basic amenities identified as essential in our survey (see Section 2).


Interactive mapping of access to amenities should be developed to demonstrate the growth of 15-minute neighbourhoods and where adjacent communities can complement each other. (See Appendix 1 for the Walkability Index for Oxford.)

The Local Transport and Connectivity Plan must ensure there is a strong, consistent policy on healthy streets, particularly in existing areas, so that active travel to the basic amenities is a pleasant experience, along attractive paths. Uneven pavements need to be repaired and parking on the pavement prevented. There is the opportunity to shift people from getting in their cars, even with the present amenities.

The current Oxfordshire Street Design Guide should be updated to meet national design standards and must include active travel connectivity to wider services and facilities, for example to the ‘host town’. It should be written to address the needs of existing communities as well as for new developments.

If there is to be new housing in an area, the primary need is for social housing and sheltered housing, that is truly affordable and close to centre of the community. This will improve the viability of the amenities.

Support is needed for our communities, particularly in rural areas, to actively engage in the creation of their own, fully-functioning 15-minute neighbourhood, particularly with the help of their councillors.

Planners and councillors need to lobby for new planning bill to give local councils extra powers, in particular powers to require minimum amenities in new developments.

Acknowledgements

POETS16 Noel Newson and Roger Williams who advised us on the powers that local authorities have to influence planning and development.

Cllr Alex Hollingsworth for his advice on what influence councils have and the constraints placed on them.

Judy Davis, CoHSAT coordinator, for her help with analysing the survey and coordinating inputs to the project.

And most importantly all the people who gave up their time to fill in the survey

---

16 POETS (Planning Oxfordshire’s Environment & Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focused primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire. For more information go to www.poetsplanningoxon.uk
One of the first activities CoHSAT undertook was to create a Walkability Index (see Figure 1). A member of Cyclox, Will Ray, who is a geographer and spatial mapper worked with CoHSAT on creating an index, using proximity to supermarkets, green space (parks, playing fields and allotments), pubs, schools and GP surgeries.

Will produced the following map rating streets in terms of their walkability. The index uses distances along streets, not distances as the crow flies. Extremely walkable streets are ones where amenities are within a 500m walk, unwalkable streets are where almost all amenities are over 2km away (Click here for technical details behind the creation of this map.)

Figure 1

From this map you can see that the most walkable areas in the city are near district centres, Summertown, Jericho, Cowley Road, Temple Cowley, Headington, Botley. The areas with the least walkable areas tend to be in the peripheries of the city, and several are in the more deprived parts of the city, Blackbird Leys, Cowley and Barton. The lack
of local amenities probably contributes to making these places less desirable to live in and locking in car dependency in those communities that can least afford a car. Any initiative therefore needs to understand its impact on all members of communities, ensuring that it doesn't widen inequality of access, and disadvantage those with mobility problems and other disabilities.

Appendix 2: Resources

Local

Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) is a community development charity helping communities identify issues and find solutions. [https://www.communityfirstoxon.org/community-halls-and-enterprise/community-shops/](https://www.communityfirstoxon.org/community-halls-and-enterprise/community-shops/) They help set up community shops of which there are now over 20 in the county.

National

Pub Is the Hub is a not-for-profit organisation providing support for pub owners who want to broaden their range of services, and also advice for community ownership. [https://www.pubisthehub.org.uk](https://www.pubisthehub.org.uk)

Plunkett Foundation is a national charity that supports rural communities across the UK to tackle the issues they face through community business [https://plunkett.co.uk/who-we-are/](https://plunkett.co.uk/who-we-are/)

References

The Town and Country Planning Association. “20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities” March 2021 is the main source document for this report.