

Vale Local Plan

Response to Consultation on draft Local Plan Part One 2031

From: Andrew Litherland, 28 Lovelace Close, Abingdon, OX14 1XW (Email:-

I have objections applicable to the Plan as a whole. I set these out below, followed by objections which are more specific to the north and north east Abingdon on Thames sites, with which I am personally most familiar, having lived in North Abingdon for several decades. I support the objections submitted by CPRE and by NALPG.

I wish to object to the draft Local Plan Part One 2031 on the basis that it is 'unsound'. Below I outline my reasons, and what must be done, if the Vale of the White Horse, and indeed Oxfordshire as a whole, is not to lose its character and identity.

Re: Core Policy 4 & all others that flow from it, in particular, Core Policies 8, 13, 15 & 20:

1. **The SHMA is unsound and unsustainable and should not be relied upon.** The plan is based on the exceptionally high forecasts of housing need from the controversial Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), which has been much criticised by the public, organisations (such as CPRE) and politicians alike. In an independent critique of the SHMA commissioned by CPRE Oxfordshire, a leading planning expert concluded that the SHMA's estimate is likely to be 'grossly overstated' by a factor of over two.

From these criticisms I understand that:

- The SHMA housing need figure is more than two and a half times what the Government's official household projections would suggest, making it highly questionable;
- The SHMA makes many dubious adjustments to official statistics which add over 20,000 houses to its forecast of need for Oxfordshire; and
- Much of the forecast of need is based on another forecast that 85,000 new jobs will be created attracting more people to move to the County. However much of this figure seems itself just to be based on questionable hopes of aggressive economic growth and housebuilding rates and it has not been subject to public consultation or independent scrutiny.

However, I am not aware of any response to these criticisms or any attempt to instigate an independent review of the SHMA, and there is no evidence that the Council has given them appropriate consideration

2. The Vale District Council has failed to give proper consideration to the environmental and social constraints within the District:

The SHMA itself says it is just a starting point and only part of the evidence base for determining housing need and that further work needs to be done to test whether it can be accommodated sustainably before adopting it as a housing target. As far as I understand, the Vale District Council did not attempt to undertake this further work before adopting the SHMA figures unquestioningly; it should first have assessed them against social, environmental and infrastructure considerations.

Re: Core Policy 13 Oxford Green Belt, Core Policy 8 – Spatial Strategy for Abingdon & Oxford fringe Sub Area & Core Policy 15 – Spatial Strategy for SE Vale Sub Area:

3. The Vale’s uncritical acceptance of the SHMA figures as targets has led to the inappropriate allocation of sites within the Green Belt and North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The plan has identified four development sites in the Green Belt to accommodate 1,510 houses, and two in the AONB for a total of 1,400 houses, which is threatening to undermine the rural character of the Vale.

A further 11 sites are proposed for removal from the Green Belt. I am concerned that once land is removed from the Green Belt it will be at imminent risk of development, even if not immediately identified as a strategic site.

Green Belt

The Plan is inconsistent with planning guidance and government policies on the protection of Green Belts. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) makes it very clear that a Green Belt boundary may be altered only in ‘exceptional circumstances’.

Moreover, recent guidance (6 March 2014) states that: ‘Unmet housing need (including traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt.’

The Government's position on Green Belt policy, therefore, is very clear. The fundamental aim remains to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Boundaries of Green Belts should only be changed in "exceptional circumstances", and unmet housing need is not an exceptional circumstance to justify taking land out of the Green Belt.

North Wessex Downs AONB

Under the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000* the Council has a statutory duty to have regard for the purposes for which the North Wessex

Downs were designated an AONB, that is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

The NPPF places AONBs in the highest category of landscape protection and affords them “great weight” in the decision-making process. Further to this the NPPF confirms that AONBs are one location where restrictions apply to development and accordingly that: ‘Planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest.’

Re: Core Policy 7 – Providing Supporting Infrastructure:

- 4. There is a lack of appropriate infrastructure to support the Plan as outlined.** I cannot see how public services and infrastructure, such as the road network, which are already over-stretched in many places can possibly be improved within the timescales to meet such a great increase in demand. I do not believe that the District will be able to cope with this level of growth and I am very concerned about the impact it will have on the environment and the countryside. I therefore believe the Plan as it currently stands to be *ineffective* and *unsound*. I also draw the inspector’s attention to the fact that the council has failed to address the inevitable severe exacerbation which would result of the already existing severe traffic congestion on local roads located some distance from the proposed sites, for example at the Colwall Drive/Marcham Road junction in Abingdon and Marcham Road from the A34 into town.

Re: Core Policy 4:

- 5. The consultation process has been poor.** The report to the Council about the consultation process ignores important procedural and policy challenges, and seriously understates opposition to the proposals voiced both in the several thousand written comments received and at the public meetings convened to discuss the plan. I therefore believe the Plan has *not been positively prepared*. The council has in my view treated local residents with arrogance and contempt in relation to a critical issue (the council’s determination to change the character of the Vale for ever) by expecting them to wade through and understand a vast suite of documents which are unwieldy, not reader friendly, indigestible, with only token attempts to consult and listen. It seems to be assuming that most residents will be put off, and has engaged in token consultation of a most reprehensible nature.

For the above reasons, I consider the Plan to be unsound because it is not justified by robust evidence.

Consequently, I request that much lower housing figures (based more closely on the Government's own household projections) should be used by the Vale in its Local

Plan, and that the Inspector strikes from the Local Plan all site allocations in the Green Belt and North Wessex Downs

Concerning the North and North East Abingdon sites, my additional concerns relate to the fundamental unsuitability of these for housing. Key to this belief is the proximity of the A34, which directly borders much of the land concerned, and is close to the remainder. There are several points. First, there is a general agreement that the A34 (built in the early 1970s as a by-pass, to the standards of the day) is already unfit for purpose. The BBC has reported earlier this year that it carries some 70,000 vehicles per day, and that the M40 carries 102,000 but of course it has 6 lanes and a hard shoulder. A modest programme of improvements is planned, but these are regarded by all as only interim (and will do little or nothing to increase capacity), and that far more radical work is needed if the road is ever going to function effectively as the “spine” of the council’s “Science Vale” high tech industrial area running from Chilton to Oxford. Indeed absent significant improvement (such as extra lanes, active traffic management) to reduce significantly the already endemic delays and congestion, the A34 will likely limit the attractiveness of the area for both new and existing industry (and so reduce demand for housing anyway). Contributions from developers for infrastructure may help fund a “full” interchange at the Lodge Hill (Abingdon North) junction but no more. These sites will experience much greater traffic passing by on the A34 if the Lodge Hill scheme goes ahead. This will mean more pollution and noise – according to the “Oxford Times” (17/04/2014) one in twenty deaths in the county is linked to air pollution. Parts of Botley close to the A34 are already an Air Quality Management Area due to traffic pollution. If developed, residents of these sites will be subject to both damaging pollution and high noise. Attempts to mitigate will only reduce the potentially developable area, as will reservation of land for possible A34 improvements.

Also, it is ludicrous for the council to claim development of these sites would be “sustainable”, on any reasonable interpretation of that word. They will be remote from the town centre, with very limited facilities, cut off from the existing town by the existing perimeter (ring) road (Dunmore Road/Twelve Acre Drive) which itself would need, as the council accepts, much enhancement to accommodate the extra 1500-plus vehicles resulting from 1000 houses. Residents would be in an island between the A34 and the perimeter road. The council give slip service to “green” transport but there is no continuous uninterrupted segregated cycle route from the existing housing on Dunmore Road to the town centre, nor have any commercially viable bus services become established on the perimeter road. It is fanciful to suggest that new housing on these sites will change that and the dominant mode of transport for new housing will inevitably be the private car. The council appears reluctant to face up to this, I suggest because it knows the infrastructure is deficient and there will be no funding for the foreseeable future (and perhaps never) to address this.