

Chapter 2: Key Challenges and Opportunities

Overview

The Vale is a predominantly rural area located in south-west Oxfordshire and is bounded to the north and the east by the River Thames and by the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which runs through the south of the district. It is an attractive and popular place to live and contains parts of the Oxford Green Belt.

The district contains the historic Market Towns of Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon and Wantage, the Local Service Centres of Botley and Grove and a number of Larger and Smaller Villages.

The Vale is located between the larger centres of Swindon, Oxford and Didcot, which are all expected to continue to grow in the future and it is important we plan effectively to deliver coordinated development across the Vale and with our neighbours.

The district includes the majority of the Science Vale area, an internationally significant location for innovation and science-based research and business. Within the Vale, this includes the two Enterprise Zone sites at Harwell Campus and Milton Park. These sites are expanding and will provide for both new jobs and wider opportunities to the district as a whole.

This chapter identifies some of the key challenges and opportunities faced by the Vale of White Horse that the Local Plan 2031 aims to address.

This chapter is structured around four thematic areas that are central to the Local Plan 2031 and are carried through the document. These are:

- **building healthy and sustainable communities**
- **supporting economic prosperity**
- **supporting sustainable transport and accessibility, and**
- **protecting the environment and responding to climate change**

Introduction

- 2.1 The district takes its name from the 3,000-year-old figure cut into the chalk downs near Uffington. It is a largely rural district and covers an area of some 580 square kilometres (224 square miles; see **Figure 2.1**).
- 2.2 The main settlements within the Vale of White Horse are the three historic Market Towns of Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon and Wantage, which provide essential services for the surrounding rural areas. There are also two 'Local Service Centres' at Botley and Grove. Botley consists of parts of North Hinksey and Cumnor parishes and is a mainly residential area on the outskirts of the City of Oxford. Grove is a large village located to the north of Wantage and functions as a significant centre for housing and employment in its own right.
- 2.3 There are more than 70 villages across the Vale, ranging from small hamlets, to large villages. Beyond these, in the wider countryside, there are many isolated farmsteads and small groups of dwellings.
- 2.4 The Vale falls between the larger centres of Oxford to the north-east, and Swindon to the south-west. Didcot lies to the south-east boundary of the Vale in neighbouring South Oxfordshire. All three of these centres are expected to accommodate major growth in the next decade and beyond. Although the town of Didcot falls mainly within South Oxfordshire, its associated growth to the west of the town extends into the Vale district.
- 2.5 We need to plan effectively for the Vale in partnership with our neighbours and have a 'duty-to-cooperate' on key cross boundary issues. This process ensures that proper sustainable planning can be achieved across administrative boundaries¹.
- 2.6 This chapter summarises the key challenges and opportunities facing the district that the Local Plan 2031 should address.

¹ Duty to Cooperate Topic Paper www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidence

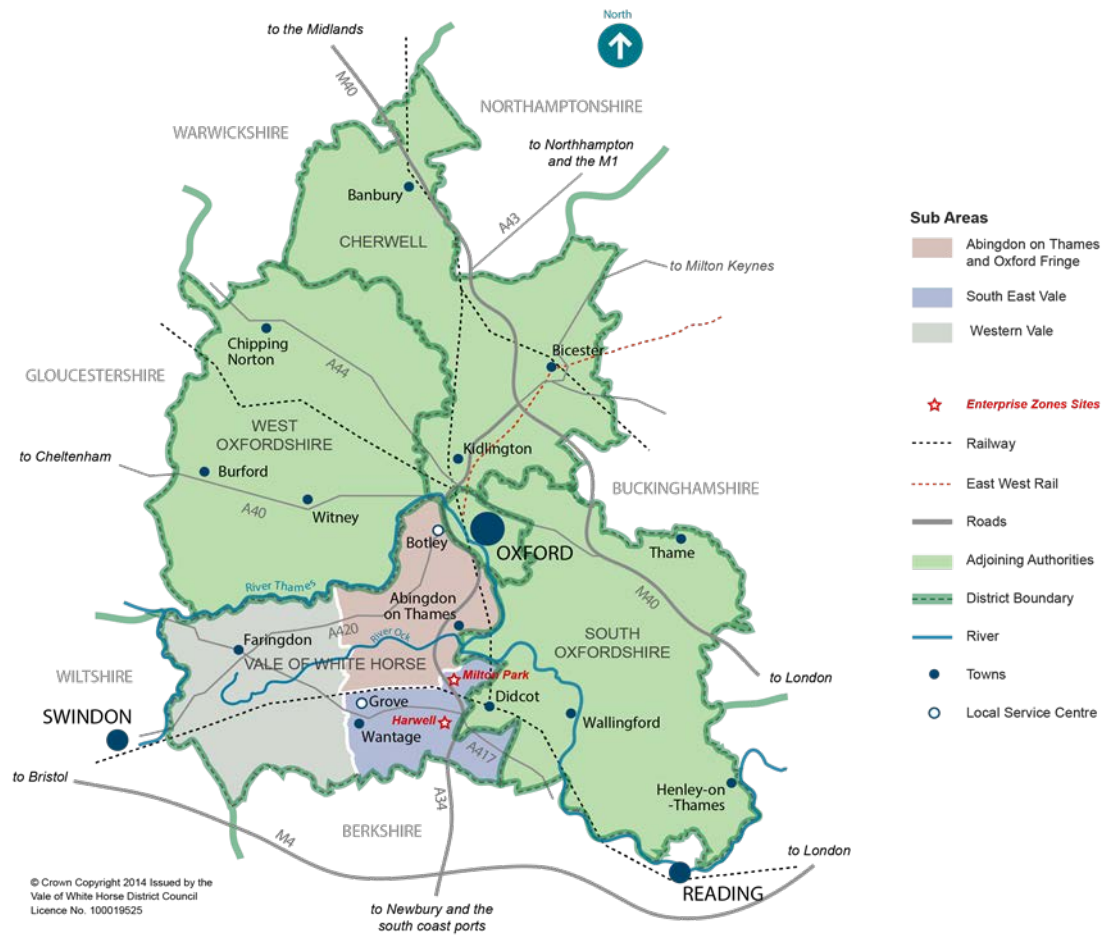


Figure 2.1: Vale of White Horse District and its wider setting

Building healthy and sustainable communities

- 2.7 People in the district generally enjoy a high standard of living and there are relatively low levels of deprivation. The Vale is ranked 306 out of 326 authorities nationally, with 326 being the least deprived local authority².
- 2.8 The planning system plays an important role in creating the right environments to enhance existing communities and to create new ones. This includes creating places that:
- facilitate the right type of housing in the most sustainable locations
 - provide for or seek contributions towards the provision of services and facilities to benefit the community, including libraries, schools, health and leisure facilities
 - set out a physical layout that enhances connections between residential areas and town and village centres, education, employment and recreation opportunities
 - set out a physical layout that is intuitive to navigate using street hierarchy, landmarks, buildings' form and function to form visual clues in the townscape, and
 - safe and accessible streets and spaces, including high quality useable public open space for the benefit of the local community.

Key challenges and opportunities

Providing for our housing need

- Providing for the objectively assessed housing need of 1,028 units per annum, which has been identified for the district (this equates to 20,560 new homes between 2011 and 2031)³. It is important the Local Plan 2031 meets the objectively assessed housing need by providing enough new homes of appropriate type and size and in sustainable locations.
- Providing for sufficient affordable homes in our towns and villages (273 affordable homes are needed per year between 2011 and 2031)⁴
- Meeting the needs of an increasingly ageing population over the period of the plan to 2031. The total number of people aged 55 and over is expected to increase by almost 50 % during the plan period.
- Meeting the needs of gypsies, travellers and travelling show people, and

² The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2010 prepared by DCLG

³ GL Hearn (2014) *Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment*-
http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2014-04-14_Final%20SHMA%20Report.pdf

⁴ GL Hearn (2014) *Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment*-
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- Making an appropriate contribution to addressing any identified unmet need for housing across the Oxfordshire Housing Market Area (see **Core Policy 2**).

Providing new community facilities

- Ensuring high quality and accessible services and facilities are provided in accessible, viable locations as part of new development when they are needed, so existing and new residents can enjoy a good quality of life.

Meeting the needs of our rural areas

- Supporting some development across the rural areas to retain and enhance services to help improve the vitality and sustainability of our rural communities.

Supporting economic prosperity

2.9 The Vale benefits from a very strong knowledge-based economy and has almost 5,500 businesses located within the district⁵. The Vale's workforce is highly skilled with a higher than average proportion of managers, professionals and associate professionals⁶. The levels of unemployment in the Vale are also relatively low at less than half the national average⁷. Furthermore, the Vale is consistently ranked within the top 20 % of districts in the UK Competitiveness Index⁸.

2.10 The strategic focus for economic and employment growth in the district is the Science Vale area, which extends east-west from Culham and Didcot to Wantage and Grove (**Figure 2.2**). Science Vale is an internationally significant location for innovation and science-based research, business and is one of the key growth areas for Oxfordshire identified within the Strategic Economic Plan. As such, Science Vale has attracted significant government investment to help unlock and maximise the area's world class assets and economic potential, including City Deal, Local Growth Fund and Enterprise Zone status for Harwell Campus and Milton Park. It is also home to around 13 % of research and development jobs within the South-East of England.

⁵ ONS Business Demography 2012 dataset

⁶ Labour Market Profile: VWHDC (www.nomisweb.co.uk)

⁷ Based on Job Seekers Allowance data

⁸ <http://www.cforic.org/downloads.php>

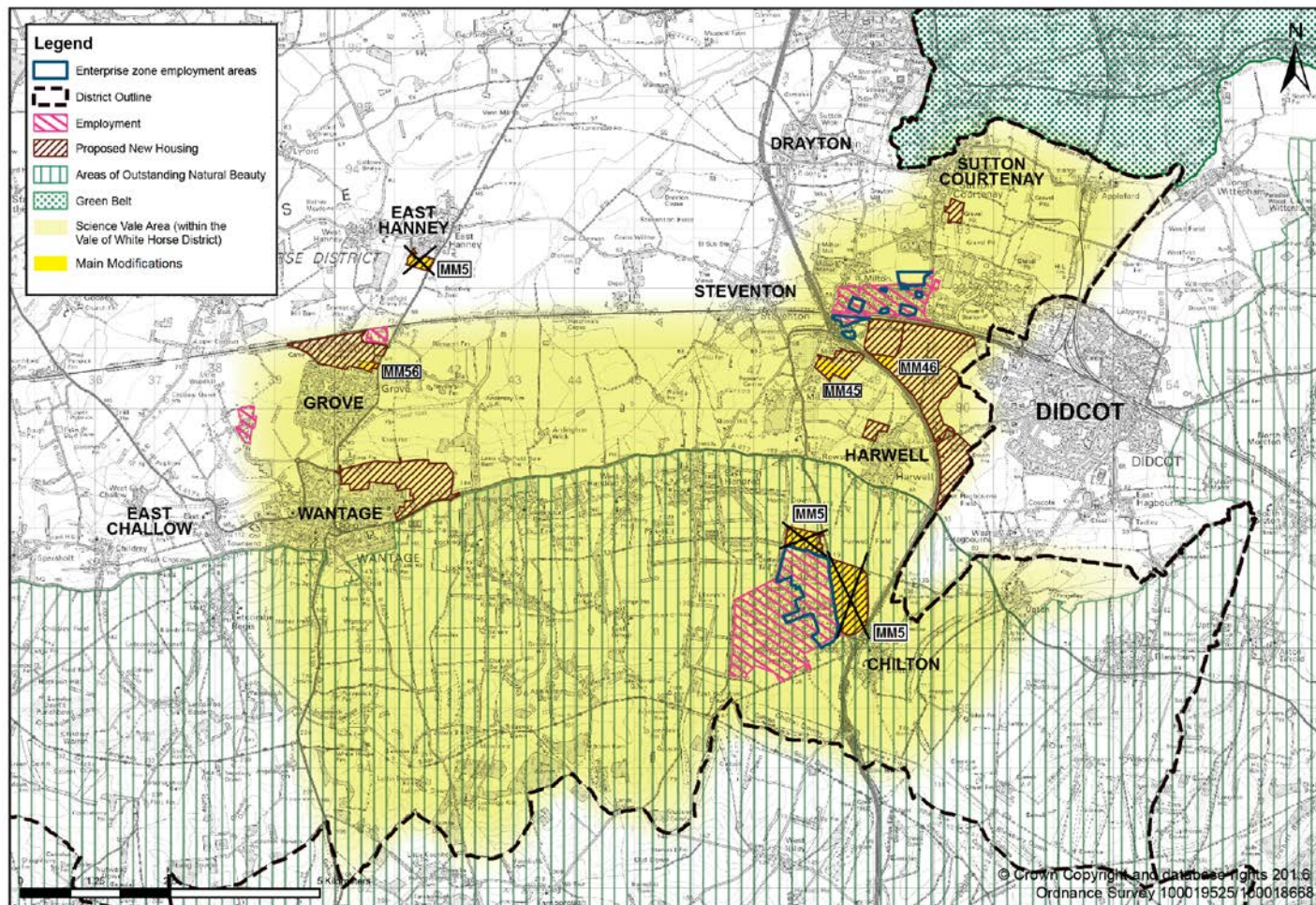


Figure 2.2: Science Vale area within the Vale of White Horse District

Key challenges and opportunities

Providing new employment land and supporting science and innovation

- Providing sufficient employment land across the Vale to ensure that suitable sites are available to support the projected employment growth of 23,000 jobs up to 2031⁹.
- Maximising the opportunity to nurture science, research and innovation and attract new high value businesses to the Enterprise Zone sites at Harwell Campus and Milton Park so that Science Vale continues to make a major contribution to both the Oxfordshire and UK economy.
- Using Local Development Orders (LDO's), such as that at the Milton Park site to speed up delivery on sites, including potentially at Harwell Campus¹⁰.
- Retaining other notable employers and employment locations in the district such as Williams F1 in Grove and Abingdon Science Park.
- Supporting the economy of the towns and rural areas in the district and providing a range of employment opportunities close to where people live.
- Didcot A Power Station is a site in a prime location on the edge of Didcot and provides a key opportunity for redevelopment for further economic growth and other mixed-use development within the Vale.

Supporting a skilled workforce

- Maintaining a highly skilled labour force that will meet business requirements, including the particular skills needed to support Science Vale. Initiatives such as the Oxfordshire Skills Strategy¹¹ will help to support skills provision, which will in turn benefit the local population who can share the benefits of economic success and will reduce the need for in-commuting.

Promoting tourism

- The tourism industry in the Vale generated approximately £202 million worth of income for local businesses in 2011¹². However, a significant proportion of this was generated by day visitors.

⁹ Employment Land Review addendum (2014)- <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidence>

¹⁰ The LDOs will provide a simplified planning framework to help make it easier to deliver new development at these sites more quickly.

¹¹ Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) (2014) *Oxfordshire Skills Strategy to 2020: Building a responsive skills support system*, available at:

<http://www.oxfordshirelep.org.uk/content/oxfordshire-skills-strategy-2020>

¹² The Economic Impact of Tourism on Vale of White Horse (2011), available online at:

http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Vale%20Tourism%20Economic%20Impact%20Estimates%202011_1.pdf

- Increasing the economic impact and value of tourism by taking steps to convert day visitors to overnight visitors, in particular by addressing the shortage of hotel accommodation¹³.
- Supporting growth in conferencing and business tourism stimulated by anticipated growth in the Enterprise Zone.

Supporting our rural economies

- Supporting the growth and expansion of rural businesses (including village shops and public houses) to maintain sustainable rural settlements and reducing the need to travel.
- Supporting the agricultural economy including appropriate farm diversification schemes will help to maintain a healthy rural economy.

Supporting the role of our main settlements for retailing

- Supporting Market Towns and Local Service Centres to maintain their vitality and viability in meeting local retail needs in the face of competition from nearby, larger centres, such as Oxford, Swindon and Reading, which many people visit for their non-food (comparison) shopping.
- Successfully redeveloping the Charter Area in Abingdon-on-Thames and the Central Botley area provides an opportunity to strengthen these key centres in the district.
- Creating attractive town centre environments, which appeal to visitors and shoppers alike and incorporate vibrant evening economies, would strengthen the role of the centres in the Vale in the face of competition from larger nearby centres that have a greater diversity of facilities.

¹³ Hotel Solutions (July 2014). Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Hotel Needs Assessment, available at <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidence>

Supporting sustainable transport and accessibility

- 2.11 The Vale of White Horse is easily accessible from other parts of the UK, particularly the south west and east, and the midlands. The A34 trunk road provides good access between the M4 to the south, and the M40 to the north. The A420 and A417 roads cross the district and provide links to Swindon in the west and Didcot in the east.
- 2.12 Whilst there are two railway main lines (Bristol to London and Oxford to London) running through the district, there are only two stations on the Oxford line and none on the Bristol line within the Vale.
- 2.13 It is important that growth across the district effectively addresses any highway constraints and helps to deliver a shift towards more sustainable modes of travel.

Key challenges and opportunities

Supporting sustainable travel and improving public transport

- Maintaining the very good bus services, particularly between the main settlements.
- Providing viable bus services in the more rural parts of the district, that provide an attractive alternative to the car.
- Ensuring that employment and housing growth is located to reduce the need to travel by car and encourage walking and cycling for short journeys.
- Supporting improvements to public transport, cycling and walking to provide attractive alternatives to travelling by car and to help minimise traffic congestion, particularly between the district's main employment and service centres.
- Supporting the ambition of re-opening the railway station at Grove to help increase access to the national rail network within the district.

Providing for new road infrastructure

- Addressing congestion, particularly at peak times on the A34 trunk road within Abingdon-on-Thames, Botley and around Science Vale. It is important the road network operates safely and efficiently for the economic success of the district to be maximised.
- Working with partners to help address any capacity issues to ensure new development can be adequately accommodated whilst addressing congestion and safety on the road network.
- Facilitating the implementation of the new infrastructure (such as new roads) identified in the Science Vale Area Strategy¹⁴ to help maintain a safe and efficient transport network.

¹⁴ Oxfordshire County Council, Local Transport Plan 3, 2011-2030

- Balancing the delivery of major investment in new roads and public transport with the wider needs for other infrastructure improvements arising from proposed development.

Helping to make our rural areas more accessible

- Continuing to help people in rural areas without a car to access the services available in the Market Towns and Local Service Centres.

Supporting the delivery of superfast broadband

- Increasing provision of superfast broadband coverage across the district in line with the Better Broadband for Oxfordshire Project¹⁵ and to deliver the roll-out of next-generation mobile broadband.

Protecting the environment and responding to climate change

2.14 The high quality and rural nature of the Vale is borne out by the many designations that cover the district (such as Oxford Green Belt and North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 52 designated Conservation Areas). It is important that development protects, maintains and enhances the special characteristics of the built and natural environment of the Vale to ensure it remains a popular place for people to live, work and to visit.

2.15 The Vale has a long frontage to the River Thames and contains the River Ock and its tributaries including the Letcombe Brook. It also contains a significant proportion of the route of the Wilts and Berks Canal, the subject of an ambitious restoration project.

Key challenges and opportunities

Responding to climate change

- The Vale will need to play its part in meeting Government targets for reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions through low carbon and renewable energy generation, improving the energy efficiency of development and promoting more efficient use of materials and natural resources.
- Equipping new development to adapt to the warmer, wetter winters and hotter, drier summers that are predicted for the UK¹⁶.

¹⁵ <http://www.betterbroadbandoxfordshire.org.uk/cms/>

¹⁶ <http://ukclimateprojections.defra.gov.uk>

Protecting water resources

- Ensuring there is enough water available to meet needs, as the Vale is in an area of water stress, through prudent water resources management, including preventing flooding through the use of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) and climate change adaptation
- Waste water treatment facilities and resources within the district are in need of upgrading and new facilities are required to allow new housing and employment growth to be sustainably delivered.
- Improving access to waterways that add diversity and interest to the locality, enhancing open spaces and providing corridors for recreation, tourism and wildlife.

Protecting our high quality landscape

- The landscape of the district is central to the rural character of the Vale, from the Corallian Ridge, to the Lowland Vale, to the North Wessex Downs AONB. Key landscape features need to be respected, retained and enhanced to maintain the local character and distinctiveness of the landscape of the Vale.

Protecting biodiversity

- Biodiversity in the district is supported by a network of local, national and international wildlife designations. These will need to be protected and enhanced where possible through enhancing, restoring, expanding and linking key wildlife habitats and species populations.
- Supporting informal recreation and providing open spaces and Green Infrastructure to accommodate a rise in local populations and have due regard to the existing value of the natural environment for both people and biodiversity.

Conserving our historic environment

- The Vale contains 52 designated Conservation Areas, over 2,000 Listed Buildings, eight Registered Parks and Gardens, and 68 Ancient Monuments, as well as non-designated heritage assets.
- Conserving and enhancing all historic assets and their settings for future generations to enjoy is important. Opportunities exist for new development to re-create the quality and character of these historic places to inform a high quality urban environment.