

THE FUTURE OF THE VALE TO 2011

THE CONTEXT FOR THE LOCAL PLAN

- 2.1 In preparing the Local Plan the Council has taken into account the character of the Vale and the pressures for development it experiences. The Council has also been mindful of the policies and advice put forward in planning documents prepared at the national, regional and county level. These provide a clear context for the more specific and detailed policies needed at the local level.

The Character of the Vale

- 2.2 The Vale of White Horse takes its name from the oldest chalk figure in Britain which dates back over 3000 years. The Vale is located in the south-western quadrant of Oxfordshire and stretches from Oxford and Didcot in the east and almost to Swindon in the west. It is bounded to the north and east by the River Thames and to the south by the Berkshire Downs. The district covers some 580 square kilometres (224 square miles) of country which is attractive and mainly rural in character.
- 2.3 The census results show that in 2001 some 115,600 people lived in the Vale, an increase of 3% since 1991. Within the district there are three historic market towns, Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon, which provide many services for people living in the surrounding rural areas. There are more than seventy villages and small hamlets, ranging from Lyford and Eaton Hastings with a few dozen inhabitants to Grove which is home to some 8,200 people. The district takes in communities on the outskirts of the university city of Oxford at Botley¹, South Hinksey and Kennington. Just over half the population of the Vale lives in the three market towns and Botley and Grove, which together comprise the Vale's five main settlements. The district also incorporates the extensive employment areas of Milton Park and the former atomic energy complex with the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory on the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, one of the largest research centres in Europe.
- 2.4 The Vale's three market towns, and many of its villages, are of considerable conservation importance. Abingdon is England's oldest continuously inhabited

¹ For the purposes of this Plan, Botley consists of those parts of North Hinksey and Cumnor parishes south and east of the A420 not designated as Green Belt and including Cumnor Hill and Chawley, as shown on the proposals map.

town, and its town centre contains a conservation area of historic interest. The district contains part of the Oxford Green Belt and also an important section of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. A remarkably high proportion of the area is therefore identified as having qualities which require special attention in planning for the future.

- 2.5 The Vale is well located in relation to key transport routes. The line of the A34 trunk road runs north - south through the district, linking the Solent ports with the Midlands. It also links the district with the motorway network: the M4 is just to the south and the M40 is just to the north-east. The main rail line from London Paddington to Bristol and the west passes through the Vale, although at present the only stations on the line are outside the area, at Didcot and Swindon.

The National Context

- 2.6 In recent years there has been a growing awareness of, and concern for, environmental matters, including the threat to the ozone layer, global warming, the loss of wildlife and biodiversity, pressures on water quality and the loss of green fields to new development. Increasingly it is being recognised that our current actions may be causing long-term damage to the environment which is important not only for our quality of life and general health but for those of generations to follow.

- 2.7 A key word in this context is 'sustainability' which is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. The Government recognises that the planning system, in regulating the development and use of land, has an important role to play in achieving sustainable development. A sustainable planning framework should:

- provide for people's needs for new homes, jobs and food, so enabling social progress which meets the needs of everyone;
- protect the environment and conserve cultural heritage and natural resources; and
- shape new development in a way which minimises the need to travel by private car and encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport.

Important supporting themes are to:

- make the most efficient use of land and buildings by re-using land that has been previously developed and raising the density of new developments above levels previously achieved to reduce the need to build on greenfield sites;

- concentrate most additional development within urban areas and promote urban renaissance so that towns are attractive places in which to live, work and socialise; and
- ensure high standards of design in new developments to reinforce civic pride and sense of place, attract business and investment and secure greater public acceptance of new development.

The Regional Context

- 2.8 Regional planning guidance, approved by the Secretary of State for the Environment, establishes the context within which county structure plans are prepared. The guidance for the South East Region, published in March 2001 (RPG9), seeks to focus development in urban areas, create a less dispersed pattern of development, increase economic opportunities by regenerating the less favoured parts of the region, enhance London's role as a world city, sustain the life of the countryside and the rural areas, and more closely integrate transport and land use planning.
- 2.9 The emerging regional spatial strategy for the south east, called "The South East Plan", will establish the framework for development in the region from 2006 to 2026. It is currently available in draft form and is likely to be adopted by Central Government in 2008, when it will become part of the development plan for the District. In the meantime the Oxfordshire Structure Plan will provide the strategic framework for development in this area.

The Oxfordshire Structure Plan

- 2.10 This local plan has been prepared in the context of The Oxfordshire Structure Plan to 2011, adopted by the County Council in 1998, which seeks to provide a sustainable planning framework for development in the county. An alteration to policy H1 was adopted in April 2001. It is for local plans to identify specific areas of land for development in accordance with this framework. The key elements of the Structure Plan include:
- i) to protect the environment, character and natural resources of the county by restraining the overall level of development;
 - ii) to favour locations where;
 - the need to travel, particularly by private car, can be reduced;
 - walking, cycling and the use of public transport can be encouraged; and
 - a reasonable range of services and community facilities exist or can be provided;

- iii) concentrate developments which generate a lot of journeys in locations which are, or are capable of being, well served by public transport;
- iv) make the best use of land and buildings within built-up areas to reduce the need for the development of greenfield sites, while not permitting development on important open spaces;
- v) the preferred locations for development will be Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney; including Abingdon, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage in the Vale;
- vi) 5750 dwellings will be provided in the Vale between 1 April 1996 and 31 March 2011, of which 500 will be located at Didcot;
- vii) in rural areas, local plans will make appropriate provision for development and in doing so will have regard to the economic and social well-being of local communities; and
- viii) elsewhere most new housing development should take place in larger settlements where a reasonable amount of employment, services and community facilities exist or can be provided.

2.11 Oxfordshire County Council adopted the Structure Plan to 2016 in October 2005. The general approach and much of the policy framework in the 2011 Structure Plan has been carried into the 2016 plan. A major change for the Vale, however, is that Grove is identified as a main location for new housing development, to take about 2,100 dwellings between 2001 and 2016. The amount of housing to be built in the Vale is 7,150 dwellings over the 15 year period to 2016. This is a significant increase over the previous Structure Plan and to some extent has been anticipated by the District Council through the policies in the housing chapter of this plan.

The Council's Vision for the Vale

2.12 The vision of the District Council is to 'build and safeguard a fair, open and compassionate community' and its aims can be summarised as: strengthening local democracy and public involvement, creating a safer community and improving the quality of life among Vale residents, encouraging a strong and sustainable economy, helping disadvantaged groups and individuals to realise their full potential, providing and supporting high quality public services, and protecting and improving the natural and built environment . In preparing its Local Plan the Council considers it important to establish aims and goals which reflect and build on its overall vision and which are clearly focused on the land use issues which the Local Plan has to address.

The Aims and Goals of the Local Plan

- 2.13 The attractive countryside, many villages and three historic market towns give the Vale a very special and distinctive character. This, coupled with the location of the district within the prosperous South-East, the easy access to the motorway network and a high concentration of jobs in research and development mean that the Vale will inevitably face pressures for further development in the years to 2011. In this context the District Council believes **the overall aim** of the Local Plan should be:

In partnership with others find an acceptable balance between maintaining a thriving economy, enabling social progress which meets the needs of everyone and protecting the environment and character of the area for future generations.

This can only be achieved if development is contained and related to local needs, if natural resources are used prudently and provided all proposals for development are carefully assessed to ensure they are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

- 2.14 This overall aim underpins the Local Plan and to give greater clarity the Council has established seven, more detailed, aims which flow from it. These aims have guided the preparation of the policies and proposals in the Local Plan, and provide the framework against which the success of the Local Plan can be monitored. Each aim has a number of more specific goals. The Plan's aims and goals are set out below.

Aim 1: to safeguard the distinctive character of the Vale, and conserve and enhance the natural, built and historic environment for future generations.

- 2.15 The Vale has very attractive countryside including substantial parts of the Thames Valley and the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It also has a range of wildlife habitats and a rich heritage, including conservation areas, listed buildings and ancient monuments. Through its planning policies the Council will seek to:

- i) protect and enhance the countryside for its own sake, particularly areas of attractive landscape and the setting of the River Thames;
- ii) maintain and enhance biodiversity and protect sites important for wildlife conservation;
- iii) protect and enhance the historic and built environment;
- iv) protect the distinctive character of the Vale's towns, villages and countryside;
- v) maintain the integrity of the Oxford Green Belt in the north-east of the district; and

- vi) restrain the overall level of development in accordance with the Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

Aim 2: to promote high quality, sustainable development.

2.16 Well designed and laid out new buildings can help to reinforce local distinctiveness and sense of place, and reduce energy consumption and crime. This will help integrate new development into the Vale and improve the quality of life of existing and future residents. To this end the Council will seek to:

- i) ensure that all new development is designed to a high standard, uses high quality materials and respects the character of the area;
- ii) make the best use of resources and infrastructure;
- iii) resist the unnecessary loss of floodplains, agricultural land, water, mineral and other natural resources;
- iv) minimise pollution and noise arising from new development;
- v) reduce the need for development on green fields by promoting
 - the re-use of vacant, under-used and previously developed land and buildings within existing settlements before greenfield sites are used
 - higher density developments where appropriate;
- vi) promote environmentally efficient design to reduce heat loss and maximise solar gain by the careful location, layout and design of new buildings and encourage the use of appropriate materials; and
- vii) encourage the harnessing and use of environmentally friendly energy sources.

Aim 3: to reduce the need to travel and the harmful effects of traffic on people and the environment.

2.17 Increased traffic has led to congestion, noise and air pollution which is harmful to people and the environment. The increased use of cars has diminished the economic viability of some public transport services which means that people without cars can be seriously disadvantaged. To help address these problems the Council will seek to:

- i) reduce the need to travel by car by
 - encouraging and enabling people to transfer to more environmentally friendly modes of transport by seeking improved facilities for walking, cycling and public transport and through the careful location of new development
 - locating most new development close to existing facilities and services or where they can be provided and avoiding sporadic and piecemeal development
 - enabling people to live close to where they work, including encouraging developments which have a mix of different land uses;

- ii) use traffic management measures to alleviate traffic congestion and improve safety and the environment; and
- iii) resist development which would give rise to excessive or inappropriate traffic, such as heavy goods vehicles on narrow rural roads.

Aim 4: to maintain and improve the quality of life of all members of the local community.

2.18 The Local Plan can help to meet the social needs and improve the quality of life of the local community by:

- i) providing new housing in accordance with the Structure Plan requirement;
- ii) promoting mixed communities by ensuring a range of housing types is provided, including social housing to meet local needs;
- iii) maintaining and, where possible, improving the range of services and facilities for shopping, educational, health, leisure and recreational purposes;
- iv) securing the provision of local facilities, accessible to all sections of the community, in association with new developments;
- v) providing access for people with mobility impairments;
- vi) promoting design which helps to reduce crime and encourage community identity and pride;
- vii) protecting rights of way and promoting access to the countryside for leisure pursuits; and
- viii) protecting green open spaces of amenity value within settlements.

Aim 5: to encourage a strong and sustainable economy which is beneficial to all who live in, work in, or visit the Vale.

2.19 An essential part of improving people's quality of life is that they have access to opportunities for fulfilling work in a diverse economy. One of the Government's key objectives is to encourage continued economic development and growth; local authorities, through the planning system, can help create the right conditions in which businesses can thrive and prosper. The Council will therefore seek to:

- i) promote the diversity of the Vale's economy;
- ii) enhance its competitiveness, particularly its special emphasis in research and science-based industries;
- iii) improve employment opportunities and provide for local employment needs;
- iv) enable regeneration and modernisation; and
- v) promote sustainable tourism.

Aim 6: to ensure that the main settlements of Abingdon, Botley, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage are attractive places for living, working and pursuing leisure interests.

2.20 58% of the population live in the five main settlements and many others visit for work, shops, services and leisure pursuits. They are therefore very important to the social and economic life of the Vale. The Council will seek to:

- i) improve the environment of the urban areas;
- ii) reduce traffic congestion and improve conditions for cyclists and pedestrians;
- iii) promote the vitality and viability of the main settlements particularly as local centres for shopping and other services; and
- iv) encourage the economic regeneration and sustainability of the main settlements.

Aim 7: to ensure that the countryside and villages of the Vale are prosperous and have a diverse economy.

2.21 There are significant changes taking place in the rural economy, particularly in agriculture where there are reducing numbers of people working in farming. To ensure there are local employment opportunities within the rural areas, which maintain a high quality environment, the Council will seek to enable:

- i) the appropriate diversification of the farming industry, particularly through the careful re-use of existing buildings;
- ii) the diversification and regeneration of the rural economy, particularly within the villages of the Vale and the areas identified for employment development.