

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION AND PLANNING CONTEXT

- 7.1 The Vale of White Horse district contains a rich variety of semi-natural habitats, including woodlands, hedgerows, streams and rivers, meadows, pastures and wetlands; together these habitats help to secure the survival of many species of wildlife. The diversity of wildlife helps to ensure that the countryside remains healthy and productive and that its complex natural cycles are kept in balance.
- 7.2 Much of the Vale's countryside is also of great natural beauty. The district occupies an attractive part of the upper Thames valley where the landforms have a gentle rounded nature. There is no dramatic scenery but the landscape, reflecting the underlying geology, presents a good deal of variety and interest, ranging from the rolling sweep of the chalk downs to the floodplain of the Thames.
- 7.3 The Vale's natural environment is being affected by a variety of pressures and changes which the Council will need to address in its role as planning authority and service provider. The following sections outline some of these issues and provide the context for the policies set out later in the chapter.

Nature Conservation

- 7.4 Among the diverse habitats found in the district, some are recognised as having special nature conservation interest, for example:
- i) **Ancient Woodland** there is a broken band of ancient woodland (woodland which broadly has been undisturbed since medieval times) on the ridge of corallian limestone in the north of the Local Plan area;
 - ii) **The Chalk Downs** the Berkshire Downs once presented a great expanse of unimproved chalk grassland grazed by sheep. This habitat, with its springy turf, colourful and scented wild flowers and rare butterflies, now survives in only small fragments. The largest remaining areas, at White Horse Hill and Hackpen Down, are protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and the latter is a candidate Special Area of Conservation. The Ridgeway track forms a natural wildlife corridor, a valuable habitat for native chalk grassland plants;

- iii) **Heathland and Fenland** some of Oxfordshire's rarest habitats – heathland, acid grassland and fenland – are found in the Local Plan area. Acid grasslands are found at Hurst Hill and around Frilford. Remnants of heathland survive at Frilford Heath. A complex of fens exists at Lashford Lane, Cothill and Dry Sandford, along the line of the Sandford Brook, a tributary of the River Ock. This particular complex is regarded as being of European importance and the Cothill Fen is a candidate Special Area of Conservation; and
- iv) **Wetlands** a few hay meadows are still managed traditionally on the floodplains of the Thames and Ock: Fernham Meadows and Grafton Lock Meadows are SSSIs. The river valleys generally form natural wildlife corridors, and rivers and streams are key elements for wildlife within the landscape structure of the Vale.

7.5 These and other areas in the Vale are rich in ecological value. They also suffer from unprecedented pressures for change. Damage and loss has occurred as a result of development and changes in farming and forestry practices. A habitat survey undertaken in the late 1990s by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) estimated that less than 4% of Oxfordshire can be considered to be of high nature conservation value. It is essential to avoid further erosion of this nature conservation resource.

7.6 To set against these pressures and losses there are more positive signs. Vigorous efforts are being made locally not only to protect important wildlife and natural habitats but also to create new areas of interest:

- i) a UK Biodiversity Action Plan, arising out of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, was published in 1994 setting out a programme for the conservation and sustainable use of the country's ecological diversity. It identifies a range of 'priority' habitats and species of at least national importance;
- ii) the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum, an informal partnership of local and national organisations, co-ordinated the production of The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, published in 2000. This document describes important habitats and species in Oxfordshire. There are eighteen Habitat Action Plans (HAPs) targeting priority habitats as follows; beech and yew woodland, broadleaved woodland, canals, chalk grassland, farmland, fens and flushes, geodiversity, gravel pits, heathlands, hedgerows, neutral grassland, parkland, ponds, reed beds, reservoirs, rivers and ditches, settlements and wet woodland, all of which are found within the Vale. To complement these HAPs, 'species action plans' have also been prepared for locally important species. These HAPs can be seen at the Council offices, local libraries and the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum web-site www.oncf.org.uk;

- iii) these various action plans provide valuable information on the biodiversity of the district. These documents will be used as guidance on nature conservation issues in the district. In considering development, proposals advice will also be sought from English Nature (or its successor), the County Council's Ecologist and other relevant organisations, as appropriate;
- iv) the Great Western Community Forest should help to form a range of new habitats for wildlife in the west of the Vale;
- v) Natural Area documents have been produced by English Nature for three parts of the Vale of White Horse – the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs, the Thames and Avon Vales and the Midvale Ridge. Natural areas are based on landscape, wildlife and natural features. Each natural area has a unique identify resulting from the interaction of wildlife, landforms geology and human impact. They reflect a local 'sense of place'. The documents provide helpful background material as well as clarifying broad nature conservation goals;
- vi) the Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area was launched in 1994 by the then Department of Environment. The scheme, which includes parts of the Thames floodplain between Kelmscott and Oxford, aims to encourage and sustain the traditional management of permanent pasture. This will assist farmers and landowners in the sympathetic management of wildlife and natural habitats;
- vii) whole farm conservation plans are promoted through the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Strategy. These plans help farmers to identify all existing wildlife features, prioritise appropriate future conservation work and target grant aid. The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) also promotes whole farm conservation plans and provides farmers and landowners with practical conservation advice;
- viii) *The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Challenge* was published in 1996 by the local Wildlife Trust. It attempted to set specific nature conservation targets for 100 plants and animals in Oxfordshire;
- ix) the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project was established in 1998 to identify areas of county importance for wildlife that lack statutory protection and offer their owners conservation management advice. There are currently 84 County Wildlife Sites in the Vale of White Horse District covering an area of approximately 1248 ha supporting habitats such as chalk grassland, ancient woodland, hay meadows and wetland. These sites are listed in Appendix 4;

- x) 'alert maps', which collate information on significant known sites of nature conservation importance in the county. (These can be inspected at the District Council offices).

7.7 The District Council, through its own planting programmes and through its involvement in schemes for grant-aiding tree and hedgerow planting, pond reclamation and willow pollarding, is also making a positive contribution to the retention or establishment of natural habitats. The Council has expressed its concerns for the protection of wildlife and environmentally sensitive areas and has committed itself to encouraging the provision of nature reserves where appropriate. The District Council is also participating in the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum, promoting habitat protection and sympathetic land use management in conjunction with a range of like-minded organisations.

Landscapes of the Vale

- 7.8 The countryside of the district is worthy of protection not just for its farming and forestry value but for the general environmental quality of its varied and largely unspoilt landscapes.
- 7.9 The rolling open chalkland of the Berkshire Downs forms the southern boundary of the district. The clay vale itself is a pastoral landscape where willows and streams, watermeadows and wide skies combine to create a distinctive entity. A wooded ridge crosses the north of the district, its scarp facing north towards the Cotswolds across the upper Thames valley; at its east, this ridge forms part of the circle of hills which look down onto the dreaming spires of Oxford.
- 7.10 This variety of landscapes is directly reflected in the appearance of local buildings: many older buildings have an affinity with the landscape in which they stand. They are often built out of the materials found in the underlying geology and are themselves an important component of the landscape. Thus, chalk and sarsen stone as building materials are associated with the Downs, brick and timber with the clay vale, and limestone with the ridge along the northern part of the district.
- 7.11 Some landscapes, especially those on the fringes of urban areas, have been affected by the impact of unsightly developments, such as mineral extraction or major roads. Moreover, there is on-going concern about the effect of changing farming practices on the quality and appearance of the landscape: the removal of trees and hedgerows, the drainage of wetland areas, the neglect of small but important landscape features such as copses and ponds, continue to be potential threats. In its recent policies, central government has recognised the vital role that farmers and landowners have in managing the countryside and has introduced schemes to encourage better stewardship of the countryside and the planting of woodlands, trees and hedgerows. The District Council also has a role to play in

this process through its local planning responsibilities and through its administration of grant resources to help fund small planting schemes and willow pollarding.

- 7.12 Trees, small woodlands, ponds and streams are essential landscape elements of the Vale, making an important visual contribution to the district's scenery. They have ecological benefits by providing local wildlife habitats, and in the case of trees, they help to reduce the prospects of global warming. Trees may also have a role within the rural economy by providing timber for a variety of uses. A future trend may be the energy production of biomass from willows or other species. Where access is provided to the public, woodlands can also be a valued recreational resource.
- 7.13 The Council pursues a number of initiatives to encourage the growing of trees. It plants, or advises on the planting of, species of trees that will thrive in accordance with local conditions and the landscape zones identified below. It works to grant-aid planting and management works which can include willow pollarding and hedgerow restoration. It supports the Oxfordshire Woodland Project which provides advice for owners and managers on all aspects of small woodland management in the area and it seeks to identify possible sites for the planting of 'heritage woodland', areas of trees planted for public access and for the future heritage of the Vale. The Council can also prohibit the removal of important hedges under the government's Hedgerow Regulations (S.I. 1997. No. 1160).
- 7.14 Wherever possible in areas of woodland the District Council hopes that owners will enter into a Forestry Authority Woodland Grant Scheme to protect and improve the woodland over a contract period. In cases where owners are not prepared to enter into such an agreement, and trees of amenity value are considered to be at risk, the Council will use its powers to make tree preservation orders.

The Local Plan and its Role in Safeguarding the Vale's Natural Environment

- 7.15 The main aim of the Local Plan's strategy is to 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 will entail accommodating necessary change in the countryside while maintaining and, where possible, enhancing the quality of the environment and the natural heritage for local people and visitors.
- 7.16 The Council is committed to planning for sustainable development and in this context the policies in this section of the Plan aim to conserve the natural heritage, to safeguard important areas of the Vale's open countryside, to protect and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape and to support the establishment of the Great Western Community Forest.
- 7.17 The policies in this chapter have sought to take account of changing guidance from central government in the form of planning policy guidance notes (PPGs) and

planning policy statement (PPSs) together with the strategic guidance in the Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

Planning Guidance from Central Government

- 7.18 The main guidance on how the government's policies for the conservation of the natural heritage are to be reflected in land use planning is set out in Planning Policy Statement 9: *Biodiversity and Geological Conservation* (PPS9). This recognises that wildlife is an integral part of the countryside. It builds on the commitments of the 1990 White Paper, *This Common Inheritance*, to sustainable development and to conserving the natural heritage for the benefit of this and future generations. In 1992 the United Kingdom signed the Biodiversity Convention at the UN conference held in Brazil – the 'Rio Earth Summit'. Following this the Government published in 1994 an Action Plan setting out the UK's conservation strategy for the next twenty years.
- 7.19 Other guidance on the integration of nature conservation and land use planning can be found in Planning Policy Statement 7: *Sustainable Development in Rural Areas* (PPS7). This requires planning authorities to balance economic, conservation, agricultural and other factors when considering development in the countryside.
- 7.20 The agency responsible for advising central and local government on nature conservation is English Nature. English Nature has a principal role in identifying and protecting statutory sites which have nature conservation interest and value and both the District and the County Council work with English Nature to ensure these interests are properly taken into account. Non-statutory sites are identified by the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project which is supported by the Council.
- 7.21 The main guidance on how the government's policies for the protection of the countryside are to be reflected in land use planning is set out in Planning Policy Statements 1 and 7 (PPS1 and PPS7) which state that 'the countryside should be safeguarded for its own sake' and that 'building away from existing settlements should be strictly controlled'.

The Oxfordshire Structure Plan

- 7.22 The conservation and enhancement of the natural environment is a priority of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan to 2011. Principally policies EN1 and EN2 sought to ensure that development will not have an unacceptable or adverse environmental impact, whilst EN4 sought to protect attractive landscapes and EN5 nature conservation sites. (This approach is carried forward in the Structure Plan to 2016 in policies EN1 and EN2.)
- 7.23 The Structure Plan recognises the contribution that Oxfordshire's Biodiversity Action Plan (prepared by the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum) can make to improve the environment for the benefit of wildlife and policy EN6 (EN2 in the plan

to 2016) covers the protection, enhancement and creation of different habitat types.

- 7.24 The general strategy of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2011, and as now modified in the Structure Plan 2016 is to provide a framework to sustain economic prosperity, for development to meet housing, and other requirements and guide investment decisions over the period to 2011. The plan contains general policies to protect the environment, character and natural resources of the county including its areas of high landscape value and of local landscape character.

POLICIES AND PROPOSALS

Nature Conservation and Biodiversity

- 7.25 Biodiversity is dependent upon a healthy and balanced environment. Conservation of this environment for the benefit of current and future generations is an important and fundamental part of sustainable development.
- 7.26 The Council wishes to ensure that areas of importance to nature conservation are not lost through development. It wishes to safeguard, maintain and enhance nature conservation value wherever it exists and particularly to encourage biodiversity. Features such as rivers, streams and banks, hedgerows, ponds and woods are relatively obvious examples. Even minor development proposals need to take full account of the effects upon biodiversity. Apparently insignificant small-scale developments may seriously damage the integrity of habitats or habitat networks, for example through landtake, fragmentation, severance or disturbance and hydrological changes. Similarly, even the smallest opportunities for habitat creation or enhancement can be significant and can build into major contributions over time.

The Need for Ecological Appraisals

- 7.27 Government guidance stresses the importance of taking nature conservation considerations into account in making decisions. If the Council considers that it has insufficient information available to assess the likely effects of a development proposal on a known or potential site of nature conservation value, an ecological appraisal will be required to be carried out by the applicant. Such an appraisal should be undertaken to the extent necessary to provide adequate information about the effects of the proposed development. Applicants must consider the issue of nature conservation including the likelihood of protected species, Biodiversity Action Plan species or priority habitats being affected by their proposals before making their applications so that the necessary full

appraisal can be submitted at the same time as the application is made, thereby avoiding delays in the planning process.

POLICY NE1

APPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT WHICH ARE LIKELY TO AFFECT A KNOWN OR POTENTIAL SITE OF NATURE CONSERVATION VALUE WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS THEY ARE ACCOMPANIED BY AN ECOLOGICAL APPRAISAL WHICH ENABLES A PROPER ASSESSMENT TO BE MADE OF THE IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT ON THE ECOLOGICAL VALUE OF THE SITE.

Protection of Sites of Special Nature Conservation Importance

- 7.28 Within the district there are a number of sites which have been designated according to their nature conservation importance. These range from sites of international importance such as Special Areas of Conservation, sites of national importance such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest to sites of regional or local importance such as Local Nature Reserves.
- 7.29 **Special Areas of Conservation** are designated under the European Commission Directive, *Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora* (the Habitats Directive). Special Areas of Conservation and Candidate Special Areas of Conservation are of international importance and are the most important sites for wildlife in the country. Two candidate SACs have been designated in the Vale. One is at Cothill Fen where the calcium-rich springwater-fed fens are considered rare in the European context. The other is at Hackpen Down, an area of unimproved chalk grassland.
- 7.30 **National Nature Reserves** can be declared by English Nature under section 19 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as amended by the Nature Conservancy Act 1973) or section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. In the Vale, part of the Cothill Fen is a National Nature Reserve.
- 7.31 **Sites of Special Scientific Interest.** English Nature has a duty under section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to identify Sites of Special Scientific Interest which are of national importance and of outstanding interest as a result of their flora, fauna, physiographic or geological features. There are 23 such sites in the Vale, all of which are shown on the proposals map and listed in Appendix 4.
- 7.32 The District Council is concerned to protect these special sites from damage or destruction and policy NE2 will be applied where development likely to affect such sites is proposed.

POLICY NE2

DEVELOPMENT WILL NOT BE PERMITTED IF IT WOULD RESULT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF OR DAMAGE TO ANY SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION, NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE OR SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST.

- 7.33 Applicants are advised to contact the Council if they believe a site of nature conservation value is likely to be affected by the proposed development.

Geologically Important Sites

- 7.34 Biodiversity is linked to the landscape of the area. English Nature is promoting the identification of Regionally Important Geological Sites through the establishment of local groups. These sites will be non-statutory, locally based sites which will be designated and informally and voluntarily managed. Regionally Important Geological Sites are proposed at Coxwell Pit; Faringdon (Rogers Concrete); The Manger, Whitehorse Hill; Hatford Sand Pit; Gimbro Copse Quarry, Pusey; Dry Sandford Quarries; Tubney Woods; Shellingford Quarry; and Wicklesham Quarry, Faringdon. Four of these sites are also identified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (see policy NE2 above and list of sites in Appendix 4).

POLICY NE3

DEVELOPMENT THAT WOULD DESTROY OR DAMAGE A REGIONALLY IMPORTANT GEOLOGICAL SITE WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS THE DAMAGE CAN BE PREVENTED OR ACCEPTABLY MINIMISED.

Other Sites of Nature Conservation Value

- 7.35 Alert maps have been drawn up to collate information on all known sites of nature conservation interest in Oxfordshire and may be examined in the District Council offices. Many known sites do not have statutory protection but nonetheless contribute to the diversity of habitats for wildlife. On sites of this kind, development need not always be prejudicial to the wildlife interest but as the sites represent a considerable proportion of the nature conservation heritage of the area the District Council will consult with the relevant nature conservation bodies, including English Nature, when a planning application appears to affect wildlife interests. The range of non-statutory sites can be extensive, including geological sites, ancient woodlands, lakes, ponds, watercourses, heathlands, water meadows, unimproved pastures and marshes. Some of these are discussed below.

- 7.36 **Local Nature Reserves.** Local Nature Reserves may be established by local authorities in consultation with English Nature under section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. They are habitats of local importance. In the Vale there is a Local Nature Reserve at Tuckmill Meadows, Watchfield, which is shown on the proposals map. Local Nature Reserves are proposed at the Abbey Fishponds and the western end of the Ock Valley in Abingdon, Chilswell Valley in South Hinksey, and Kennington Pond in Kennington. A local nature reserve is also proposed by Oxford City Council at the Iffley Fritillary Meadows, a small proportion of which lies within the area of the Vale (see Appendix 4). The Council may seek the designation of additional Local Nature Reserves during the life of this Local Plan. This is done under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.
- 7.37 **County Wildlife Sites.** Sites of critical importance for nature conservation within Oxfordshire, which are not already statutory designations, are referred to as County Wildlife Sites. These are also called Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in PPS9. In the Vale, County Wildlife Sites have been re-surveyed in accordance with detailed criteria and are shown on the proposals map and listed in Appendix 4.
- 7.38 **Ancient Woodlands.** Ancient woodlands have been provisionally identified by English Nature as woodlands that have existed at least from medieval times and which have never been cleared for use other than timber production. Many are of nature conservation value as well as important landscape features. Ancient deciduous woodland is regarded as having special conservation value. The Vale's ancient woodlands are shown on the proposals map.
- 7.39 **Ecological Networks.** Although specific site protection is extremely important there is now recognition that the health and quality of the wider countryside can affect the long-term viability of individual habitats and species. Wildlife corridors and ecological networks can play an important role in maintaining the diversity of the conservation resource. Corridors and ecological networks (such as small woods, hedgerows, ancient and mature trees, road verges, watercourses, ponds and their banks and flood plains) can be both beneficial to nature conservation and to the landscape. These features may not be covered by a specific designation but if they are present on sites where development is proposed, applicants should be aware that the Council will expect any related nature conservation issues to have been fully addressed as part of the development proposal.
- 7.40 The District Council is determined to do all it can to protect and enhance the nature conservation heritage of the Vale and to this end will apply the following policy to other sites of nature conservation value in the district. In some cases legal agreements may be used to protect the nature conservation resource in accordance with the policy.

POLICY NE4

DEVELOPMENT LIKELY TO HARM A SITE OF NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE NOT COVERED IN POLICIES NE2 AND NE3 WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS IT CAN BE CLEARLY DEMONSTRATED THAT THE REASON FOR THE DEVELOPMENT CLEARLY OUTWEIGHS THE NEED TO SAFEGUARD THE NATURE CONSERVATION VALUE OF THE SITE AND ADEQUATE COMPENSATORY HABITATS WILL BE PROVIDED.

Protection of Species

- 7.41 In addition to habitats of importance to nature conservation, there are a number of plant and animal species protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the European Commission Habitats Directive 1992. For example, it is an offence to intentionally disturb nesting birds or damage or destroy bat roosts. Other species such as badgers, great crested newts and water voles are protected by their own legislation. Government advice in PPS9 is that the presence of a protected species is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. Where there are reasonable grounds to suggest that protected species are present, a survey by a competent person must be carried out prior to the determination of the planning application. (See also policy NE1). Planning permission is only likely to be granted if the protection of the species and its habitats can be secured through the use of planning conditions or legal agreements.
- 7.42 Development and protection of endangered and important species need not be incompatible. Measures to protect species or their habitats can be sensitively incorporated into the development proposal and in some cases relocation may be a practical option. The Council will use planning conditions and legal agreements to help safeguard and benefit important species.

POLICY NE5

DEVELOPMENT LIKELY TO HAVE AN ADVERSE AFFECT ON A SPECIALLY PROTECTED SPECIES WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS THE ADVERSE AFFECTS, EITHER DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY, CAN BE PREVENTED OR ACCEPTABLY MINIMISED OR ADEQUATE ALTERNATIVE HABITATS CAN BE PROVIDED.

Enhancement and Creation of Habitats

- 7.43 The Government has confirmed its commitment to not only conserve bio-diversity but to enhance it. In this context the Council believes encouraging the enhancement and management of habitats and the creation of new ones should be important objectives of the Local Plan. When considering development proposals the Council will seek to ensure that there is no net loss in biodiversity resources, and where appropriate it will seek gains for biodiversity.

- 7.44 Developers will be encouraged to enhance existing habitats or incorporate the provision of new habitats in their proposals, for example, through the use of native species of local provenance in landscaping schemes. In its consideration of development proposals, the Council will also be looking to see how any habitats within the development site relate to the surrounding area so that, where possible, they complement existing habitats.
- 7.45 Applicants are referred to policy DC6 relating to landscape enhancement which covers this issue. Where major development is proposed, as at Grove and Didcot, this aspect will be specifically covered in the detail of the respective development briefs.
- 7.46 Where it can, the District Council grant-aids appropriate schemes. Additionally, woodland projects are supported. The District Council recently acquired Besselsleigh Wood, an ancient semi-natural woodland, which is co-managed in partnership with Oxfordshire Woodland Project. Other financial help comes from the Forestry Commission as part of its Woodland Grant Scheme.

Countryside and Landscape Protection

- 7.47 Government guidance stresses that the countryside should be safeguarded for its own sake and that building away from settlements should be strictly controlled. In line with this guidance the main focus for new development will be in the main settlements and new building outside settlements will be strictly limited (policies GS1 and GS2).

The Landscapes of the Vale

- 7.48 Central Government has made it clear that development plans should include policies designed to secure the conservation of the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside and to sustain its character and diversity.
- 7.49 The Oxfordshire Structure Plans (2011 and 2016) contain general policies to protect the local landscape character. In the sections which follow the Council has sought to develop these general policies and relate them more closely to specific areas of the Vale.
- 7.50 In 1990 the Countryside Agency recommended that an approach to landscape policy is best based on an assessment of landscape character, defining the characteristics and features that make one landscape different from another, rather than necessarily better or worse (*Countryside and Nature Conservation Issues in District Local Plans, 1990*). The character-based approach has been endorsed in PPS7 and followed by the Council. It has undertaken a detailed appraisal which

identifies four broad landscape zones in the area of the Local Plan, generally arranged in east–west bands.

Zone1: The North Vale Corallian Ridge The water meadows of the River Thames above Oxford, along with the east–west ridge of high ground between Wytham and Buscot, constitute a distinct northern landscape zone. Most of the woodlands in the Local Plan area are to be found in this zone, including a considerable amount of ancient woodland. Country houses in parkland take advantage of fine views to north and south. On this ridge, formed of corallian limestone, the local coral rag has been widely used as a building material for houses, barns and walls.

Zone 2: The Lowland Clay Vale The pastures of the clay vale, in the centre of the Local Plan area, form a second distinct landscape zone. Streams drain into the River Ock. Willows line the banks of the water meadows and floodable pastures. There are wide views of the sky and distant hills, and qualities of solitude, light and mist. Villages have often developed on islands of gravel above the flood plain: the suffix '-ey' after Charney, Hanney and Goosey denotes 'islands'. Brick, clay tile and some timber have been the predominant traditional building materials, along with local stone.

Zone 3: The Lower Chalk and Upper Greensand Along the northern scarp of the Berkshire Downs, a series of plateaux and small gentle scarps form a transitional landscape area between the Downs and the clay vale. A narrow band of fertile land on the Upper Greensand has distinctive villages whose character derives in part from their setting. The tree cover is higher than to the north or south. Old trackways, such as the Portway, follow the northern springline under the Downs.

Zone 4: The Middle and Upper Chalk The top scarp slope of the Berkshire Downs and the gentle dip slope to the south form the classic chalk downland landscape with wide open vistas broken only by a few clumps of trees. There are few settlements. The rolling large fields are now mostly in arable cultivation. The Ridgeway track follows broadly the top of the scarp, passing hill forts and other antiquities. Grassy combes are found on the scarp slope. There is a remote atmosphere and a sense of being closer to the elements than in the rest of the district.

7.51 A further description of the landscape zones is contained in Planning Advisory Notes available from the District Council.

7.52 The Council's appraisal forms the basis for the following landscape-related policies in the Local Plan which cover:

- The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Beauty
- The North Vale Corallian Ridge
- The Landscape Setting of Oxford
- The Lowland Vale

- Urban Fringes and Countryside Gaps
- Areas for Landscape Enhancement
- Great Western Community Forest.

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

- 7.53 The Berkshire Downs within the district, together with part of the Greensand ridge at its foot (zones 3 and 4 in the landscape appraisal), fall within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 7.54 The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 provided for the designation of such areas. Under Section 87 of the Act, the National Parks Commission (now the Countryside Agency) could designate an area which is not part of a national park but is of such outstanding natural beauty that some of the provisions for national parks should apply.
- 7.55 Designation of an AONB confers formal recognition that the natural beauty of the area is of national importance. The purposes of designation are set out below:
- i) the primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty;
 - ii) in pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment;
 - iii) recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of the natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.
- 7.56 In the Agency's view it would be inconsistent with the aims of designation to permit the siting of major development in AONBs whether this was minerals, industrial, commercial or housing development. Only proven national interest and lack of alternative sites can justify any exception. Applications for major developments should be accompanied by environmental impact assessments which demonstrate this.
- 7.57 Government guidance (PPS7) reiterates that the primary objective of AONB designation is conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape. It confirms that the environmental effects of development in an AONB will be a major consideration, and that applications for major developments should be subject to the most rigorous examination and be demonstrated to be in the public interest.

- 7.58 In policy NE6 the Council has taken into account the above advice. In applying the policy the Council will have regard to the local specific features and distinctive qualities which led to designation of the AONB, namely its value as one of the most extensive and least spoilt downland tracts in southern England, and its wildlife and archaeological interest.
- 7.59 The Council will seek to ensure that any new development: is not visually prominent; reflects the character of its surroundings in terms of scale and design; and that its external appearance, the choice of materials, lighting and associated landscaping do not detract from views from vantage points or otherwise spoil the appreciation of the area's landscape quality.

POLICY NE6

DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY WILL ONLY BE PERMITTED IF THE NATURAL BEAUTY OF THE LANDSCAPE WILL BE CONSERVED OR ENHANCED. DEVELOPMENT WHICH WOULD BE VISUALLY PROMINENT, WOULD DETRACT FROM VIEWS FROM PUBLIC VANTAGE POINTS OR WOULD SPOIL THE APPRECIATION OF THE LANDSCAPE QUALITY OF THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY WILL NOT BE PERMITTED.

MAJOR INDUSTRIAL OR COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT WILL NOT BE PERMITTED IN THE AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY UNLESS:

- i) IT IS PROVEN TO BE IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST AND NO ALTERNATIVE SITE CAN BE FOUND; AND**
- ii) ALL STEPS ARE TAKEN TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT ON THE BEAUTY OF THE AREA.**

- 7.60 The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 places a statutory requirement on local authorities to produce management plans to look at positive ways of enhancing the beauty of the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In the North Wessex Downs a Council of Partners has been established which brings together local authorities, relevant organisations, interest and community groups. This has produced a management plan for the North Wessex Downs. The District Council will assist with its implementation to secure a sound future for the AONB.

The North Vale Corallian Ridge

- 7.61 The Oxfordshire Structure Plans (2011 and 2016) seek to ensure that the local landscape character should not be damaged. The Council has identified the Corallian limestone and sandstone ridge and the adjoining Thames Valley between Buscot and Wytham as an area requiring special care in assessing the visual impact of proposals for development. The Council remains committed to protecting the

North Vale Corallian Ridge from development which would harm its special character and when considering applications will pay particular regard to the siting, mass, scale and appearance of the proposed development, the external materials that are to be used, any proposals for external lighting and the nature and extent of any associated landscaping proposals.

- 7.62 The North Vale Corallian Ridge has a striking landform with a steep north facing scarp slope separating the clay vale from the Thames valley. In the west the ridge has been dissected by streams, which have eroded steep slopes to hills such as Badbury Hill and Faringdon Folly. The ridge is characterised by woodland, including a significant proportion of ancient woodland, country houses designed to look out over the scarp, villages built of the local coral ragstone, and expansive views.

POLICY NE7

DEVELOPMENT WHICH WOULD HARM THE PREVAILING CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE OF THE NORTH VALE CORALLIAN RIDGE, AS SHOWN ON THE PROPOSALS MAP, WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS THERE IS AN OVERRIDING NEED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND ALL STEPS WILL BE TAKEN TO MINIMISE THE IMPACT ON THE LANDSCAPE.

The Landscape Setting of Oxford

- 7.63 The need to protect Oxford and its setting in its natural environment is a key consideration in the Oxfordshire Structure Plan. Policy EN9 of that plan (EN5 of the plan to 2016) state that 'the conservation of Oxford's architectural and historic heritage and its landscape setting will take priority in considering proposals for development in and around the city'.
- 7.64 The District Council has local planning responsibility for an important part of the countryside setting of Oxford, notably the slopes of Wytham Hill, Hinksey Hill, Harcourt Hill and Bagley Wood, along with the water meadows of the Hinksey and Seacourt Streams. The wooded hills in the Vale form backdrops to famous panoramas of Oxford's towers and spires.
- 7.65 The views towards collegiate Oxford from viewpoints in the Vale are unique and precious. They could be vulnerable to intrusive new development. The City Council's report on 'High Buildings in Oxford' (1962) described six key viewpoints of Oxford: two of them, Boars Hill and Raleigh Park, are located within this Local Plan area. The City Council has subsequently drawn attention to other viewpoints, including the A34 interchange at Hinksey Hill, and has emphasised that the absence of specific reference to other viewpoints does not diminish their importance. The District Council recognises that the protection of such world-famous views and panoramas requires policy consistency across Local Plan areas. The Council intends to take these vistas into account and make the conservation of Oxford's landscape setting a priority when considering applications for development or associated proposals for landscaping or tree-

planting in areas within view of the city. The Green Belt status of the area should protect it from inappropriate large-scale development but the following policy will apply. The Council will join with Oxford City Council in seeking that electricity cables be put underground and pylons removed where these have a significant impact on the landscape setting of Oxford in this area.

POLICY NE8

THE CONSERVATION OF OXFORD'S LANDSCAPE SETTING WILL TAKE PRIORITY IN CONSIDERING PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AREAS WITHIN VIEW OF THE CITY. DEVELOPMENT WILL NOT BE PERMITTED IF IT WOULD:

- i) HARM THE LANDSCAPE SETTING OF OXFORD; OR**
- ii) OBSCURE OR DETRACT FROM AN IMPORTANT VIEW OF THE SKY LINE OF COLLEGIATE OXFORD, PARTICULARLY WITHIN THE VIEW CONES AS DEFINED ON THE PROPOSALS MAP.**

The Lowland Vale

- 7.66 The bowl of countryside which lies between the AONB within the district and the North Vale Corallian Ridge can be broadly referred to as the Lowland Vale. This area has been celebrated for the contribution it makes to distant views from the higher land. The Lowland Vale is also distinctive and valued for its own quality.
- 7.67 The long views over the patchwork quilt of fields, farms and villages in the Vale are an essential part of the landscape quality of the district. Seen from the Ridgeway, Uffington Castle or Folly Hill, the open views of the Lowland Vale have retained their integrity, despite the imposition of the cooling towers of Didcot Power Station at its distant eastern horizon.
- 7.68 Insensitively located or designed proposals could have an adverse impact on these open vistas and on the intrinsic qualities of the Lowland Vale. Particular account will be taken of the colour, texture, height and scale of development proposals and their impact on the local landscape.

POLICY NE9

DEVELOPMENT IN THE LOWLAND VALE WILL NOT BE PERMITTED IF IT WOULD HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON THE LANDSCAPE, PARTICULARLY ON THE LONG OPEN VIEWS WITHIN OR ACROSS THE AREA.

Urban Fringes and Countryside Gaps

- 7.69 It is well-established planning practice to exercise strict restraint on development in the countryside generally but there are special areas on the fringes of towns where the countryside needs additional care. The countryside in these areas can be prominent, being close to urban settlements and major transport routes. The Council has categorised these countryside areas using two definitions. The first, 'gaps', has been used to define land which is to be kept open in the interests of either safeguarding the separate identities of neighbouring settlements or to retain an open space between settlements and major transport routes. The second, 'fringes', has been used to describe land similar to 'gaps' but which has a wider function. Gaps or fringes between or on the edge of settlements have an important purpose in retaining the separate identities of, and in providing an attractive setting for and approach to, town and villages. In some circumstances, they may present an opportunity for informal recreational use, with better access in the form of footpaths and bridleways.
- 7.70 The gaps between Wantage and Grove, and Wantage and East Challow, and the tract of countryside between Faringdon and the Faringdon bypass and the vulnerable areas of urban fringe to the west and north-east of Didcot have been particularly identified and protected in past adopted plans by a special safeguarding policy context. This policy context has been given the strong support of inspectors at local plan inquiries, following careful scrutiny at the respective inquiries. The policy context is carried forward in this Local Plan under policy NE10 below.
- 7.71 Each of the areas designated under policy NE10 as fringe or as an important gap of open land has a particular purpose:
- i) the gap between Wantage and Grove was included in the adopted plan for Wantage and Grove in 1987. Since then new housing has been built at the northern edge of Wantage and the southern edge of Grove so that the perceived gap between the two settlements has extended westwards. The area currently designated aims to prevent the coalescence of Grove, Wantage, the industrial areas at the Grove Technology Park, the site occupied by Crown Cork and Seal and the village of East Challow. The area identified on the proposals map takes account of the strategic housing site proposed at Grove;
 - ii) the principle of retaining an area of open land between Faringdon and the A420 received strong support from the inspector at the Faringdon Local Plan Inquiry who wrote '....the preservation as far as practicable of this main open sweep of land between the town and the A420 remains a highly desirable objective'. The policy designation aims to retain the open countryside through which the bypass was designed to pass, well south of the town, taking account of the land identified for housing partly on the site

of the former Nursery (see policy H4) and the land identified for new business development (see policy E3);

- iii) the areas identified as urban fringe around the western and northern edges of Didcot are considered vulnerable to development pressures. These fringe areas also serve as gaps which help to maintain the separate identities of Didcot and its surrounding village communities and to avoid the coalescence of development in the area in general. The area identified on the proposals map takes account of the significant major development proposed to the west of Didcot.

Encroachment of development into the areas identified will therefore be resisted during the current Plan period.

POLICY NE10

IN THE URBAN FRINGES AND IMPORTANT OPEN GAPS BETWEEN SETTLEMENTS, AS SHOWN ON THE PROPOSALS MAP, DEVELOPMENT OR CHANGES OF USE WHICH WOULD HARM THEIR ESSENTIALLY OPEN OR RURAL CHARACTER WILL NOT BE PERMITTED.

Areas for Landscape Enhancement

- 7.72 Much of the Vale's landscape is of high quality, and there are relatively few features detracting from it. Some parts of the district, however, could benefit from enhancement by, for example, the removal of eyesores, the management of woodlands, or the planting of trees to enhance or frame views or to block less attractive views. The Council has set out in a Planning Advisory Note its approach to conserve and enhance landscape character. It will be used as a background against which development proposals will be judged under policy NE11 and also in promoting positive measures such as planting and maintenance schemes carried out or grant-aided by the Council. Landscaping will use locally native trees and shrubs in order to maintain local landscape character and biodiversity.
- 7.73 The strategy is based on an appraisal of the Vale's individual landscape areas. A key aspect of the strategy is to focus attention on two broad areas where the further planting of trees and woodlands, and other landscaping works, would be particularly valuable. The aim of enhancing the landscape in these areas does not imply either the promotion or preclusion of development: any development proposals within them will be considered under the other relevant policies in this Plan. The two areas concerned are indicated on the proposals map.

The A34 Corridor south of Abingdon The A34 trunk road (which is partly elevated), gravel workings, pylons and Didcot Power Station have all had an impact on this area in the east of the District. It was one of the last areas of the Vale to be drained and brought into agricultural use and it has a relatively light tree cover. As

gravel workings cease and restoration follows, there should be opportunities for improving the landscape. In the long term, other proposed developments will also be required to include measures to enhance the surrounding landscape as appropriate.

Land west of Grove Much of the landscape west of Grove was cleared of woodland and trees during the Second World War to make way for airstrips and other installations associated with Grove Airfield. The landscape has never fully recovered and opportunities should be taken to continue to enhance this area. This Plan proposes significant major development on that part of the airfield covered by runways and the area for landscape enhancement takes account of this proposed development.

- 7.74 Policy NE11 below confirms the Council's determination to seek and promote the enhancement of those parts of the local landscape which have become damaged or compromised.

POLICY NE11

PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPMENT WITHIN OR AFFECTING AREAS OF DAMAGED OR COMPROMISED LANDSCAPE, IN PARTICULAR THOSE AREAS DEFINED FOR LANDSCAPE ENHANCEMENT ON THE PROPOSALS MAP, MUST PROVIDE A LANDSCAPING SCHEME WHICH ENHANCES THE APPEARANCE OF THE AREA. DEVELOPMENT WHICH WOULD FURTHER ERODE OR DAMAGE THE CHARACTER OF THE LANDSCAPE WILL NOT BE PERMITTED.

Great Western Community Forest

- 7.75 The concept of Community Forests was launched in 1989. A Community Forest is not envisaged as solid woodland but as a variety of landscapes rich in woodland to various degrees. Such a 'forest' can incorporate farmland, wetland, flower meadows, lakes and parkland as well as traditional woodland.
- 7.76 The Great Western Community Forest was founded in 1994. It covers the whole of Swindon Borough and extends into neighbouring authorities in Wiltshire and Oxfordshire. It is backed by the Countryside Agency and the Forestry Commission with additional support coming from the authorities involved. The forest area has been divided on a geographical basis. Those parts which lie within the western end of the Vale are the 'White Horse Forest' and a small portion of the 'Upper Thames Forest'. The extent of the Great Western Community Forest is shown on the proposals map.
- 7.77 The Great Western Community Forest Plan, *A Forest Now and for the Future*, which covers the period 2006–2010, is the latest revision of the original forest plan published in 1994. The mission statement of the Great Western Community Forest

is 'to work with the community to create a diverse and integrated woodland environment now and for the future'.

7.78 This is accompanied by a set of aims and objectives for the Forest Plan. The aims include to create a multi-purpose forest embracing Swindon and its environs, to increase forest cover from an average 5% to 30%, to encourage community involvement and public access and to enhance biodiversity and landscape quality. Specific objectives for the White Horse Forest have been set down, including:

- to use woodland to define the western edge of the clay vale
- to enhance the road corridor of the A420, the railway line and the Wilts and Berks Canal
- to soften the impact of Watchfield and Shrivenham on their immediate landscape
- to conserve and enhance long distance views
- to create 'Forest Gateways'
- to develop the footpath system.

7.79 The full text of these aims and objectives can be found in the current Great Western Community Forest Plan. Community forests are intended to develop from a partnership of the whole community with local authorities, business, voluntary groups, schools, residents, farmers and landowners all working together to create a better environment. They are very long-term projects, possibly extending over 100 years. The aim is to ensure that all significant developments in community forest areas make an appropriate contribution – by their design, associated landscape works and planting – to the community forest.

7.80 Through policy NE12 and other policies, the District Council will seek to ensure that the design, siting, scale and landscaping of all development proposals are in accordance with the aims and objectives of the Forest Plan and do not prejudice its delivery.

POLICY NE12

DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY FOREST, AS SHOWN ON THE PROPOSALS MAP, MUST, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE CREATION OF A DIVERSE WOODLAND ENVIRONMENT APPROPRIATE TO THE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER OF THE AREA. PROPOSALS WHICH WOULD PREJUDICE THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE GREAT WESTERN COMMUNITY FOREST WILL NOT BE PERMITTED.