

Supporting economic prosperity

6.27 The Spatial Strategy set out in **Chapter 4** seeks to support economic prosperity in the Vale by focusing sustainable growth in the Science Vale area. The Spatial Strategy also seeks to reinforce the service centre roles of the main settlements across the district, including by directing new shops and facilities towards these settlements, and to promote thriving villages and rural communities.

6.28 The policies in this section complement the policies included in **Chapters 4 and 5** by setting out policies that will apply across the whole district to assist decision making and to support the delivery of our Strategic Objectives. They will help to support a strong and sustainable economy within the Vale's towns and rural areas and to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of the Vale's town centres and local shopping centres to strengthen their service centre roles.

6.29 Any site or area specific policies are included in our Sub-Area Strategies (**Chapter 5**). This section sets out policies that apply across the district, these are:

- **Core Policy 28: New Employment Development on Unallocated Sites** – which sets out the Council's approach to assessing proposals for employment on sites not already allocated
- **Core Policy 29: Change of Use of Existing Employment Land and Premises** – which sets out the Council's approach to assessing proposals for change of use
- **Core Policy 30: Further and Higher Education** – which seeks to support enhanced provision to enhance access to skills across the district
- **Core Policy 31: Development to Support the Visitor Economy** – which seeks to support the visitor and tourism sector across the district
- **Core Policy 32: Retail Development and other Main Town Centre Uses** – which sets out the Council's approach to determining proposals for retail and town centre uses.

New employment development on unallocated sites

- 6.30 The Local Plan 2031 Part 1 sets out employment allocations within **Core Policy 6**. There is a strong focus on the Science Vale area, with a total of 157 hectares allocated to Milton Park and Harwell Campus, and 29 hectares to be provided at the Didcot A Power Station site. **Core Policy 28** complements these allocations by supporting appropriate B-Class employment development on unallocated sites across the district.
- 6.31 In the rural areas, outside the Market Towns, Local Service Centres and Larger and Smaller Villages, new employment activities can be accommodated with least impact on the landscape through the re-use, conversion or adaptation of suitable existing buildings. However, there is some flexibility for new employment buildings to come forward in the rural areas if there are no suitable existing buildings available for re-use, providing that the proposals meet the other criteria set out in the policy.

Core Policy 28: New Employment Development on Unallocated Sites

Proposals for new employment development (Use Classes B1, B2 or B8) will be supported on unallocated sites in or on the edge of, the built up area of Market Towns, Local Service Centres and Larger and Smaller Villages provided that the benefits are not outweighed by any harmful impacts, taking into account the following:

- i. the effect on the amenity of nearby residents and occupiers
- ii. the provision of safe site access for pedestrians and cyclists and for all types of vehicles likely to visit the sites, and measures to promote the use of sustainable modes of transport where possible, and
- iii. the scale, nature and appearance of the employment development and its relationship with the local townscape and/or landscape character

In the rural areas the re-use, conversion or adaptation of suitable existing buildings for employment will also be supported subject to criteria (i)-(iii) where applicable. Other rural proposals will be supported, provided that, in addition to criteria (i)-(iii) where applicable:

- iv. the proposal cannot reasonably be accommodated on employment land identified as vacant or developable, and
- v. it can be demonstrated that the proposal will benefit the local economy and will not undermine the delivery of the strategic employment allocations.

Change of use of existing employment land and premises

- 6.32 In addition to supporting appropriate new employment development, there is also a need to protect important existing employment sites in the Vale. This will help ensure the overall employment provision is increased over the Local Plan 2031 period. The Government has introduced new permitted development rights

that impact upon existing employment uses in the district⁸². Vale of White Horse District Council will continue to monitor the impacts of these rights on the district. Should we consider them to potentially conflict with our Spatial Strategy, we will seek an Article 4 direction to maintain control of our strategic employment sites. **Core Policy 29** will apply to all proposals for changes of use of existing employment land and premises that are not covered by the new permitted development rights.

- 6.33 There are a number of key existing strategic employment sites, at the main settlements and in the Science Vale area, where retention of the existing employment uses will be particularly important to help deliver our overall Spatial Strategy. These strategic employment sites are listed in the Sub-Area Strategies in **Chapter 5. Core Policy 29** sets out the Council's intention to safeguard land and premises on these existing sites and on sites allocated for new employment development (also listed in the Sub-Area Strategies in **Chapter 5**), for employment uses.
- 6.34 There is an adopted Local Development Order (LDO) that covers the Milton Park site⁸³ for a period of 15 years from December 2012. The LDO permits an element of non-B class employment generating uses (specifically car dealership and private healthcare uses) and also allows for some other uses that will help support the sustainability and viability of the business park, such as small-scale shops and recreation facilities. **Core Policy 29** will apply to any applications for non B-class uses at Milton Park which are not permitted by the LDO.
- 6.35 There are also a number of rural employment sites that make an important contribution to the local economy and provide employment opportunities in rural locations across the district. These rural multi-user sites and large campus style sites (listed in **Appendix D**) are identified in the Local Plan 2011 and will be reviewed through the Local Plan 2031 Part 2.
- 6.36 Proposals for alternative uses on these rural employment sites and other employment land and premises in the district will need to demonstrate that at least one of the criteria set out in **Core Policy 29** will be met.
- 6.37 In seeking to demonstrate that a site has no reasonable prospect of being used for employment purposes, applicants will be expected to demonstrate that the site is no longer viable for its present, or any other realistic and suitable, employment use. They must demonstrate that the site has remained un-sold or un-let for at least 12 months. In addition, applicants will need to provide evidence relating to the marketing of the site for its present use for a minimum period of 12 months up to the date at which the planning application was lodged. This should demonstrate that despite genuine and sustained attempts to sell or let a site on reasonable terms for employment use, they have failed to do so.

⁸² <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/permission/commonprojects/changeofuse/>

⁸³ Milton Park Local Development Order, December 2012, available at: <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/milton-park-local-development-order>

6.38 The site's potential contribution to the local and wider economy must be considered, both currently and in the long term, taking proper account of the economic cycle and the likely future needs of the economy. The Council will need to be satisfied that the change of use of the employment site would not jeopardise the provision of sufficient employment land across the district to meet the identified need.

6.39 Saved Policy E13 of the Local Plan 2011 sets out the circumstances in which ancillary uses will be permitted on employment sites. This policy will be reviewed through the Local Plan 2031 Part 2, and will continue to be used alongside the Local Plan 2031 Part 1 until such time as it is replaced.

Core Policy 29: Change of Use of Existing Employment Land and Premises

The strategic employment sites, as listed in the Sub-Area Strategies, form part of the District's reserve for employment land to meet objectively assessed employment needs and will be safeguarded for employment uses. Alternative uses will be considered if they provide ancillary supporting services or meet a need identified through the Local Plan 2031 review process, or exceptionally where a reassessment of the district-wide 2013 Employment Land Review demonstrates that these sites are no longer needed over the full plan period.

Elsewhere in the District, where there is no reasonable prospect of land or premises being used for continued employment use, a mixed use enabling development which incorporates employment space should first be considered. If a mixed use scheme is not viable, the extent to which the proposed use generates new employment will be considered in determining the relevant planning application.

Proposals for alternative uses will need to demonstrate compliance with other relevant policies.

Further and higher education provision

6.40 Growth in the Science Vale area is expected to lead to an increase in the number of jobs in high tech and science-based industries in the Vale. **Core Policy 30** supports improvements to further and higher education facilities to help ensure local people have opportunities to gain the skills needed to access the jobs available and local employers have access to a suitably skilled local labour force.

6.41 **Core Policy 30** identifies the most appropriate locations for further and higher education facilities. The Council will support, where consistent with the other relevant policies in this plan, the development and expansion of higher education facilities at Oxford Brookes University Harcourt Hill Campus and at Cranfield University (Defence Academy) at Watchfield.

Core Policy 30: Further and Higher Education

The Council will support the development and enhancement of further and higher education facilities to help support the local economy and to ensure the local labour force is equipped to take advantage of the opportunities likely to arise in the future. The most appropriate locations for further and higher education provision are:

- i. by the extension or more intensive use of existing education or other suitable community facilities
- ii. within identified strategic employment locations, provided that the training offered is clearly relevant to meet the needs of businesses in that strategic employment location, and
- iii. in the main settlements and other locations with good pedestrian and cycle access and well served by public transport connections between the proposed facility and its likely student catchment.

Development to support the visitor economy

6.42 The benefits of the visitor economy can include indirect impacts such as acting as a positive force for protecting and improving the environment, as well as the direct economic gains arising from visitor economy related expenditure. The Vale is well-placed to take advantage of this, being close to the visitor attractions of the city of Oxford and the River Thames, and with the Ridgeway National Trail passing through the south of the district.

6.43 A joint Hotel Needs Assessment has been prepared with South Oxfordshire District Council⁸⁴ and confirms the need for a significant increase in hotel supply in the Science Vale area. It has also identified the potential need for hotels in the Market Towns of Abingdon-on-Thames and Wantage and on the fringe of the city of Oxford at Botley.

6.44 **Core Policy 31** supports new development in the visitor economy, including hotels and guest houses. Development should be of an appropriate scale and character in relation to the location. Proposals for development relating to the visitor economy within the Oxford Green Belt or the North Wessex Downs AONB will need to be in accordance with the relevant Local Plan 2031 policies for these areas or in accordance with Saved Policies NE7, NE 8, NE9, NE10, NE11 and NE12 until these policies are updated through Local Plan Part 2.

⁸⁴ www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidence

Core Policy 31: Development to Support the Visitor Economy

The Council encourages new development to advance the visitor economy for leisure and business purposes. Proposals will be supported as follows:

- i. within the built-up areas of the Market Towns and Local Service Centres - larger scale developments including conference facilities, museums, heritage centres, hotels, guest houses and associated facilities for visitors
- ii. within the built-up areas of the Larger and Smaller Villages - smaller and proportionately scaled developments that are in keeping with the character of the settlement, including museums, heritage centres, hotels, guest houses, self-catering accommodation and associated facilities for visitors
- iii. at Milton Park and Harwell Campus - ancillary business hotel and conference facilities, and
- iv. at service areas on the main transport corridors - hotel accommodation.

Outside the above locations, small-scale development to support the visitor economy, including farm diversification and equine development, will be supported provided that proposals are in keeping with the scale and character of the locality and which would not adversely affect heritage assets or their setting. Larger developments will only be supported in exceptional circumstances, for example to sensitively re-use a historic building, or to proportionally support or enhance enjoyment of a significant and established visitor attraction where this cannot reasonably be achieved from a town or village location.

Retail development and main town centre uses

6.45 The Vale has good local shopping provision in the Market Towns and Local Service Centres. One of the Strategic Objectives of this Local Plan 2031 is to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of the existing centres in these settlements.

6.46 It is important that existing centres remain active and vibrant in light of changing trends. Retail growth suffered nationally during the economic downturn between 2008 and 2012 and a number of important national operators failed during that period. In addition, shopping from home has grown rapidly since the late 1990s and with the continued expansion of superfast broadband to the more rural and remote areas of the District, it is predicted that this form of retail offering will continue to grow.

6.47 The focus for future retail development and other town centre uses⁸⁵ will continue to centre on the primary and secondary retail frontages and town centre policy areas as defined in the Local Plan 2011. Local shopping centres, also

⁸⁵ As defined in Annex 2 of the NPPF. Main town centre uses: Retail development (including warehouse clubs and factory outlet centres); leisure, entertainment facilities the more intensive sport and recreation uses (including cinemas, restaurants, drive-through restaurants, bars and pubs, night-clubs, casinos, health and fitness centres, indoor bowling centres, and bingo halls); offices; and arts, culture and tourism development (including theatres, museums, galleries and concert halls, hotels and conference facilities).

identified through the Adopted Policies Map, will maintain a healthy level of shopping facilities that serves the surrounding residential areas.

- 6.48 Consequently, we have saved a number of policies from the Local Plan 2011 and will review these as part of our Local Plan 2031 Part 2 or where amended through a Neighbourhood Development Plan. These saved policies are identified in **Appendix G**.
- 6.49 Specific proposals for the redevelopment of the Charter Area in Abingdon-on-Thames and the Botley Central Area are supported by **Core Policies 10 and 11** respectively in the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area Strategy.
- 6.50 The main retail warehouse provision in the Vale is at Fairacres Retail Park in Abingdon-on-Thames, the Limborough Road/Kings Park area in Wantage, and Seacourt Retail Park in Botley. The Fairacres Retail Park accommodates a high proportion of the total comparison retail floorspace in the district. Any proposals for retail warehouse development or redevelopment will need to follow the approach set out in **Core Policy 32**.
- 6.51 As well as the shopping centres at the Market Towns and Local Service Centres, there are also smaller shopping centres in the Larger Villages of Kennington, Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, Shrivenham, Watchfield, and Wootton, and at Harwell Campus. **Core Policy 32** supports the provision of retail development at these settlements, and also other Larger and Smaller Villages, where this meets the needs of the local community.
- 6.52 Local plan policies that support main town centre uses in other locations include **Core Policy 11: Botley Central Area**, **Core Policy 28: New Employment Development on Unallocated Sites** and **Core Policy 31: Development to support the Visitor Economy**.
- 6.53 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets a default threshold of 2,500 square metres gross floorspace, above which all proposals for retail, leisure and office development outside town centres that are not in accordance with an up-to-date Local Plan, should be accompanied by an impact assessment⁸⁶. The NPPF indicates that this default will apply where there is no threshold set locally. We consider that a 2,500 square metres gross threshold is inappropriate in the Vale, as this scale of development would represent a significant proportion of the overall retail need in the area. Development smaller than 2,500 square metres gross could have a significant adverse impact on the smaller town centres. **Core Policy 32** therefore sets local floorspace thresholds, based on recommendations in the 2013 Retail and Town Centre Study. Any proposals that exceed the local floorspace thresholds will need to be accompanied by an impact assessment based on a methodology and assumptions that have been agreed with the Council in advance.

⁸⁶ Paragraph 26 of the National Planning Policy Framework, Communities and Local Government, March 2012

6.54 In addition to supporting appropriate proposals for new retail and other main town centres uses, it will also be important to protect the Vale's existing local facilities and services. The Local Plan 2011 includes policies CF1: Protection of Existing Services and Facilities, CF5: Public Houses Outside the Five Main Towns and S14: Loss of Village and Other Local Shops. These policies will continue to be saved and will be used alongside the Local Plan 2031 Part 1 until such time as they are replaced or updated in the Local Plan 2031 Part 2 or a Neighbourhood Development Plan (**Appendix G**).

Core Policy 32: Retail Development and other Main Town Centre Uses

The Market Towns and Local Service Centres defined in the Settlement Hierarchy (**Core Policy 3**) are the preferred locations for larger scale development or redevelopment for retailing and other main town centre uses.

For new retail proposals (Use Class A), first consideration should be given to areas designated as primary and secondary shopping frontages¹ and the redevelopment sites at the Charter area of Abingdon-on-Thames and the Botley Central Area.

For other town centre uses, first consideration should be given to opportunities within the designated town centre areas¹ that are well linked to the retail core by foot, including identified redevelopment sites, before more peripheral locations are considered. Proposals for new retail development or changes of use to retail or other main town centre uses will be supported elsewhere as follows:

- i. for development primarily intended to serve the day-to-day needs of the local community, within the Larger and Smaller Villages, and in the local shopping centres located within Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage¹
- ii. ancillary and proportionate food, drink and convenience retailing within and primarily servicing the users of designated employment areas, and
- iii. offices in employment locations where office use is identified elsewhere in this plan to be appropriate.

Proposals for retail or other main town centre uses that are on the edge of or outside the town or local shopping centres, and are not supported by Local Plan policies, will only be supported if it is demonstrated that the proposal satisfies the sequential approach to site selection, and, where the proposal exceeds the local floorspace thresholds set out below, an impact assessment confirms that there are no likely significant adverse impacts on the vitality and viability of nearby centres. The impact assessment methodology and assumptions are to be agreed with the Council in advance.

The local floorspace thresholds for impact assessment are as follows:

- iv. 1,000 square metres gross retail floorspace for development likely to have an impact on Abingdon-on-Thames or Wantage town centres, and
- v. 500 square metres gross retail floorspace elsewhere in the district.

¹ As defined by the Adopted Policies Map or where amended through an adopted Neighbourhood Development Plan