

Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Part 1

Examination Hearings

Examination Stage 2

Written Statement by Vale of White Horse District Council

in relation to:

Matter 6 – Proposed Housing Sites in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

**Version:
Dated:**

**FINAL
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Matter 6 - Proposed Housing Sites in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

1. Introduction and Background

Overview

- 1.1 The Council considers that there are very clear 'exceptional circumstances' to justify the new development it proposes within the North Wessex Downs AONB and that its proposals are soundly based.
- 1.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) makes clear that 'great weight' should be given to 'conserving' Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 'which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty'¹.
- 1.3 The Council fully supports the principle of protecting the AONB and recognises the significant benefit the North Wessex Downs brings to the Vale; indeed, it is one of the reasons the Vale is such an attractive and popular place for people to live and work. Recognising its value to the area, the Local Plan 2031 Part 1 includes *Core Policy 44: Landscape*, which seeks to protect key landscape features, including the AONB².
- 1.4 The Council has also adopted the AONB Management Plan, which seeks to maintain and enhance the distinctive landscape character of the North Wessex Downs AONB³.
- 1.5 However, para. 116 of the NPPF also makes clear that new development can be permitted within the AONB in 'exceptional circumstances' if it can be demonstrated to be in the 'public interest'. The NPPF considers that development within the AONB should include an assessment of:
 - "the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
 - the cost of, and scope for, development elsewhere outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
 - any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities and the extent to which that could be moderated."⁴
- 1.6 Indeed, large scale development has taken place within the North Wessex Downs AONB at the Harwell Campus, such the Diamond Synchrotron. The national importance of this research instrument was considered to present exceptional circumstances and to be in the public interest when the planning application was considered in 2001. There are other examples of major development being allocated within an AONB nationally, such as the Vearse Farm site at Bridport, West Dorset. This allocation is for a mixed use development of 760 homes and c. 4 ha of employment land and is contained

¹ EIP Library Ref No: LNP02 – National Planning Policy Framework. Para 115

² EIP Library Ref No: DLP01 – Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Strategic Sites and Policies

³ EIP Library Ref No NAT11: North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014-2019

⁴ EIP Library Ref No: LNP02 – National Planning Policy Framework. Para 116

within the adopted West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland Councils Joint Local Plan 2015⁵.

- 1.7 The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan acknowledges the existence of significant employment sites within the AONB, such as Harwell Campus, which is described as having ‘opportunities for redevelopment and intensification’⁶. Further, the Management Plan does not seek to entirely preclude housing development within the AONB, but instead states that it should only come forward in exceptional circumstances ‘in line with the recommendations of the NPPF’⁷.
- 1.8 The Local Plan proposes two strategic housing sites adjacent to Harwell Campus: 550 homes at Land North of Harwell Campus and 850 homes at Land East of Harwell Campus.
- 1.9 The ‘Science Vale’ locality is exceptional. It is an internationally significant location for economic growth. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne MP, has said:

“The Science Vale Enterprise Zone will harness the region’s unparalleled research and development base to create a wealth of innovative and high growth business. The region is home to some of the newest and fastest growing businesses in high performance engineering, biotechnology and medical instruments, and the Science Vale Enterprise Zone provides the opportunity to unlock the region’s full potential”⁸.
- 1.10 Harwell Campus is also itself, demonstrably exceptional; the science and innovation that takes place there is both nationally and internationally significant and is at the core of the UK’s strategy for growth and a pillar of strength for the UK economy. The site is home to a number of internationally significant organisations and facilities, including: the European Space Agency, the Science and Facilities Council’s Rutherford Appleton Laboratory and the Diamond Light Source.
- 1.11 To continue its success, Harwell Campus needs to compete on an international stage and provide a world class environment to attract inward investment, commercial enterprise and highly skilled staff. To achieve this, the campus needs to evolve from a science and innovation park to a world class campus environment offering a work-live-play community. Essential to this is the delivery of housing integrated with the campus supported by local services and facilities.
- 1.12 This co-location of scientific excellence, housing and community facilities, thereby creating a thriving and sustainable campus community, is vital to enable networking and interaction and to stimulate innovation on-site. The

⁵ West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland Councils (2015). West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland Councils Joint Local Plan 2015. Available at:

<https://www.dorsetforyou.com/jointlocalplan/west/weymouth>

⁶ EIP Library Ref No NAT11: North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014-2019

⁷ EIP Library Ref No NAT11: North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014-2019

⁸ www.sciencevale.com

council and the Harwell Campus Partnership therefore share the view that housing integrated with the campus is essential. Failure to provide this will compromise the ability to achieve its economic growth potential and its significant contribution to the local and national economy.

1.13 ***Local Plan Chronology in relation to this Matter***

The Local Plan has been informed by an iterative process of consultation, technical evidence and Sustainability Appraisal. Important steps in the process of allocating housing at Harwell Campus have included:

- The Council first proposed housing at Harwell Campus within the *Additional Consultation* published in 2010. This proposed 400 homes to the north of Harwell Campus and included land both within and outside the designated employment site;
- The Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) was published in 2014. This identified an Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) housing requirement of 20,560 homes for the Vale, an increase of some 55 %;
- The OAN was informed by new economic projections for Oxfordshire, responding positively to the new Government's growth agenda and providing support for the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan, which stated that 'accelerating housing delivery' was 'fundamental' to support innovation led growth⁹;
- For these reasons, the Council identified a series of additional strategic site allocations for inclusion within the Local Plan;
- The *Housing Delivery Update* consultation, published in February 2014, proposed a development to the East of Harwell Campus for 1,400 dwellings up to 2031 with the potential for a further 2,000 dwellings beyond 2031¹⁰. Its proposal to allocate land for housing development at the Campus, had been informed by a Landscape Capacity Study¹¹, and whilst recognising that development would change aspects of the landscape and views across the sites in question, the Council took the view, that the exceptional circumstances for developing at Harwell Campus, outweighed the landscape impacts which the Landscape Capacity Study had identified;
- Following the *Housing Delivery Update* consultation, the Council also commissioned a more detailed LVIA specifically for Harwell Campus¹². This work, which has since been updated, looked in detail at individual parcels of land surrounding the campus and also considered what mitigation may be appropriate if development were to go forward, and;

⁹ EIP Library Ref No: ECO010 - Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan – Driving Economic Growth through Innovation

¹⁰ EIP Library Ref No: PLP01.1 - Housing Delivery Update

¹¹ EIP Library Ref No: NAT04.5 – Landscape Capacity Study 2014 (and associated documents)

¹² EIP Library Ref No: NAT04 – Vale of White Horse District Council. Landscape Study: Phase 1 Landscape Assessment of Eight Additional Contingency Housing Sites at East Hanney, Kingston Bagpuize, Harwell Oxford Campus, Proposed Oxford Garden City Site, South Shrivenham and South Radley.

- Following full consideration of the detailed LVIA work, the Submission Version of the Local Plan proposes two strategic green-field development allocations within the AONB at Harwell Campus splitting the original proposed allocations for 1,400 units into two sites. These are for 550 homes at North-West of Harwell Campus and for 850 homes at East of Harwell Campus.

Question 6.1

Having regard to the exceptional circumstances and public interest tests set out in para 116 of the NPPF, are the Strategic Housing Allocations (sites 12 and 13) proposed in the AONB soundly based? In particular:

- a) What is the need for the housing development, including in terms of national considerations?**
- b) What is the likely impact of permitting, or refusing, the housing development on the local economy?**
- c) Is there scope for providing for the housing development outside of the AONB?**
- d) What is the likely effect of the development on the environment, landscape and recreational opportunities having regard to the potential for moderation?**

2. The Council's Response to Question 6.1a

- **What is the need for the housing development, including in terms of national considerations?**

- 2.1 The Vision for the South East Vale Sub-Area, set out on page 68 of the Local Plan is that 'new housing at Harwell Campus will have provided an exemplar in sustainable development and function as a thriving community, successfully integrated with the science campus and provide accommodation and housing for many of the site's employees'¹³.
- 2.2 The importance of Science Vale and Harwell Campus is set out clearly in paras 1.9 and 1.10 of this statement. The provision of housing integrated with the Campus is essential to create a world class campus community co-locating a cluster of technical excellence with a range of housing tenure, services and facilities. These are essential ingredients for innovation led growth, the ability for the campus to compete on an international stage and for it to fulfil its contribution to the local and national economy.
- 2.3 This section briefly sets out the main reasons the Local Plan seeks to allocate new housing at Harwell Campus:

¹³ EIP Library Ref No: DLP01 - Local Plan 2031 Part 1 – Strategic Sites and Policies

1) *Economic Reasons*

- 2.4 Harwell Campus is a unique economic asset for the local area and for the UK. The Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Report stated that ‘the research facilities at Harwell Campus are of international significance and an increasing attraction for firms’ and that Oxfordshire has ‘a unique grouping of ‘big science’ and other research facilities’¹⁴. The only comparable location in Europe for ‘big science’ is Grenoble, but Harwell Campus is significantly better located strategically given its proximity to one of the World’s best universities (Oxford), one of the largest hub airports (Heathrow) and a genuine World City (London)¹⁵.
- 2.5 The economic forecasts that informed the Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) projected 9,000 additional jobs being created at Harwell Campus by 2031, including 5,800 jobs on the Enterprise Zone.
- 2.6 The UK Government is also focused on exploiting the economic benefits of the country’s major research facilities, such as Harwell Campus. ‘*Our Plan for Growth: Science and Innovation*’ published by the Treasury and BIS in December 2014 states that ‘researchers and business leaders need access to the best expertise and infrastructure wherever it is located’. The Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) also specifically recognises that Harwell’s scientific R&D assets ‘provide huge opportunities and resources to drive high-technology business growth’¹⁶.
- 2.7 The potential for economic growth at Harwell Campus is substantial. The Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Research Report states that ‘Harwell is the main UK centre for space science research and its commercial applications in satellite telecommunications’¹⁷. The Government estimates that space science will grow from a £9bn industry now to one worth £40bn by 2030, generating 100,000 new jobs in the UK. If just one tenth of those jobs are based in and around Harwell, the additional business floorspace from this sector alone will use most of the site’s capacity for commercial development, and the consequential growth in local employment and workers seeking to relocate to the area could take up much of the new housing supply being planned in southern Oxfordshire. Yet space science is just one of the high tech sectors with significant growth potential in Science Vale¹⁸.

¹⁴ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO19** Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Report – Realising the Growth Potential, SQW on behalf of the University of Oxford, The Oxford Trust and Oxfordshire LEP (Oct 2013)

¹⁵ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO19** Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Report – Realising the Growth Potential, SQW on behalf of the University of Oxford, The Oxford Trust and Oxfordshire LEP (Oct 2013)

¹⁶ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO20** Our Plan for Growth: Science and Innovation – Department for Business Innovation and Skills (Dec 2014)

¹⁷ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO19** Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Report – Realising the Growth Potential, SQW on behalf of the University of Oxford, The Oxford Trust and Oxfordshire LEP (Oct 2013)

¹⁸ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO19** Oxfordshire Innovation Engine Report – Realising the Growth Potential, SQW on behalf of the University of Oxford, The Oxford Trust and Oxfordshire LEP (Oct 2013)

- 2.8 Science Vale is identified as one of the main locations for innovation led growth in the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) and forms the southern part of the 'Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine'. The SEP states that accelerating housing delivery is 'fundamental' to the delivery of innovation led growth¹⁹. For these reasons, the Spatial Strategy focuses around 75 % of strategic housing and around 70 % of employment growth to the Science Vale locality.

2) Innovation Village

- 2.9 To fully realise this economic growth potential, the campus needs to evolve from a science and innovation park to a world class campus environment offering a work-live-play community. As set out in Paragraphs 1.11 and 1.12 of this statement, the integration of housing with the employment function at the campus, supported by local services and facilities is essential.
- 2.10 The provision of housing at Harwell Campus offers the unique opportunity to create a truly innovative development; where high quality research and employment uses come together with a mix of services and facilities and appropriate housing offer to support an attractive and highly sustainable lifestyle. This approach is sometimes labelled as an 'innovation village'.
- 2.11 Examples globally include Sophia Antipolis in southern France, Hsinchu Science Park in Taiwan and the Rensselaer Technology Park in North Greenbush, New York. These examples of successful science parks have some common successful characteristics including close links to a substantial publicly funded scientific research community and the provision of supporting infrastructure including housing.
- 2.12 On-going research to inform the master-planning of Harwell Campus has identified that the creation of a sustainable and campus-style village at the site is 'strongly supported' by key organisations at the Campus. Organisations participating in the research have made it clear that more and better amenities at Harwell Campus are 'essential' for the Campus to be 'successful' and support future recruitment to the site.
- 2.13 This research also identified that the ability to network with other organisations at Harwell Campus is one of the many reasons for organisations choosing to locate on the site. Fully exploiting the opportunities for this as part of the growth of Harwell Campus, by creating a mixed-use community, is therefore important. Housing located in close proximity to the campus was also identified as being important as many employees would want to walk or cycle to work.

¹⁹ **EIP Library Ref No: ECO010** - Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan – Driving Economic Growth through Innovation

3) Type of Housing Required at Harwell Campus

- 2.14 Harwell Campus employs a high proportion of both international and academic staff, who will work on campus for fixed periods of time, and who have a need for accommodation that can be easily accessed and is affordable. Scientific research is often funded on a fixed-term basis, carried out by post-graduate or post-doctoral researchers. This combination brings a transient workforce.
- 2.15 Research suggests that the need for homes, particularly for apartments (on short and longer term lets) and relatively low cost family homes are extremely important to organisations at the Campus, especially for those who have a high proportion of employees from overseas. Around a third of staff at the Campus (within the main organisations) are from overseas and for some organisations the proportion is much higher²⁰.
- 2.16 The type of accommodation needed at Harwell Campus is therefore different to a standard housing development, and will have a particular focus on providing a higher proportion of smaller and also private rental dwellings.

4) Sustainability Reasons

- 2.17 Over 5,800 new jobs are projected at the Harwell Campus Enterprise Zone during the plan period²¹. Increasing opportunities for people to live and work in close proximity to the Campus will significantly help to reduce the need to travel and provide for a much more sustainable pattern of living for people working there now and in future.
- 2.18 Harwell Campus exists in a semi-rural location. It has evolved over several decades from a wartime airfield firstly to a world leading location for research and development of nuclear energy and now to its current position as an internationally significant centre for research and innovation. The Campus has benefitted from significant public and private investment over the past few decades and the research and innovation facilities are unique and could not be re-located, without incurring enormous costs.
- 2.19 On this basis, it is essential the Council not only fully recognises the role of Harwell Campus within its Local Plan, but also seeks to maximise the opportunities for enhanced sustainable development in accordance with the NPPF”

²⁰ Chris Green (SQW) - *Pers Comm*.

²¹ **EIP Library Ref No: HOU2** - Science Vale Housing and Employment Study (GL Hearn 2014).

The Council's Response to Question 6.1b

- **What is the likely impact of permitting, or refusing, the housing development on the local economy?**

2.20 The economic reasons for permitting housing at Harwell Campus have been set out in Paragraphs 2.4 to 2.8 along with the wider benefits for the proposed development in Paragraphs 2.9 and 2.19.

2.21 It is however clear that failing to allocate new housing development at Harwell Campus could result in a range of negative impacts, including:

- A reduction in the number of research and development based industries and/or slowdown in the pace of those industries seeking to relocate to Harwell, if potential employees cannot find convenient residential accommodation and a consequential reduction in the ability of Harwell Campus to help drive economic growth in Science Vale in a way envisaged by the Oxfordshire SEP;
- Significant increased pressure on the local housing market elsewhere in the locality from incoming workers looking to relocate to the area;
- Difficulties in attracting workers, including international workers who are looking for (and are perhaps familiar with) a campus based environment in which to live and work;
- An increase in traffic and the potential for congestion in and around the site from workers commuting to and from their place of work on the Campus, and;
- The inability to market Harwell Campus as offering a unique and innovative 'live-work' experience.

The Council's Response to Question 6.1c

- **Is there scope for providing for the housing development outside of the AONB?**

Alternative Sites Considered during Preparation of the Local Plan

2.22 The Council does not consider that there is scope for providing the housing development being allocated at Harwell Campus outside of the AONB. In total, the Local Plan allocates an additional 10,320 homes on strategic sites within the Science Vale locality. The delivery of this level of additional housing for the Science Vale area is absolutely crucial to ensure the economic aspirations of Science Vale can be delivered in a sustainable way. Furthermore, sites removed from the campus will not provide integrated housing onsite in the form of an innovation village.

2.23 The Council has followed a comprehensive and iterative approach to site selection. This involved the comprehensive assessment of a wide range of sites across the whole district, informed by detailed evidence and Sustainability Appraisal (SA). This process is discussed in more detail in the

Council's Matter 8 Written Statement²² and within Topic Paper 3: Strategic Sites Selection²³.

2.24 Within the Science Vale area, ten alternative sites have been assessed in detail. The alternative sites were not selected as preferred for a number of reasons; some are simply not suitable for development, others are extremely unlikely to deliver homes within the plan period. A brief summary of the reasons the alternative sites were not identified as preferred, is set out with **Appendix 1**. The principle reasons were:

2.25	South Wantage:	Not suitable for development on landscape grounds.
	Increased Density at Valley Park:	Additional housing is not deliverable within the plan period.
	North Didcot:	Site is now designated as an Enterprise Zone to bring forward new commercial use rather than housing.
	North West Grove:	Constrained site. Additional development not deliverable within the plan period.
	Rowstock:	Unsustainable location for development that would also lead to coalescence between Rowstock and Milton Hill.
	Milton Heights:	Objection from Oxfordshire County Council and Highways England on highway grounds.
	Land West of Harwell Village:	Constrained site. Only suitable for smaller quantum of development on north eastern part of the site; as proposed in Local Plan.
	Appleford:	Constrained and unsustainable site.
	South of Harwell Campus:	Not suitable for development on landscape Grounds; highly prominent and forms slope of North Wessex Downs.
	Harwell Campus:	This matter is covered under Matter 6.2 (see below).

²² EIP Library Ref No: VWS08 Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Examination Stage 2 Hearing Statement 8: Strategy for the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub Area

²³ EIP Library Ref No: TOP03 – Topic Paper 3 Strategic Sites Selection

Delivery

- 2.26 The identified Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) for the Vale is challenging (20,560 homes up to 2031), given the 'step change' in average annual delivery which is needed in the Local Plan area to increase the annual rate of housing delivery from the rate achieved in the past five years from 480 homes per annum, up to the annual requirement being planned for in the Local Plan of 1,028²⁴.
- 2.27 The '*Meeting the Objectively Assessed Need for Housing*' Study (Oct 2014) concludes that with the 'wide range of sites in a range of locations – the Council will be maximising the likelihood of delivery'²⁵. In other words, the inclusion within the Local Plan of larger and smaller sites at a range of locations helps to ensure the proposed allocations are deliverable overall. The development of housing at Harwell Campus is intended to offer a particularly unique style of living and working in an international 'Campus-style' environment. It therefore offers a unique choice for new residents and households coming into the area and, being linked directly to the choice of many companies seeking to relocate or expand at Harwell Campus, it helps to increase the chance of local housing being delivered more quickly.
- 2.28 Beyond the immediate Campus environment, alternative housing sites will be competing more directly for buyers in the wider housing market and thus some sites might not come forward as quickly, particularly where several sites are located in close proximity and developers decide not to open up competing sites at the same time or where considerations at planning application stage take time to resolve.

Transport

- 2.29 The Local Plan has been informed by an iterative Evaluation of Transport Impacts (ETI) Study, undertaken for the Council by independent consultants and working in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). This work has confirmed that the highway network, particularly in the Science Vale area, is constrained, and in many instances is close to, or at capacity²⁶.
- 2.30 The Council has sought to locate development where it can be best accommodated by the highway network, to maximise opportunities for sustainable transport, and to propose mitigation to reduce any impacts as far as this is possible.
- 2.31 The ETI demonstrates that the highway network can accommodate additional housing at Harwell Campus relatively well in contrast to other locations, for example, Didcot, where there is little, if any additional capacity within the

²⁴ **EIP Library Ref No: HOU03** – Meeting Objectively Assessed Need for Housing. HDH Planning and Development (Oct 2014).

²⁵ **EIP Library Ref No: HOU03** – Meeting Objectively Assessed Need for Housing. HDH Planning and Development (Oct 2014).

²⁶ **EIP Library Ref No: TRA02** – Evaluation of Transport Impacts Study to Inform the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031: Part 1 Strategic Sites and Policies – Final Report

network to accommodate additional growth above that proposed in the Local Plan²⁷.

The Council's Response to Question 6.1c

- **What is the likely effect of the development on the environment, landscape and recreational opportunities having regard to the potential for moderation?**

2.32 The selection of sites for inclusion within the Local Plan has been informed by detailed evidence including a Landscape Capacity Study and a Landscape and Visual Impact Study (LVIA) for Harwell Campus.

2.33 When considering the landscape impact of the Council's proposals for development at Harwell Campus, it is important to remember a number of factors:

- Harwell Campus is an existing employment site, it consists of almost 290 hectares, is highly industrial in nature and already forms a significant feature of the local landscape and this part of the AONB;
- A number of significant planning applications at Harwell Campus will increase both the bulk and height of the existing Campus inevitably impacting on the wider landscape setting. Development at Harwell Campus is already a significant developed feature within the local landscape and is much more urban and industrial in appearance than within other parts of the AONB;
- The A34 dual carriageway is a significant feature within the local landscape that is both highly visible and audible. Work is under way to construct north facing slips at Chilton Interchange, which has included the removal of trees and vegetation, and;
- Views from the Ridgeway National Trail (on the North Wessex Downs) already allow open views of Harwell Campus, the A34 dual carriageway, Milton Business Park and the settlement of Didcot and the character of those views will be consolidated but will not substantially alter as a result of the housing allocations proposed.

2.34 For these reasons, the area of the AONB where the proposed housing sites are located could not reasonably be suggested to display the characteristics that underpin the AONB designation of 'tranquillity' and 'remoteness'. The area is already more urban and industrial than rural, and the Local Plan's proposals should be viewed in that context.

2.35 However, the Council is committed to protecting the AONB and undertook additional LVIA work following the *Housing Delivery Update* Consultation, published in February 2014, which was focused on the Harwell Campus proposals.

²⁷ **EIP Library Ref No: TRA02** – Evaluation of Transport Impacts Study to Inform the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031: Part 1 Strategic Sites and Policies – Final Report

- 2.36 As a result of the additional LVIA work, the Council reduced the scale of proposed development at Harwell Campus and reconfigured the allocation. This was to maximise the use of land that had the least landscape sensitivity, to avoid any development on land that had greatest landscape sensitivity and to maximise the benefit of the proposed mitigation. The revised proposal was set out within the Submission Local Plan, published in November 2014²⁸.
- 2.37 The LVIA concluded that:
- the most sensitive areas would be retained as agricultural land;
 - the separation between Harwell Campus and Didcot when viewed from the Ridgeway would be maintained in part;
 - the impacts caused by inclusion of areas with landscape sensitivity (to the east of the area proposed for residential development) could be significantly reduced if these areas were used as the location for such uses as education and/or informal public open space
 - the mitigation strategy would reduce the visibility of the development at maturity (20 years), and;
 - by allocating land to the east of that proposed for residential development for open space, education or recreation, these alternative land uses would have lower impacts on the surrounding landscape than housing development within these areas and would form a transitional landscape between the agricultural fields and the housing²⁹.
- 2.38 Overall, it was considered that whilst the character of this part of the AONB would see some change, the changes, subject to an appropriate landscape mitigation strategy, would be compatible with the AONB management plan and would not constitute substantial harm to the wider AONB landscape.

²⁸ EIP Library Ref No: DLPO1 - Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Strategic Sites and Policies.

²⁹ EIP Library Ref No: NAT04 – Vale of White Horse District Council. Landscape Study: Phase 1 Landscape Assessment of Eight Additional Contingency Housing Sites at East Hanney, Kingston Bagpuize, Harwell Oxford Campus, Proposed Oxford Garden City Site, South Shrivenham and South Radley.

Question 6.2

Would the alternatively proposed housing site at Harwell Campus:

- i. Accord with the exceptional circumstances and public interest tests?**
- ii. More appropriately meet housing needs?**

3. The Council's Response to Question 6.2i

i) Accord with the exceptional circumstances and public interest tests?

- 3.1 The alternative proposal for housing to the North of Harwell Campus would still involve major development within the AONB. The alternative proposal incorporates the proposed allocation to the north of the Harwell Campus as well as land within the existing employment site including some brownfield land.
- 3.2 The Council considers that, in relation to the two housing allocation sites proposed by the Local Plan, that there are 'exceptional circumstances' to justify their development adjacent to Harwell Campus, which are in the public interest, and in conformity with national policy.
- 3.3 However, the alternative proposal involves the allocation of housing on land currently designated as an Enterprise Zone. On this basis, there is likely to be a significantly different impact on landscape and the setting of the AONB between the two proposals as employment growth would be more likely to be required outside of the existing Enterprise Zone site, if housing were to be developed within the EZ.
- 3.4 According to the Harwell Campus Partnership, the land to the east of the Campus (the Council's preferred location for housing) is the obvious long-term candidate for the expansion of the campus for employment, which would presumably be more likely if part of the Enterprise Zone were to be developed for housing. If this were the case, the development of big science/employment uses on this land to the east of the Campus could be expected to have a significantly greater impact on the AONB than a residential village. It would also be much more difficult to moderate its impacts.

ii) More appropriately meet housing needs?

- 3.5 Government awarded an Enterprise Zone to Oxfordshire with the specific aim of achieving a step change in knowledge economy growth, capitalising on the unique combination of a world leading university, concentration of the UK's big science and research institutions and private sector innovation. The Enterprise Zone is the main area intended for business growth, to complement further growth of the scientific research activities elsewhere on

the site (parts of which are constrained by nuclear decommissioning and will not become available for development for many years). Given the exceptional potential for the facilities at Harwell to generate wealth and high value jobs locally, and to the benefit of the UK economy, the Local Plan is seeking to maximise the capacity for employment generation on the Enterprise Zone.

- 3.6 The Oxfordshire SHMA demonstrates that 9,000 jobs are anticipated to be created at Harwell Campus by 2031, with 5,800 of these within the Enterprise Zone ³⁰. The alternative proposal would reduce the net developable area of the Enterprise Zone area by 17.34 hectares (from 54.41 hectares to 37.07 hectares if existing playing fields remain and from 60.36 ha to 43.02 hectares if existing playing field are developed for employment purposes). Based on an average employment floorspace density of 3,760 sqm and assumptions on mix of uses derived from discussions with the Harwell Campus Partnership, this would reduce the number of jobs created in the Enterprise Zone by at least 1,000. The reduction in Enterprise Zone floorspace would also reduce the business rate receipts originally anticipated as part of the Enterprise Zone bid earmarked for infrastructure funding. The Harwell Enterprise Zone has the potential to deliver at £120 million of business rates that will be retained by the LEP to fund essential infrastructure in the Vale of White Horse and other development sites across Oxfordshire.

³⁰ **EIP Library Ref No: HOU01** – Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment: Final Report

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The Council considers that clear exceptional circumstances exist to justify the Local Plan seeking to allocate new housing development in the AONB and that the Council's proposals will not lead to substantial harm to the wider AONB landscape.
- 4.2 The Council has worked hard, through an iterative plan making process, to continue to refine and improve the Local Plan throughout its preparation.
- 4.3 The importance of Science Vale and Harwell Campus are not in doubt. Both are clearly of national and international significance and are critical to the growth agenda for Oxfordshire and for the UK.
- 4.4 Housing development at Harwell Campus is crucial to 'unlock' the full potential of the Campus for innovation led growth and to optimise the contribution organisations on the Campus wish to make to growth in the local and national economy. Maximising the role of the Enterprise Zone is also crucial to support economic growth and the delivery of critical infrastructure through business rates income.
- 4.5 The proposed allocations for new housing development at Harwell Campus take full account of the existing landscape context. The development requirements set out in detail in the Appendices to the Local Plan for the allocations at the Campus provide clear and strong guidance against which master-plan proposals and subsequent planning applications can be assessed. These will ensure they are developed in a manner which is both sustainable and sensitive to the AONB.
- 4.6 The Council therefore considers that the Local Plan fully meets the tests of soundness set out in the NPPF in respect of this matter.

Appendix 1: Brief summary of why alternative sites were not selected as preferred

Site No*	Site Name	Reason for not selecting as preferred site
(9) TPS109	South Wantage	<p>Any development on this site would have a significant impact on the landscape character of the area, and the AONB in particular. The Landscape Capacity Study indicates that no part of the site is suitable for development and it is protected within the draft Wantage Neighbourhood Plan.</p> <p>The site could only accommodate a maximum of 305 homes and is not an alternative to the Harwell Campus sites.</p>
(12) TPS056	Increased Density at Valley Park	<p>This site is included within the Local Plan as a strategic allocation for 2,550 homes, in addition to the adjoining site, North West Valley Park, for a further 800 homes.</p> <p>A Planning Application has been submitted for 4,254 homes in total. It is made clear in the applicants supporting material that it is unlikely that significantly more housing, above 2,550, would be delivered in the plan period up to 2031³¹. This accords with the Council's own evidence on delivery.</p>
(13B) TPS059	North Didcot	<p>Since the Local Plan has been submitted this site has been designated by Communities and Local Government as an Enterprise Zone. Development on this site will be guided by the Council in the forthcoming Science Vale Area Action Plan (AAP).</p> <p>Given the sites designation as Enterprise Zone, it is not an alternative housing site to the Harwell Campus sites. Housing development at the North Didcot site would prejudice employment growth and harm the prospects for income generation on behalf of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).</p>

³¹ **EIP Library Ref No: HOU11** - Letter to all members of Vale of White Horse District Council Committee. Hallam Land Management (6 Oct 2015).

Site No*	Site Name	Reason for not selecting as preferred site
(16) TPS049	North West Grove	<p>This site is affected by a number of constraints, including flood risk, proximity to a railway line, sewerage works and the potential for ecological impacts. Furthermore, the Landscape Capacity Study indicates that the site could only accommodate 695 homes.</p> <p>Significant development is already allocated to Wantage and Grove (4,750 homes through proposed strategic allocations and a further 648 through planning permissions and completions). This represents a 70% increase in the population of Wantage and Grove. It is extremely unlikely that additional development would be deliverable in the plan period.</p>
(39) TPS080	Rowstock	<p>Only a limited part of this site is suitable for development on landscape and visual impact grounds and any development on this site would lead to coalescence between Rowstock and Milton Hill.</p> <p>There are no facilities locally and development would be unsustainable.</p>
(40) TPS071	Milton Heights	<p>This site was originally allocated for 1,400 homes within the Housing Delivery Update (Feb 2014). However, the proposed allocation was reduced to 400 within the Submitted Version of the Local Plan based on advice received from the Highways Authority and Highways England. Both made it clear that this level of development in such proximity to the A4130 and A34 junction at Milton Interchange would be unacceptable on highway grounds.</p>
(44) TPS063	Land west of Harwell Village	<p>The site is considered at high risk to surface water flooding. Only a limited part of this site is suitable for development on landscape and visual impact grounds.</p> <p>For the reasons outlined, a site was identified as preferred to the north eastern part of the wider site with stipulations that careful master-planning is required to minimise landscape impact.</p>

Site No*	Site Name	Reason for not selecting as preferred site
(46) TPS008	Appleford	<p>The site is affected by a range of constraints, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible access difficulties with crossing railway lines (London/ Birmingham mainline and gravel workings branch line). • The site is adjacent to Flood Zones 1 and 2 and is susceptible to surface water flooding. • There is an adjacent minerals extraction site/ railhead aggregates depot. • There are a number of high voltage overhead power lines crossing the site. • There is an adjacent landfill site; and • The highway network is particularly constrained in this area. A new road is proposed linking Culham and Didcot, which will alleviate existing problems, however, this will not be delivered until the latter stages of the plan period
(51) TPS055	South of Harwell Campus	<p>This site is remote from the existing services and facilities. The site is also remote from any existing public transport routes and it is unclear if a viable bus service could be provided to this site.</p> <p>The site is extremely prominent in the landscape and any development would cause harm to the AONB (part of the site forms the slope of the North Wessex Downs and would be prominent from the Ridgeway National Trail.</p>

*** () Numbers in brackets relate to Site Information Tables for short-listed sites set out in:**

**Housing Delivery Update Supporting Paper: Appendix 5 (Feb 2014); and
Topic Paper 3: Strategic Sites Selection (Nov 2014).**

**TPS (Topic Paper Site) Numbers relate to tested sites as set out in Appendix A:
Topic Paper 3: Strategic Sites Selection (Nov 2014).**