

TOURISM**INTRODUCTION AND PLANNING CONTEXT**

- 13.1 The Vale of White Horse is a well-established tourist destination, with historic associations, pleasant market towns and attractive countryside. The district has one of the longest frontages to the River Thames; it is on the doorstep of Oxford and the Cotswolds which are among England's most popular visitor destinations and it has good communications to many other parts of the country.
- 13.2 Abingdon is an important tourist destination in its own right and has been included among the top 44 historic towns in England which each receive more than 20,000 staying visits by overseas visitors.
- 13.3 The District Council welcomes visitors to the Vale with all the facilities and attractions of the area that can be enjoyed by the public. The Council recognises that tourism can bring valuable benefits to the local economy, whether visitors come as day trippers, for longer stays or as business people attending conferences. Visitor spending can help to keep in existence local facilities which might otherwise not be able to survive. Catering for visitors helps to create local job opportunities and can increasingly be seen as a key factor in the rural economy, helping to make up for the loss of employment in agriculture. In 1996 an estimated £11 million was spent by visitors to the Vale on tourist accommodation alone (See *Economic Impact of Tourism in Vale of White Horse, 1996*).
- 13.4 In addition to the direct economic benefits, tourism can be a positive force for protecting and improving the environment since its success depends on the maintenance of the beauty and distinctive character of the area. The tourist industry helps to pay for repairs to historic buildings and can offer a range of potential new uses for redundant historic buildings.
- 13.5 While the tourist industry is to be welcomed, the Council recognises that there can be environmental costs arising from local pressures created by the industry. Problems can include traffic congestion, parking difficulties, noise, litter, intrusive advertising and the physical erosion of the environment. To avoid such problems, tourism needs to be properly managed and directed. Planning policies should be aimed at ensuring that the adverse effects of tourism are kept to a minimum.

Background to the Local Plan Policies

- 13.6 In its planning policy guidance, Central Government has emphasised that tourism is important to the economy (Planning Policy Guidance 21: *Tourism* (1992) (PPG21). It is also acknowledged that planning for tourism should respect the environment. Local authorities are advised that the needs of tourism should be managed in ways which reflect well-established planning aims, such as the protection of the countryside, special landscapes and habitats, the Green Belt, conservation areas and historic buildings. In land-use terms, tourism developments are considered no different from other types of development. Location, scale and environmental factors will be important in considering proposals. When planning for historic towns, the needs of tourism and of traffic and environmental management should be integrated. In the countryside, development to meet the needs of visitors should respond sensitively to the local environment. Proposals should demonstrate high design standards and be of an appropriate scale and location. PPG21 refers to the report of the national task force (*Tourism and the Environment: Maintaining the Balance*). The task force concluded that the environment has an intrinsic value which outweighs its value as a tourism asset and a balance is required between the development of tourism, the conservation of the environment and the needs of the host community.
- 13.7 The Vale is part of the Southern Tourist Board (STB), now Tourism South East, region and within the 'Thames and Chilterns Country' sub-region. An STB report in 1999 (*A Tourism Strategy for the Southern Region of England*) notes that tourism is an important part of the region's economy and that although the region has lost market share, the long-term prospects for tourism are good – for example, the region is well placed in terms of location, catchment and resources to benefit from any growth in activities such as overseas visitors, business tourism and domestic short breaks. The regional basis on which the various tourist boards are set up is being reviewed to consider whether it should be changed in the future.
- 13.8 The balance referred to above between the development of tourism, conservation of the environment and community needs is carried forward in the concept of sustainable or green tourism which respects and reflects the scale and quality of the area and seeks to continue to direct most tourism development towards the five main settlements and encourages visitors to arrive at tourist destinations by public transport, on foot or by cycle.
- 13.9 The Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2011 comments that a positive approach is needed towards the provision of facilities for tourism in ways which contribute to, rather than detract from, the quality of the environment. Policy E7 of that Plan (EN5 of the plan to 2016) states:

'Tourism projects which are based on the conservation and enjoyment of the County's inherent qualities and heritage will be encouraged in

appropriate locations, particularly where the proposed development is accessible by foot, cycle or public transport.'

- 13.10 In the past, the District Council has sought to achieve a balance between encouragement and protection and to guide larger tourist developments to the towns and away from the countryside areas unless they were small in scale and drew upon the natural or built heritage of the Vale. Past examples include a new hotel in Marcham Road, Abingdon, to meet demand and in the countryside the creation of the Court Hill Centre for walkers on the Ridgeway, a project designed to reflect the scale and needs of its sensitive downland setting.
- 13.11 The Vale's *Issues Report* (2000) asked if the Council's current approach to tourism was soundly based and whether significant tourist development should only be located in the main settlements. As a result of the response to the Issues Report the Council agreed that the tourism policies be updated in the context of new guidance but that the approach followed in the previously adopted Local Plan of encouraging sustainable forms of tourism by directing most tourist development towards the five main settlements be continued.

Tourism in the Vale

- 13.12 **The Vale's Market Towns** As referred to above, the current approach of encouraging sustainable forms of tourism by directing most development towards the five main settlements helps limit the impact of development on the countryside and equally brings a variety of benefits to the towns. The Council's Shopping Study Review (Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, 1996) noted that encouraging tourism has several advantages, e.g. in generating demand for tourist related activities, such as cafés, speciality shops and 'spin-off' trade in town centres and in raising their image for shoppers, visitors and investors. The Study listed some positive measures to maximise the benefit from increasing numbers of tourists visiting the centres, including better publicised car parks, the strengthening of pedestrian links between car parks, tourist attractions and the central shopping areas, and encouraging greater circulation of tourists through central shopping areas.
- 13.13 **The Oxford Outskirts** Oxford is an international tourist destination. Adjacent areas in the Vale, such as Botley, Kennington and nearby rural areas, experience consistent pressure to increase hotel and guest house accommodation and to provide other facilities for visitors. Much of this area is designated as Green Belt, where priority will be given to the implementation of stringent policies for the control of development and tourist-related development will need to be assessed against Green Belt objectives.
- 13.14 The hills encircling Oxford are a particularly important feature of the city's environment, contributing much to the perception of the city which visitors enjoy. They are included in the designated Green Belt but are also identified in

this Plan as the North Vale Corallian Ridge, where the Council will take special care to ensure that the visual impact of any proposed development is acceptable.

- 13.15 In the built-up areas of the Oxford fringes which are not included in the Green Belt, however, there may be scope in appropriate circumstances for tourist-related development. It is recognised that there is a shortage of visitor accommodation and there may be economic and employment benefits to be gained from additional accommodation. Subject to detailed consideration of scale, siting, design and transport issues, proposals in these areas might make a useful contribution to meeting demand.
- 13.16 **The River Thames** Much of the northern and eastern boundaries of the Vale are formed by the River Thames with the River Ock and its tributary the Letcombe Brook running through the heart of the district to join the Thames at Abingdon. The river and its valley is a major leisure resource for visitors to the Vale.
- 13.17 The Environment Agency has launched its Thames Waterway Plan, with the 'aim to manage the healthy growth of the non-tidal River Thames for leisure, for business, for local communities and for wildlife'. As part of this initiative, the Agency is actively marketing the non-tidal river, which includes the stretches bordering the Vale, with a number of initiatives including tourist promotions, leaflets and publications.
- 13.18 As with other tourist attractions, it will be important to reconcile the public enjoyment of the River Thames and its amenities and the protection of its environmental value.
- 13.19 **The Rural Areas** The Council supports the principle of 'sustainable' development which contributes to and does not diminish the environmental resources of the area. A key resource is the landscape of the Vale: its unity and distinctiveness is described in the Natural Environment chapter of the Plan. 'To safeguard the distinctive character of the Vale, and conserve and enhance the natural, built and historic environment for future generations' is one of the key aims of this Local Plan. The response to the Issues Report (2000) supported the approach of protecting the natural, built and historic environment. The building of major new tourist facilities in the countryside would be contrary to these aims and will, therefore, not normally be permitted. However, the Council will welcome small-scale 'sustainable' rural tourism projects which are more likely to be in keeping with the landscape and character of the area. There may, for example, be scope for small-scale tourism enterprises and for increased public access to the countryside through farm diversification schemes. The Council will generally favour such developments, subject to local and site factors and compliance with other relevant policies in the Local Plan.
- 13.20 The approach to tourism in the Local Plan reflects the Vale of White Horse Draft Visitor Strategy 1997 which is based on the principle of sustainable tourism, i.e.

that tourism development should respect the balance between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community and economic development objectives to promote diversity in the Vale's economy.

POLICIES AND PROPOSALS

General Policy

- 13.21 The Council aims to encourage and support tourism in the Vale. While welcoming the economic benefits to be gained from a prosperous tourist industry, there is a vital need to protect the quality of the local environment (which is the attraction for many visitors in the first place). It is the nature of tourism and tourist-related development that it has many forms which themselves have differing characteristics and locational requirements. Any development of tourism should be appropriate in scale and based on an appreciation of the Plan's general locational strategy as well as the local heritage and local attractions. Large-scale proposals unrelated to the area are not likely to be favourably considered and in the rural areas only appropriately small-scale and low-key proposals are likely to be acceptable.

POLICY T1

PROPOSALS FOR NEW TOURIST-RELATED DEVELOPMENTS WHICH ARE IN KEEPING WITH THE SCALE AND CHARACTER OF THE AREA, AND WHICH AIM TO PROMOTE THE INHERENT QUALITIES AND ASSETS OF THE VALE, WILL BE PERMITTED AS FOLLOWS:

- i) **WITHIN THE BUILT-UP AREAS OF ABINGDON, BOTLEY, FARINGDON, GROVE AND WANTAGE, LARGER SCALE TOURIST DEVELOPMENTS, MUSEUMS, HERITAGE CENTRES, HOTELS, GUEST HOUSES AND ASSOCIATED TOURIST FACILITIES;**
- ii) **WITHIN THE BUILT-UP AREAS OF THE VILLAGES LISTED IN POLICIES H11 AND H12, SMALLER SCALE TOURIST DEVELOPMENTS, MUSEUMS, HERITAGE CENTRES, HOTELS, GUEST HOUSES, SELF-CATERING ACCOMMODATION AND ASSOCIATED TOURIST FACILITIES;**
- iii) **OUTSIDE THE ABOVE LOCATIONS, WHERE THE PROPOSAL INVOLVES THE RE-USE, CONVERSION OR ADAPTATION OF SUITABLE EXISTING BUILDINGS TO HOTEL, GUEST HOUSE OR YOUTH HOSTEL ACCOMMODATION, SELF-CATERING ACCOMMODATION AND COUNTRYSIDE CRAFT CENTRES SUBJECT TO POLICIES GS3, GS7, GS8 AND GS9.**

Major Tourism Facilities

- 13.22 Major tourism facilities are those which are of regional or sub-regional importance in terms of visitor numbers or catchment area, site area, building demands or employment or traffic generation. National planning guidance recognises that they may provide the opportunity to take pressure from popular and sensitive tourist centres or to help meet other social and economic planning policy objectives. In some parts of southern England, major new tourist attractions have been created in the form of leisure complexes, theme parks and holiday villages. There have been no examples of such schemes in the Vale's Local Plan area to date. The District Council considers that large-scale proposals of this type are unlikely to be acceptable having regard to the nature and sensitivity of the countryside and landscape of the Vale and the approved policies of development restraint.

Tourist Facilities and Attractions

- 13.23 A number of visitor attractions have developed in the Vale over the years, based on archaeological or topographical features (such as White Horse Hill, Folly Hill, Jarn Mound) or on architectural or historic sites (for example, the Great Coxwell Tithe Barn and Buscot House). The location of these types of attraction is fixed by history or geography. In addition, more recent purpose-designed facilities have been created, both to provide a service for visitors and to attract them to the area. These include small-scale schemes such as museums, galleries, heritage centres and countryside craft centres. New businesses can also be created through the conversion of appropriate existing buildings. These minor forms of development accord well with the approach the Council is seeking to adopt for tourism in the Vale and will continue to be supported in appropriate locations. New buildings for tourist development are 'inappropriate development' in the Green Belt unless they accord with policy GS3.

Museum and Heritage Centres

- 13.24 Proposals for museums and heritage centres are generally to be welcomed in the built-up areas of Abingdon, Botley, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage as long as there are no environmental or other objections to their development. The Council recognises that there could be local advantages to the development of further facilities of this type. In Abingdon, for example, interest has been shown in a museum based on the association with MG cars. Similarly in Faringdon there may be scope for a small museum explaining the history of the town and its role in the Civil War or for a larger White Horse Heritage Centre which could look more widely at the historical attraction of the town and its surrounding area including the White Horse itself, the River Thames and the Community Forest. In the villages listed in policies H11 and H12 there might be scope for suitable small-scale museum, heritage and countryside craft centres especially in converted buildings and where there is a strong historical or geographical link.

Associated Tourist Facilities in the Countryside

- 13.25 In relation to more modest proposals which are based on local historical or geographical features, planning decisions will need to be considered very carefully when associated facilities are required, sometimes in environmentally sensitive places.
- 13.26 Much of the attraction of the rural Vale rests in the quality of its landscape, archaeological and built heritage. In order that visitors may fully enjoy this heritage, features such as ticket booths, toilets, car parks and notice boards in association with existing tourist destinations in rural areas may sometimes be necessary, even in the countryside where development is strictly controlled. Policy T2 below provides for this. However the Council will wish to ensure that there is no detrimental impact on the high quality environment of the Vale.

POLICY T2

PROPOSALS FOR NEW ASSOCIATED TOURIST RELATED DEVELOPMENT WHICH SERVE THE NEEDS OF VISITORS TO EXISTING TOURIST SITES WILL BE PERMITTED WHERE THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA, ARE MET:

- i) IT COMPLIES WITH THE GENERAL POLICIES FOR DEVELOPMENT;**
- ii) THE RANGE, SCALE AND NATURE OF PROVISION IS LIMITED TO THAT COMMENSURATE WITH ESTABLISHED VISITOR NUMBERS TO THE TOURIST SITE CONCERNED.**

Visitor Accommodation

- 13.27 In 1996, the profile of commercial accommodation stock in the district indicated that there were 1409 bed spaces for tourist occupation in the Vale: of those 606 were in hotels, 117 in guest houses and 411 in bed and breakfast establishments.
- 13.28 Since then, a new hotel adjacent to Ock Mill, Abingdon (30 rooms) has been opened and there is an outstanding planning consent for a hotel at Harwell. Twenty bed spaces will be lost in Faringdon where planning permission for the conversion of the Faringdon Hotel to residential use has been granted. Nevertheless a reasonable range of visitor accommodation exists in the district but there may well be pressure for further provision in the years ahead and the Local Plan must establish a policy framework for dealing with such proposals.
- 13.29 The Council has expressed its support for the English Tourist Board's aim of encouraging good quality tourist accommodation through a national classification and optional grading scheme. Applicants may be supplied with ETB information on the Crown Classification and Grading System and an 'Informative' may be

attached to any relevant planning consent to remind successful applicants of the system. It is also intended to include inspected only premises in the *Accommodation Guide* and at Tourist Information Centres.

Hotels, Guest Houses and Public Houses

- 13.30 The Council's preferred locations for new hotels and guest houses are the main market towns of Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon, along with Grove and Botley. In the rural areas new buildings for guest houses or visitor accommodation may also be allowed within existing villages listed in policies H11 and H12. Outside of these locations new buildings to provide visitor accommodation will not be allowed unless they are an extension to an existing hotel, guest house or public house. Such proposals are covered by T3 below.

POLICY T3

EXTENSIONS TO EXISTING HOTELS, GUEST HOUSES OR TO PROVIDE OVERNIGHT VISITOR ACCOMMODATION AT PUBLIC HOUSES WILL BE PERMITTED PROVIDED:

- i) **THE PROPOSAL WOULD NOT HAVE A DETRIMENTAL EFFECT ON THE EXTERNAL APPEARANCE OF THE BUILDING IN TERMS OF SITING, SCALE, DESIGN, AND MATERIALS OR SPOIL THE VISUAL QUALITIES OF ITS SETTING; AND**
- ii) **THE PROPOSAL WOULD NOT SO INTENSIFY BUSINESS ACTIVITY AT THE PREMISES AS TO CAUSE HARM TO THE QUALITY OF THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT IN TERMS OF NOISE, DISTURBANCE, TRAFFIC GENERATION OR PARKING IN THE VICINITY.**

PROPOSALS FOR EXTENSION TO EXISTING HOTELS, GUEST HOUSES OR PUBLIC HOUSES IN THE GREEN BELT WILL BE SUBJECT TO POLICY GS3.

Self-Catering Accommodation

- 13.31 There is an increasing demand for self-catering accommodation, most often in cottages or converted properties in the countryside. The Council is keen to see self-catering holiday accommodation provided through the conversion of appropriate rural buildings rather than in new buildings. This is consistent with the policies to protect the countryside, to diversify the agricultural and rural economies and to find new uses for suitable rural buildings. Such proposals will be considered under policies GS7, GS8 and GS9. Self-catering units can be a particularly good use of suitable buildings in the countryside because holiday use can be more appropriate and sympathetic than a conversion to a permanent home. Holiday homes, for example, can be more simply designed and will often not need the domestic trim of fenced gardens, garages, garden sheds and

greenhouses which can be alien features in the countryside and detract from the setting of a traditional rural building.

- 13.32 The construction of purpose-built holiday accommodation, including holiday chalets and static caravan sites, has a similar impact on its surroundings as permanent housing and therefore it needs to be considered in the same way. PPS7 affirms that new housebuilding and other development in the countryside, away from areas allocated for development, should be strictly controlled. Proposals for new buildings for self-catering accommodation will be steered away from the countryside in accordance with policy GS2. However, there may be some scope for providing new holiday homes within existing settlements provided they are outside the Green Belt and would not adversely affect the character or amenities of their surroundings.

Bed and Breakfast

- 13.33 Bed and breakfast accommodation is seen as a valuable element in the range of visitor accommodation; it benefits local residents and in general is welcomed by the Council as long as the amenities of residential areas are not harmed. Parking arrangements may need to be considered with special care. When the use of a property for bed and breakfast reaches a level where it is no longer considered ancillary to the residential use, the proposal will be considered under policies T1 and T3.

Camping and Caravanning

- 13.34 Large camping and caravanning sites can be environmentally intrusive, both in visual terms and because of the level of traffic and activity they generate. Such large sites (one within Oxford has 129 pitches) are unlikely to be acceptable in the open countryside of the Vale and particularly in the Oxford Green Belt.
- 13.35 Small sites, limited under Caravan Club rules to five caravans or tents, are permitted development. The Vale Council considers that, with care, sites of up to around 10 pitches can usually be accommodated in the countryside. New sites of this size would accord with the Council's aim of encouraging the quiet enjoyment of the rural Vale, if they are carefully sited to safeguard the local environment. Sites providing in excess of 10 pitches and extensions to existing sites will be closely scrutinised and a proliferation of sites in any one area will be avoided. It would also be undesirable if sites which were acceptable for touring caravans and camping became established as permanent sites and were occupied all the year round. Permissions for the use of a site may be restricted either by the imposition of planning conditions or by a legal agreement which may require the removal from the site of all caravans and tents by the date specified in the condition or the agreement. The Council is concerned particularly that the importance of Oxford as an international tourist centre might lead to a

proliferation of camping and caravanning sites close to the city: this would contribute to an impression of increasing urban encroachment into the countryside around the city and would be detrimental to the quality of the Green Belt and to the objective of preserving the character and landscape setting of Oxford. The establishment of camping and caravanning sites will therefore be opposed in the approved Oxford Green Belt.

POLICY T4

PROPOSALS FOR TOURING CARAVANS AND CAMPING SITES WILL BE PERMITTED PROVIDED:

- i) THE SITE IS NOT IN THE OXFORD GREEN BELT;
- ii) THE SITE IS IN A WELL SCREENED LANDSCAPE SETTING;
- iii) ANY PROPOSAL IS LIMITED IN SCALE IN GENERAL NOT INVOLVING MORE THAN 10 CARAVANS OR CAMPING PITCHES AND WOULD NOT AFFECT ADVERSELY THE AMENITIES OF ADJACENT OCCUPIERS OR THE QUIET INFORMAL ENJOYMENT OF THE COUNTRYSIDE;
- iv) THERE WILL BE NO ADVERSE EFFECTS ON THE CHARACTER, APPEARANCE OR NATURAL QUALITY OF THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SITE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS, ESPECIALLY WHERE THE PROPOSED SITE IS IN THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY OR THE NORTH VALE CORALLIAN RIDGE AND;
- v) PERMISSION FOR THE USE OF THE SITE FOR TOURING CARAVANS OR CAMPING WILL BE RESTRICTED, TO ENSURE THERE IS NO PERMANENT AND UNINTERRUPTED OCCUPATION OF THE SITE FOR THAT USE.

WHERE POSSIBLE ASSOCIATED FACILITIES SHOULD BE SITED IN EXISTING BUILDINGS IN ACCORDANCE WITH POLICIES GS7 AND GS8. WHERE NEW BUILDINGS ARE ESSENTIAL THESE MUST BE DESIGNED TO A HIGH STANDARD AND BE SENSITIVELY SITED IN ACCORDANCE WITH POLICY T2.