

Local Plan 2031
Part 1
**Strategic Sites
and Policies**

TOPIC PAPER 9
The natural
environment

This paper is one of 9 topic papers, listed below, which form part of the evidence base in support of the draft Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (previously referred to as the Local Development Framework Core Strategy).

These topic papers have been produced to present a coordinated view of the evidence that has been considered in drafting the local plan. It is hoped that this will make it easier to understand how we have reached our conclusions.

The papers are all available from the council website:
www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidencebase

Topic Papers

- 1: Duty to cooperate and cross boundary issues
- 2: Spatial strategy
- 3: Strategic sites selection
- 4: Housing
- 5: Supporting economic prosperity
- 6: Transport and accessibility
- 7: Responding to climate change
- 8: The built environment and historic environment
- 9: The natural environment

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This topic paper provides a brief summary of the evidence relating to the natural environment and includes consideration for Green Belt; landscape; biodiversity and green infrastructure; and leisure issues.
- 1.2 The evidence summarised in this paper has helped to inform the preparation of the draft Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 – Strategic Sites and Policies, which was previously referred to as the Local Development Framework, Core Strategy.
- 1.3 The draft Local Plan 2031 Part 1 will set the strategic priorities for the district to deliver sustainable development. It will identify the number of new homes and jobs to be provided in the area for the plan period up to 2031. It will also make appropriate provision for retail, leisure and commercial development and for the infrastructure needed to support them.
- 1.4 Significant work has already been carried out to inform the Local Plan, starting in 2007, and several stages of consultation have already been undertaken with the public and stakeholders over the last few years. These stages have informed the preparation of the draft Local Plan 2031 Part 1 and include:
 - Issues and Options (November 2007) – which identified a range of options for how we should plan for the Vale
 - Preferred Options (January 2009) – which outlined the councils preferred approach for planning for the Vale
 - Additional Consultation (January 2010) – which consulted on a few additional policies relating to specific issues
 - Draft Local Plan 2029 Part 1 – Strategic Sites and Policies (February 2013)
 - Housing Delivery Update (February 2014)
- 1.5 The purpose of this topic paper is to summarise key evidence that has informed the drafting of policies to be included in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 relating to the natural environment. As a predominantly rural district, the natural environment plays a significant role in its characterisation and is highly valued by its residents
- 1.6 It is important that the options we develop for policies are also tested through Sustainability Appraisal (SA). This is a legislative requirement of the plan making process¹ and has taken place alongside the preparation of the plan. The SA helps to identify a preferred policy option to inform the preparation of the plan.

¹ For more information see the Sustainability Appraisal at www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/evidence

- 1.7 This topic paper explains how the council has formulated the policy put forward in the Publication of the Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Strategic Sites and Policies (Local Plan Part 1). The topic paper is arranged into the following sections: Green Belt, Landscape, Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure, and Leisure. Under each of these sections is the following:

Policy review – a brief summary of how any national, regional and local policies should influence the preparation of the local plan

Evidence – a short summary of any key issues identified from previous stages of consultation; any key issues identified at a community level; and any other evidence that should inform plan preparation

Issues (challenges and opportunities) – a brief summary of any issues identified from Sections 2 and 3 of the paper that the Vale Local Plan 2031: Part 1 will need to respond to

Policy options – an overview of those policy options which have been tested for possible inclusion within the local plan

Recommendations – the key findings for how this topic area should be addressed in the local plan

2.0 GREEN BELT

Policy Review – national policy

National Planning Policy Framework and National Planning Practice Guidance

- 2.1 The purposes of the Green Belt are five fold:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
 - to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
 - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land².
- 2.2 National guidance allows for the review of the Green Belt, in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period.
- 2.3 When defining Green Belt boundaries, local planning authorities should use physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent³.
- 2.4 Construction of new buildings in the Green Belt should be regarded as inappropriate except for:
- buildings for agriculture and forestry;
 - provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation and for cemeteries, as long as it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it;
 - the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building;
 - the replacement of a building, provided the new building is in the same use and not materially larger than the one it replaces;
 - limited infilling in villages, and limited affordable housing for local community needs under policies set out in the Local Plan; or

² NPPF, paragraph 80

³ NPPF, paragraph 85

- limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed sites (brownfield land), whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt and the purpose of including land within it than the existing development⁴.
- 2.5 The NPPG states that unmet housing need (including for traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt⁵.
- 2.6 The NPPG was updated in October 2014 to make clear that local planning authorities should meet their objectively assessed need unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the NPPF taken as a whole or specific policies indicate development should be restricted, including Green Belt.⁶

Policy Review – regional policy

South East Plan 2009

- 2.7 The South East Plan (SEP) was extant until March 2013 and therefore was used to inform the development of the Local Plan 2031 until that point. When producing the policies for the February 2013 consultation an assessment of the SEP policies was made to ascertain any important considerations that might need to be taken forward once the plan was revoked. This is demonstrated by Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Policies relating to the Oxford Green Belt set out within the South East Plan⁷

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
SP5: Green Belts	Suggests selective review of Oxford Green Belt.	Consistent	Provides general support for principle of reviewing the Green Belt.
CO4: Green Belt	A Green Belt will be maintained around Oxford. A selective review of Green Belt boundaries will take place on the southern edge of Oxford	Consistent	Provides general support for principle of reviewing the Green Belt.

⁴ NPPF, paragraph 89

⁵ NPPG Paragraph: 034 Reference ID: 3-034-20141006

⁶ NPPG, Paragraph: 044 Reference ID: 3-044-20141006

⁷ Government Office for the South East (2009) The South East Plan/ Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East of England.

Policy Review – local policy

Local Plan 2011

- 2.8 An assessment of the Local Plan 2011 policies has been undertaken to ascertain if any of them should be incorporated into new policies in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (Table 2.2) or if they should be saved for consideration to be included in the Vale Local Plan 2031 part 2. The policies, both saved and unsaved, have been assessed for conformity with the NPPF to ascertain the weight they can be afforded. The NPPF advises that weight should be given according to the degree of consistency with the NPPF, the closer the policies reflect the NPPF, the greater weight that may be given⁸.
- 2.9 The final column in Table 2.2 summarises whether there is a policy 'gap' either because the policy has not been saved or because it is not consistent with the NPPF and identifies any issues that might arise from this.

Table 2.2: Green Belt policies within the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2011⁹

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
GS3: Development in the Oxford Green Belt	Development in the Green Belt will not be permitted unless it is for one of the purposes listed in the policy.	Consistent, in part, with NPPF	Update policy to be consistent with NPPF
GS4: Development in the Oxford Green Belt	Allows for limited infilling and partial redevelopment within the boundaries of identified major development sites.	Consistent, in part, with NPPF	Major developed sites no longer exist in national guidance so policy should not be carried forward.

Vale of White Horse Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008

- 2.10 There is nothing relating specifically to Green Belt in this document.

Evidence

Summary of previous consultation stages and key issues

⁸ NPPF paragraph 215

⁹ Vale of White Horse District Council (2006) Local Plan 2011/ Adopted Plan July 2006.

2.11 The Council has completed a number of stages of consultation over the past few years as it has developed the Local Plan. The responses to each stage of consultation have been used to help inform the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1. The main stages of consultation completed to date include:

- Issues and Options 2007
- Preferred Options 2009
- Additional Consultation 2010
- Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013
- Housing Delivery Update 2014

Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013

2.12 The responses from the 2013 consultation showed there was much support for continued protection of the Green Belt with a few objections to the lack of a Green Belt Review.

2.13 There were some particular comments in relation to the wording of the policy. One comment suggested that the policy wasn't a true reflection of NPPF guidance on appropriate development in the Green Belt because it was split across the new policy and saved policy GS3.

Housing Delivery Update 2014

2.14 The main thrust of the comments in relation to the Green Belt policy in the February 2014 consultation was objection to removal of sites from the Green Belt. In particular, many responses pointed out the inconsistency between the evidence base and some of the suggested site allocations, such as the proposal to release North Radley from the Green Belt.

2.15 English Heritage stated that it was likely to oppose any proposed releases of land from the Green Belt that would undermine its integrity in preserving the setting and special character of Oxford and its landscape setting.

2.16 Objections were also raised to the piecemeal approach to reviewing the Green Belt and that a holistic review of the entire Oxford Green Belt should be undertaken.

2.17 Tubney Parish Council was concerned about moving the southern boundary of the Green Belt because it would mean half of Tubney village was taken out of the Green Belt whilst the other half remained within it.

Identifying priorities at a community level

- 2.18 A number of Community-Led Plans (Parish Plans) have been prepared by town and parish councils across the Vale district. These plans provide a useful summary of community priorities that have been identified at a local level through consultation. There are no relevant issues relating to Green Belt to summarise.

Green Belt Review 2014

- 2.19 As part of the process of assessing sites to meet the increased housing target set out in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, the council commissioned a Green Belt Review to identify whether there was any land suitable for release from Green Belt, so that it could be considered for housing alongside other reasonable alternatives.
- 2.20 This Review took place in three stages:
- stage 1: to divide the Green Belt in to land parcels and to assess the edge of the settlements against the five purposes of the Green Belt
 - stage 2: to assess the remainder of the Green Belt and to bring all of the information together into a report; and
 - stage 3: to provide detailed boundaries for the parcels of land recommended for release from the Green Belt.
- 2.21 The Review recommends that 23 sites on the edge of settlements could be removed from the Green Belt because they are less effective at meeting the five purposes of Green Belt¹⁰. It also recommends a realignment of the southern boundary of the Green Belt so that it follows physical features that are more likely to be permanent. The Review concludes that Farmoor does not contribute to the open character and openness of the Green Belt and therefore should be inset rather than washed over.

Vale of White Horse District Council's comments on the Green Belt Review

- 2.22 This report set out the Council's reasons for commissioning a Green Belt Review. It also made recommendations about which sites

¹⁰ as set out in NPPF, paragraph 80

suggested in the Green Belt Review should be released from the Green Belt and which should remain within the designation.

- 2.23 The report recommended that the majority of sites suggested be released from the Green Belt but that those that were unsuitable for development, such as recreation grounds and land important to the character of the conservation area, should remain in the Green Belt.
- 2.24 The Council disagreed with the findings of the Green Belt Review with respect to the North Radley site and suggested that this site could be released from the Green Belt without harming the five purposes as set out in paragraph 80 of the NPPF. The site was included in the 2014 Housing Delivery consultation as a proposed site for development.

North Abingdon Land to the east of Oxford Road Landscape and Visual Feasibility Study

- 2.25 This report was commissioned to specifically examine the area to the east of the Oxford Road in Abingdon to ascertain the scope for release from the Green Belt. The Green Belt Review identified that this area would not be suitable for release because it contributes towards maintaining the separation from Abingdon and Radley.
- 2.26 The Landscape and Visual Impact Feasibility Study looked in more detail at a specific parcel of land to the east of the Oxford Road. It found that, for the most part, the study area is well contained from its surroundings and it would be possible to develop parts of it without having significant adverse effects on existing landscape features, provided it was not developed before land to the west of Oxford Road. However, land in the south eastern section would be too sensitive in landscape and Green Belt terms and should be left open.

Issues (Challenges and Opportunities)

- 2.27 The key issues to take in to consideration in writing the Green Belt policy are:
- The NPPF allows for Green Belt Reviews in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation of a review of a local plan.
 - In doing so, local authorities should have regard to the permanence beyond the plan period
 - Green Belt boundaries should follow physical features having regard to their permanence. However, the suggested realignment of the southern Green Belt boundary would cause inconsistencies within settlements, which would not be fair or appropriate.

- Adopted Local Plan 2011 policy GS3 is not consistent with the NPPF. Any Green Belt policy should provide a comprehensive reflection of development that is appropriate in Green Belt.
- Policy GS4 should not be saved
- The release of sites from the Green Belt should be consistent with the evidence
- The North Radley site should not be released from the Green Belt because it is not supported by evidence.
- Land to the east of Oxford Road in Abingdon could be released from the Green Belt in line with the 'North Abingdon Land to the east of Oxford Road Landscape and Visual Feasibility Study'.
- Farmoor does not contribute to the open character of the Green Belt and should be inset rather than washed over.

Strategic Policy Options

2.28 The Sustainability Appraisal process is required to identify reasonable alternative options to proposed policy approaches.

2.29 The Sustainability Appraisal that accompanies the Publication draft of the Local Plan 2031 Part 1 states that:

“In identifying the preferred sites, the council first considered those sites which were not located within the North Wessex Downs AONB or the Oxford Green Belt. However, given the level of housing required, sites have been identified within the AONB and Oxford Green Belt.

A mix of sites are required that would deliver homes in the short as well as longer term to restore and maintain a five year housing land supply. Therefore in order to achieve this it has been necessary to consider sites in AONB and Green Belt.”

2.30 On this basis, in order to meet the housing target set out in the SHMA, there is no reasonable alternative to releasing sites from the Green Belt.

2.31 The Green Belt policy itself has been refined at each stage of the process and has been tested through Sustainability Appraisal.

Recommendations

2.32 A policy on the Oxford Green Belt (Core Policy 13) is necessary to update the Council's policy in line with the NPPF. Policies GS3 and

GS4 of the adopted Local Plan 2011 should not be saved because they are not consistent with the NPPF.

- 2.33 The Adopted Policies Map should be updated to remove sites suggested for release from the Green Belt in the Green Belt Review (February 2013) from the designated Green Belt. In addition, land to the east of Oxford Road, Abingdon should also be removed from the Green Belt to the boundaries identified by the Feasibility Study. This will ensure a consistent approach to sites is taken, based on the evidence in the Green Belt Review and subsequent studies. It will also ensure that land is released having regard to the permanence of the Green Belt beyond the plan period. Land released but not allocated for development in Local Plan 2031 Part 1 can be assessed for suitability for allocation as a 'local site' in the Local Plan 2031 Part 2. Any sites that are not suitable for development will be protected by other relevant policies.
- 2.34 Aside from releasing these sites, the boundaries of the Green Belt within the Vale of White Horse should not change. The southern boundary of the Green Belt should remain as existing rather than be altered as per the Green Belt Review to ensure a consistent approach to dwellings on either side of the road.

3.0 LANDSCAPE

Legislation

- 3.1 Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, Section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act 1988 and Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 require that '*in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land*' in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, relevant authorities '*shall have regard*' to their purposes. The duty applies to all local planning authorities, not just national park authorities. The duty is also relevant in considering development proposals that are situated outside National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty boundaries, but which might have an impact on the setting of, and implementation of, the statutory purposes of these protected areas.
- 3.2 Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 confirms that the primary purpose for AONBs, such as the North Wessex Downs, is 'conserving and enhancing the natural beauty'.

Policy Review – national policy

National Planning Policy Framework and National Planning Practice Guidance

- 3.3 The planning system should contribute to, and enhance, the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes¹¹. The NPPF requires Local Plans to set out strategic policies to deliver conservation and enhancement of the natural and historic environment, including landscape¹². The NPPG makes clear that this includes designated landscapes but also the wider countryside¹³. Such policies should be criteria based¹⁴. Where appropriate, landscape character assessments should be prepared to help understand the character and local distinctiveness of the landscape and identify the features that give it a sense of place¹⁵.
- 3.4 Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.
- 3.5 Planning permission should be refused for major development in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances and where it can

¹¹ NPPF, paragraph 109

¹² NPPF, paragraph 156 bullet point 5

¹³ NPPG, Reference ID: 8-001-20140306, paragraph 001

¹⁴ NPPF, paragraph 113

¹⁵ NPPG, Reference ID: 8-001-20140306, paragraph 001

be demonstrated they are in the public interest. Consideration of such applications 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, developing 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 moderated¹⁶.

3.6 National Planning Policy Guidance states that the definition of what constitutes ‘major’ development in an AONB is a matter for the decision taker¹⁷. It also confirms that AONB Management Plans should be taken into account in Local Plans and are material considerations in the determination of planning applications¹⁸.

Policy Review – regional policy

South East Plan 2009

3.7 The South East Plan (SEP) was extant until March 2013 and therefore was used to inform the development of the Local Plan 2031 until this point. When producing the policies for the February 2013 consultation an assessment of the SEP policies was made to ascertain any important considerations that might need to be taken forward once the plan was revoked. This is demonstrated by Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Policies relating to landscape set out within the South East Plan

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
CC6: Sustainable Communities and Character of the Environment	Encourages developing a shared local vision that respects and enhances the character and distinctiveness of settlements and landscapes throughout the region.	Consistent	None – covered by Section 7: Requiring good design and Section 11: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment of the NPPF.
C3: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty	High priority will be given to conservation and enhancement of AONB	Consistent	None – covered by para 115 of the Framework.

¹⁶ NPPF, paragraph 116

¹⁷ NPPG Reference ID: 8-005-20140306

¹⁸ NPPG Reference ID: 8-004-20140306

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
	and planning decisions should have regard to their setting. Emphasis should be on small-scale proposals.		
C4: Landscape and Countryside Management	LPA should develop criteria-based policies to encourage positive and high quality management of open countryside.	Consistent	None – covered by NPPF and NPPG
C5: Managing the Rural-Urban Fringe	Promote cross-boundary working to tackle this.	Consistent	None – Assessment of landscape around main settlements covers this.

Policy Review – local policy

Local Plan 2011

- 3.8 An assessment of the Local Plan 2011 policies has been undertaken to ascertain if any of them should be incorporated into new policies in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (Table 3.2) or if they should be saved for consideration to be included in the Vale Local Plan 2031 part 2. The policies, both saved and unsaved, have been assessed for conformity with the NPPF to ascertain the weight they can be afforded. The NPPF advises that weight should be given according to the degree of consistency with the NPPF, the closer the policies reflect the NPPF, the greater weight that may be given¹⁹.
- 3.9 The final column in Table 3.2 summarises whether there is a policy 'gap' either because the policy has not been saved or because it is not consistent with NPPF and identifies any issues that might arise from this.

Table 3.2: Landscape policies within the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2011²⁰

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
DC11: Agricultural Land (not saved)	Development of the best and most versatile land will not be permitted, subject to criteria.	Consistent, in part, with the NPPF.	None - Policy removed because it duplicated PPS7. Topic is covered in the NPPF para 112.
DC18: Advertisements in Conservation Areas and the	Advertisements in these areas will not be given consent if they fail to preserve or enhance the	Not consistent	None – covered by separate legislation

¹⁹ NPPF, paragraph 215

²⁰ Vale of White Horse District Council (2006) Local Plan 2011/ Adopted Plan July 2006.

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (not saved)	character or appearance of the area.		
NE6: The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	Development in the AONB will only be permitted if it will conserve or enhance the area.	Fully consistent	None
NE7: The North Vale Corallian Ridge	Development that would harm the North Vale Corallian Ridge will not be permitted unless there is an overriding need for development and all steps are taken to minimise impact.	Fully consistent	None
NE8: The Landscape Setting of Oxford	The conservation of Oxford's landscape setting will take priority in considering proposals for development in areas within view of the city.	Fully consistent	None
NE9: The Lowland Vale	Development in the Lowland Vale will not be permitted if it would harm the long open views within it across the area.	Fully consistent	None
NE10: Urban Fringes and Countryside Gaps	Development or changes of use which would harm these areas will not be permitted.	Fully consistent	None
NE11: Areas for Landscape Enhancement	A landscaping scheme must be provided for development affecting areas of damaged or compromised landscape.	Fully consistent	None

Vale of White Horse Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008

- 3.10 This document recognises the need to manage change in a way that will protect and enhance the Vale of White Horse's (Vale) distinctive natural character. It is anticipated that this will be carried through to the Local Plan by making sure that new development retains important local landscape features and makes use of planting and landforms to help it blend into its surroundings and to enhance biodiversity.

Evidence

Summary of previous consultation stages and key issues

- 3.11 The Council has completed a number of stages of consultation over the past few years as it has developed the Local Plan. The responses to each stage of consultation have been used to help inform the Vale

Local Plan 2031 Part 1. The main stages of consultation completed to date include:

- Issues and Options 2007
- Preferred Options 2009
- Additional Consultation 2010
- Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013
- Housing Delivery Update 2014

3.12 The review of comments to the previous consultation stages have identified a number of actions to take forward in to the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1. These are:

- Natural England stated that AONBs should be provided with the highest level of policy protection. It should also make reference to the protection of the setting of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the implications for development within and outside protected landscapes.
- Natural England stated that environmental protection policies should be informed by Landscape Character Assessments.

Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013

3.13 Comments relating to landscape were generally expressing support for protection of landscape or concern that development of certain sites would impact on the landscape.

3.14 There were a few comments directly relating to the landscape policy. One stated that the policy wasn't justified because there was no assessment of the entire landscape or definition of locally valued landscape. Another comment expressed support for the spirit of the policy but suggested identifying key locally valued landscapes (such as the Corallian Ridge and the Thames river frontage) in the policy.

Housing Delivery Update 2014

3.15 There was no landscape policy included in this consultation. However, there were many comments made relating to the proposed development in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and how this approach was inconsistent with legislation and national planning policy.

Identifying priorities at a community level

3.16 A number of Community-Led Plans (Parish Plans) have been prepared by town and parish councils across the Vale district. These plans

provide a useful summary of community priorities that have been identified at a local level through consultation. Of particular relevance to landscape is Upton's Parish Plan, which seeks to protect the AONB.

Planning Advisory Notes

- 3.17 The Planning Advisory Notes were adopted in July 2006 and contain guidance to be used when making a planning application. The notes were adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) alongside the Local Plan to 2001 but they could not longer be used as SPG as they had not been subjected to formal public consultation alongside the preparation of the Local Plan 2011. However, they contain information that is still useful and relevant in determining planning applications.
- 3.18 The Adopted Vale Local Plan 2011 contains specific policies on the landscape zones found in the Vale, which is based on the Landscape Strategy in the Planning Advisory Notes. This strategy forms the basis for the 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, and
 - The Great Western Community Forest.
- 3.19 The Landscape Strategy in the Planning Advisory Notes is still used in determining planning applications in the Vale.

European Landscape Convention

- 3.20 The European Landscape Convention came into force in the UK in 2007 and is the first international convention to focus specifically on landscape. It defines landscape as '*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*'. The convention highlights the importance of developing landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of all landscapes. Landscape character is a key component of this approach.

Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS)²¹

- 3.21 The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS) was jointly sponsored as a national demonstration project by Oxfordshire County

²¹ <http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/>

Council, Natural England and the Earth Trust²². It provides a landscape character assessment and biodiversity appraisal of the County and is also used in determining planning applications in the Vale. The OWLS shows that there are thirteen landscape character areas in the district, rather than the four main zones with sub-sections as shown in the adopted Local Plan 2011. These are shown by Figure 3.3 below.

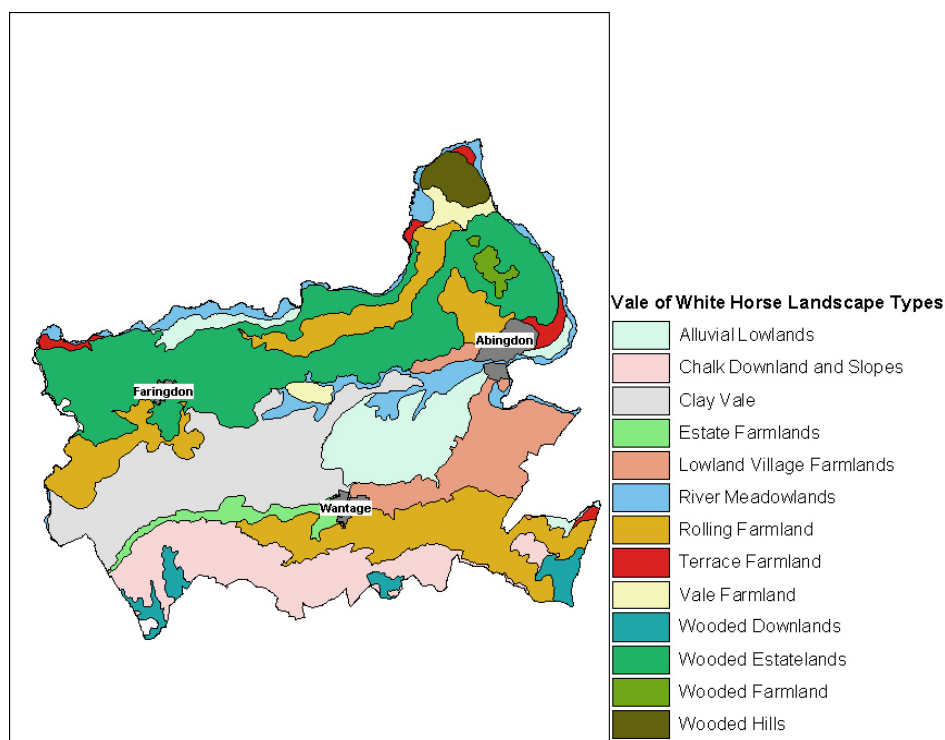


Figure 3.3: Vale of White Horse Landscape Types²³

Landscape Assessment of Land on the Edge of the Vale's Main Towns 2008

- 3.22 This document was produced to assess the land around the main towns and service centres in the district to assess landscape with a view to informing allocations for housing. The document assessed land around Botley, Abingdon, Wantage and Grove, and Faringdon.

Landscape Capacity Study Report

- 3.23 The Vale commissioned this report to assess the landscape sensitivity to change for each of the potential strategic housing development sites identified either in anticipation of or following the release of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and the increase in the housing target. The report was used in selecting the sites for allocation as detailed in Topic Paper 3: Strategic Sites Selection.

²² Previously known as the Northmoor Trust

²³ <http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/>

North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan and other documents

- 3.24 Section 88 and 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 state that each Local Authority and Conservation Board shall prepare and publish a Management Plan for their AONB which should then be reviewed at intervals of no more than 5 years. The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2009-14 was prepared by the AONB's Council of Partners, including Vale of White Horse District Council. The plan for 2014-19 has not yet been published.
- 3.25 Other documents produced by the AONB Council of Partners have provided useful background reading, such as the AONB Landscape Character Assessment, Historic Landscape Characterisation and the Position Statements on Housing, Setting and Renewable Energy.

Issues (Challenges and Opportunities)

- 3.26 The key issues to take in to consideration in writing the landscape policy are:
- The District Council has a duty to have regard to the purposes of the AONB in exercising or performing any functions in relation to the AONB.
 - The NPPF requires local plans to include strategic policies relating to landscape and this should include a criteria based policy.
 - A landscape character assessment should be prepared to help understand the character and local distinctiveness of the landscape.
 - The AONB should be given the highest status of protection, including protection of its setting.
 - The Sustainable Communities Strategy requires the Local Plan to ensure that development retains important local landscape features and makes use of planting and landforms to blend in to surroundings.
 - If the policy refers to a locally valued landscape, this needs to be defined and justified.
 - Various studies are available to provide information about the landscape in the Vale of White Horse District.

Strategic Policy Options

- 3.27 The Sustainability Appraisal process is required to identify reasonable alternative options to proposed policy approaches. As the NPPF makes clear that a strategic policy is required and that it should be criteria based, there are no reasonable alternatives for the strategy of the policy. The landscape policy itself has been refined at each stage of the process and has been tested through Sustainability Appraisal.

Recommendations

- 3.28 A strategic policy protecting the landscape of the district is necessary to accord with national policy and this should be criteria based. Whilst it is advised that a Landscape Character Assessment is produced to support such a policy, there is landscape evidence already available to support a landscape policy.
- 3.29 In terms of the specific wording of a policy, it is recommended that it does not refer to 'locally valued landscape' but instead provides general protection for landscape features. This is consistent with the requirements of the European Landscape Convention which is based on the principle that all landscapes are important. The policy should refer to the AONB receiving the highest status of protection and regard should also be had to its setting.
- 3.30 Policies NE6, NE7, NE8, NE9, NE10 and NE11 are consistent with the NPPF and should continue to be saved and update through Local Plan 2031 Part 2.

4.0 BIODIVERSITY AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Legislation

- 4.1 Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a duty on public authorities to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity in exercising their functions. A key purpose of this duty is to embed consideration of biodiversity as an integral part of policy and decision making, which should be seeking to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the commitments made by the Government in its Biodiversity 2020 strategy.

Policy Review – national policy

National Planning Policy Framework and National Planning Practice Guidance

- 4.2 The NPPF requires Local Plans to set out strategic policies to deliver conservation and enhancement of the natural and historic environment²⁴, setting out a strategic approach to planning positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure²⁵. Such policies should be criteria based²⁶ and distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is commensurate with their status and gives appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution that they make to wider ecological networks²⁷.
- 4.3 The planning system should minimise impacts on biodiversity and provide net gains in biodiversity where possible, contributing to the Government's commitment to halt the overall decline in biodiversity, including by establishing ecological networks²⁸
- 4.4 To minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should:
- plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries.
 - identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation.

²⁴ NPPF, paragraph 156 bullet point 5

²⁵ NPPF, paragraph 114

²⁶ NPPF, paragraph 113

²⁷ NPPF, paragraph 113

²⁸ NPPF, paragraph 109 bullet point 3

- promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations, linked to national and local targets, and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity in the plan.
- aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests, and
- where Nature Improvement Areas are identified in Local Plans, consider specifying the types of development that may be appropriate in these Areas²⁹.

Policy Review – regional policy

South East Plan 2009

- 4.5 The South East Plan (SEP) was extant until March 2013 and therefore was used to inform the development of the Local Plan 2031 until that point. When producing the policies for the February 2013 consultation an assessment of the SEP policies was made to ascertain any important considerations that might need to be taken forward once the plan was revoked. This is demonstrated by Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Policies relating to Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure set out within the South East Plan³⁰

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
CC8: Green Infrastructure	Requires the planning and management of multi-functional green space.	Consistent	Detail in policy on planning for Green Infrastructure (GI) will be lost. There is little detail on GI in the NPPF and there is not an adopted Local Plan 2011 policy covering this.
NRM5 : Conservation and Improvement of Biodiversity	Avoid a net loss of biodiversity, and actively pursue opportunities to achieve a net gain across the region.	Consistent	None - covered by Section 11: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment of the NPPF.
NRM7: Woodlands	Protecting the value and character of ancient woodland from damaging development, promoting effective management and through replacement of loss.	Consistent	None - covered by para 118 of the NPPF.

²⁹ NPPF, paragraph 117

³⁰ Government Office for the South East (2009) The South East Plan/ Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East of England.

Policy Review – local policy

Local Policy

- 4.6 An assessment of the Local Plan 2011 policies has been undertaken to ascertain if any of them should be incorporated into new policies in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (Table 4.2) or if they should be saved for consideration to be included in the Vale Local Plan 2031 part 2. The policies, both saved and unsaved, have been assessed for conformity with the NPPF to ascertain the weight they can be afforded. The NPPF advises that weight should be given according to the degree of consistency with the NPPF, the closer the policies reflect the NPPF, the greater weight that may be given³¹.
- 4.7 The final column in Table 4.2 summarises whether there is a policy 'gap' either because the policy has not been saved or because it is not consistent with NPPF and identifies any issues that might arise from this.

Table 4.2: Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure policies within the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2011³²

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
NE1: The Need for Ecological Appraisals (not saved)	Applications that will affect a site of nature conservation value will be refused without an ecological appraisal being submitted.	Fully consistent	None – Contained in NPPG
NE2: Protection of Sites of Special Nature Conservation Importance (not saved)	Development will not be permitted if it would damage any Special Area of Conservation, National Nature Reserve or Site of Special Scientific Interest.	Consistent, in part, with the NPPF	None – These sites have statutory protection
NE3: Geologically Important Sites	Development that would damage a regionally important geological site will not be permitted unless damage can be prevented or minimised.	Fully consistent	There is no overall strategy for geodiversity as required by the NPPF
NE4: Other Sites of Nature Conservation Value	Development that is harmful to areas not covered by policies NE2 or NE3 will not be permitted unless need clearly outweighs harm.	Fully consistent	There is no overall strategy for biodiversity and ecology as required by the NPPF
NE5: Protection of Species (not saved)	Development likely to harm specially protected species will not be permitted unless harm can be prevented, minimised or alternative habitats provided.	Fully consistent	None – There is statutory protection for protected species. Also covered in para 117 of the NPPF
NE12: Great	Development in the	Fully consistent	None

³¹ NPPF, paragraph 215

³² Vale of White Horse District Council (2006) Local Plan 2011/ Adopted Plan July 2006.

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
Western Community Forest	community forest must make a positive contribution towards creation of diverse woodland.		

Vale of White Horse Sustainable Communities Strategy 2008

- 4.8 This document recognises the need to manage change in a way that will protect and enhance the Vale of White Horse's distinctive natural character. It is anticipated that this will be carried through to the Local Plan by making sure that new development retains important local landscape features and makes use of planting and landforms to help it blend into its surroundings and to enhance biodiversity.

Evidence

Summary of previous consultation stages and key issues

- 4.9 The Council has completed a number of stages of consultation over the past few years as it has developed the Local Plan. The responses to each stage of consultation have been used to help inform the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1. The main stages of consultation completed to date include:
- Issues and Options 2007
 - Preferred Options 2009
 - Additional Consultation 2010
 - Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013
 - Housing Delivery Update 2014
- 4.10 The review of comments in relation to the previous consultation stages has identified a number of actions to take forward in to the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1. These are:
- It was identified that woodland was significantly under-represented and the document should include statistics and plans for rectification. The Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust noted that in addition to the protection of designated sites, there should be a reference to the need to protect and enhance biodiversity, to achieve a net gain in biodiversity and specific mention should be made to meet the aims of Conservation Target Areas.

Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013

- 4.11 Specific comments relating to Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure were:
- an objection to Core Policy 35 as it is not based on objectively defined standards for green infrastructure which should be taken into consideration when assessing new development
 - an objection that insufficient biodiversity policies were included within the plan
 - Natural England commented that Core Policy 36: Biodiversity needed to be clearer about the criteria that development would be required to meet in terms of biodiversity, particularly in relation to the hierarchy of designations. It was recommended that we review Policy E5 of the Test Valley Borough Council Revised Local Plan as an example biodiversity policy.
 - In relation to Green Infrastructure, Natural England stated that they would like to see Green Infrastructure provided in line with Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt).
 - Natural England also recommended that the Green Infrastructure policy refer to recommendations in the Habitat Regulations Assessment.

Housing Delivery Update 2014

- 4.12 There were no specific policies relating to Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure in the Housing Delivery Update 2014 consultation.

Identifying priorities at a community level

- 4.13 A number of Community-Led Plans (Parish Plans) have been prepared by town and parish councils across the Vale district. These plans provide a useful summary of community priorities that have been identified at a local level through consultation.
- 4.14 A summary is provided below for any issues or priorities that are included in any completed Community-Led Plan across the Vale relating to Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure.

Table 4.3: Issues Identified from Community-Led Plans relating to Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure

Parish	Description of Issue/ Priority
Blewbury	Maintain a plan to enhance the wildlife of the parish.

Buckland	Existing public green spaces preserved and protected.
East Hendred	Sites that provide village amenities and green spaces protected from house building.
Harwell	Maintain green spaces.
Shrivenham	Identify high profile sites of wildlife habitat. Encourage greater biodiversity. Establish a green buffer zone with tree planting, nature reserves, meadow land and footpath access.
South Hinksey	Create a new wetland nature reserve.

The Local Plan 2011

- 4.15 The Vale of White Horse 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.
- 4.16 Among the diverse habitats found in the district, some are recognised as having special nature conservation interest, for example:
- 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.
 - 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 Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The Ridgeway track forms a natural wildlife corridor, a valuable habitat for native chalk grassland plants.
 - Heathland and Fenland - some of Oxfordshire's rarest habitats - heathland, acid grassland and fenland - are found in the district. 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 Special Area of Conservation, and
 - 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.

4.17 Within the district there are the following wildlife and conservation designations:

- International:
 - 2 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)
- National:
 - 1 National Nature Reserve
 - 23 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
- Local:
 - 84 County Wildlife Sites (now known as Local Wildlife Sites)
 - 5 Local Nature Reserves
 - 9 Geologically Important Sites

A comprehensive list of all of these areas can be found in Appendix 4 of the adopted Local Plan 2011.

4.18 The saved, adopted Local Plan 2011 policies protect internationally and nationally designated sites by not allowing harmful development. Development that harms locally designated sites will not be allowed unless the reason for the development clearly outweighs the harm.

Conservation Target Areas

4.19 Under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, the Secretary of State has to produce lists of the species and habitats which are most important for conserving biodiversity. This list is based on the national Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and is formally published by DEFRA.

4.20 The Government published the Natural Environment White Paper³³ and a national strategy for biodiversity³⁴ in 2011 to provide the overarching national policy and strategic direction in relation to biodiversity.

4.21 A local BAP has been produced by Oxfordshire County Council, to which all of the Oxfordshire Local Authorities have signed up and is being taken forward mainly within the Oxfordshire Conservation Target Areas (CTA). These identify the most important areas for wildlife where targeted conservation action will have the maximum benefit. There are 36 CTAs in Oxfordshire. Their aim is to restore biodiversity at a landscape-scale through the maintenance, restoration and creation of BAP priority habitats. Each CTA supports one or more of the 20 UK BAP priority habitats found in Oxfordshire.

4.22 The CTAs within the Vale are:

³³ 'The Natural Choice: securing the future of nature' DEFRA 2011

³⁴ 'Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services' DEFRA 2011

- Berkshire Downs
- Oxford Heights West
- Oxford Meadows and Farmoor
- Thames and Cherwell
- West Oxon Heights Streams, Hills, Woods and Parks
- Wytham Hill
- Upper Thames
- Thames Radley to Abingdon
- Blewbury Downs South East



Figure 4.4: Conservation Target Areas in the district

- 4.23 The work that has been done to identify CTAs has identified those areas in which, due to a variety of environmental factors, there are particular concentrations of important habitats and species and therefore where sustained effort is most likely to have the greatest benefits. There are other areas which are important for biodiversity which fall outside the CTAs; however, primarily targeting investment of the limited resources available on the CTAs is most likely to bring the greatest benefits to biodiversity. The biggest potential gains for biodiversity will be by investment of time, resources and expertise within the CTAs which will enable the creation, restoration, enhancement and linking of habitats within these areas.
- 4.24 The CTAs largely coordinate with the designated ecological areas referred to above, particularly those higher up the designation hierarchy.

Vale of White Horse Green Infrastructure Audit

- 4.25 This document was produced by the consultants Nortoft in 2012 to assess the Green Infrastructure provision in the district. This used Natural England's 'Nature Nearby' Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards to determine where there is a deficit in Green Infrastructure (Figure 3.3). It showed that there are areas of deficit across the district, including in the settlements allocated for growth in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1.
- 4.26 This information will be used in producing a county-wide Green Infrastructure Strategy. This strategy will help communities and decision-makers to identify important assets, gaps in existing networks and investment opportunities to improve local areas.

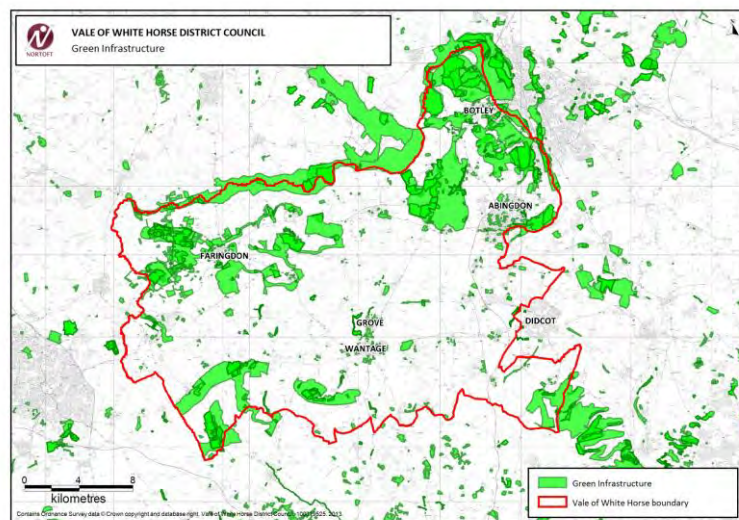


Figure 4.5: Green Infrastructure provision within the Vale of White Horse³⁵

Biodiversity Offsetting

- 4.27 The Vale of White Horse was one of the pioneer councils in developing the use of biodiversity offsetting to compensate for the impacts of development on biodiversity. The priority, in assessing planning applications, is to build on-site mitigation into a development proposal. Where this is not possible, the process of biodiversity offsetting enables contributions to be made, and pooled where necessary, to provide for the creation or restoration of important habitats elsewhere in the district. The concept of biodiversity offsetting in England was established by the publication of a government green paper in 2013³⁶.

³⁵ Nortoft 'Vale of White Horse Green Infrastructure Audit' February 2013

³⁶ DEFRA 'Biodiversity Offsetting in England' green paper, September 2013

Accessible Natural Greenspace

- 4.28 In 2010, Natural England published 'Nature Nearby' which provided guidance on accessible natural greenspace³⁷. The basic concept was that everyone should have access to areas of greenspace close to their home. The guidance included the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt), which incorporated the basic principles of improving access, improving naturalness and improving connectivity.

Geodiversity

- 4.29 Geodiversity is an issue that needs to be addressed alongside biodiversity and this is to be reflected in the Local Plan. Protection of important geological features is achieved through Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) at a national level and Geologically Important Sites at a more local level. Potential impacts on these sites are important considerations in determining planning applications.

Issues (Challenges and Opportunities)

- 4.30 The key issues to take in to consideration in writing the Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure policies are:
- The NERC Act places a duty on public authorities to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity in exercising their functions, which includes policy making.
 - The NPPF requires a strategic policy on biodiversity and green infrastructure, which should be criteria based and distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites.
 - The planning system should minimise impacts on biodiversity and provide net gains where possible.
 - Planning policies should contribute to establishing ecological networks. On this basis, the policy should refer to the Conservation Target Areas, which is a county-wide initiative to improve ecological networks.
 - With the revocation of the South East Plan, there is no policy supporting Green Infrastructure.
 - The biodiversity policy needs to be clear about the criteria that development would be required to meet, particularly in reference to the hierarchy of designations. Review Policy E5 of the Test Valley Borough Council Revised Local Plan to help decide how best to set this out.

³⁷ 'Nature Nearby- Accessible Natural Greenspace Guidance' Natural England 2010

- It should be made clear that the Green Infrastructure policy is based on Accessible Natural Green Space Standards (ANGSt).
- The Green Infrastructure policy should refer to the recommendations of the Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Local Plan 2031 Part 1.

Strategic Policy Options

- 4.31 The Sustainability Appraisal process is required to identify reasonable alternative options to proposed policy approaches. As the NPPF makes clear that a strategic policy is required and that it should be criteria based, there are no reasonable alternatives for the strategy of the policy. The policies themselves have been refined at each stage of the process and have been tested through Sustainability Appraisal.

Recommendations

- 4.32 A strategic policy seeking net gain in biodiversity and infrastructure is necessary to accord with legislation and national policy and this should be criteria based. The focus should be on improving Conservation Target Areas.
- 4.33 The Green Infrastructure policy (Core Policy 45) should ensure green infrastructure is provided in line with the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt) and it should refer to the recommendations of the Habitat Regulations Assessment for the Local Plan 2031.
- 4.34 The biodiversity policy should set clear criteria that development is required to meet, making reference to the hierarchy of designations.
- 4.35 Policy NE12 of the adopted Local Plan 2011 should continue to be saved. Policies NE3 and NE4 will be superseded by the new core policy.

5.0 LEISURE

Policy Review – national policy

National Planning Policy Framework and National Planning Practice Guidance

- 5.1 The NPPF states that the planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities³⁸.
- 5.2 Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of communities. Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision³⁹.
- 5.3 Planning policies should protect and enhance Public Rights of Way and access⁴⁰.

Policy Review – regional policy

South East Plan 2009

- 5.4 The South East Plan (SEP) was extant until March 2013 and therefore was used to inform the development of the Local Plan 2031 until that point. When producing the policies for the February 2013 consultation an assessment of the SEP policies was made to ascertain any important considerations that might need to be taken forward once the plan was revoked. This is demonstrated by Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Policies relating to leisure set out within the South East Plan

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
C6: Countryside Access and Rights of Way Management	Encourage access to the countryside through maintaining Public Rights of Way system and identifying new routes	Consistent	None – covered by para 75 of the NPPF and adopted Local Plan 2011 Policy L10.
C7: The River Thames Corridor	Formulating coordinated policies, across boundaries, to reflect environmental, heritage and recreational value of	Consistent	None – covered by the Duty to Cooperate. The Vale is part of the River Thames Alliance that carries these actions

³⁸ NPPF, paragraph 69

³⁹ NPPF, paragraph 73

⁴⁰ NPPF, paragraph 75

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Identified Issue
	the river, taking account of the Thames River Basin Management Plan.		forward.

Policy Review – local policy

Local Plan 2011

- 5.5 An assessment of the Local Plan 2011 policies has been undertaken to ascertain if any of them should be incorporated into new policies in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (Table 5.2) or if they should be saved for consideration to be included in the Vale Local Plan 2031 part 2. The policies, both saved and unsaved, have been assessed for conformity with the NPPF to ascertain the weight they can be afforded. The NPPF advises that weight should be given according to the degree of consistency with the NPPF, the closer the policies reflect the NPPF, the greater weight that may be given⁴¹.
- 5.6 The final column in Table 5.2 summarises whether there is a policy 'gap' either because the policy has not been saved or because it is not consistent with NPPF and identifies any issues that might arise from this.

Table 5.2: Leisure policies within the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2011⁴²

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
H23: Open Space in New Housing Development	15% of residential area to be laid out as public open space.	Fully consistent	None
L1: Playing Space	Development on existing outdoor playing space will only be permitted if a deficiency in such space will not be created or added to or in listed circumstances.	Fully consistent	None
L2: Urban Open Space and Green Corridors	Development that would result in the loss of urban open spaces will not be permitted.	Not Consistent	Policy can be read in conjunction with NPPF and updated through LPP2.
L3: Urban Open Space and Green Corridors	Within the Green Corridors development will only be permitted in certain circumstances.	Not Consistent	Policy can be read in conjunction with NPPF and updated through LPP2.
L4: Allotments	Development on allotments will only be permitted where a deficiency in provision is not created or added to or	Fully consistent	None

⁴¹ NPPF, paragraph 215

⁴² Vale of White Horse District Council (2006) Local Plan 2011/ Adopted Plan July 2006.

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
	where equal or better provision is achieved.		
L5: Regional and Sub-Regional Leisure Facilities (not saved)	Facilities will only be permitted if they would meet criteria.	Fully consistent	None – covered by other policies DC1-9.
L6: Major Leisure and Entertainment Facilities	Major commercial leisure facilities will be permitted where a local need has been established.	Fully consistent	None
L7: Retention of Small-scale Local Leisure Facilities	Loss of existing local leisure facilities will not be permitted unless there is no longer a need or if alternative provision is made.	Fully consistent	None
L8: Provision of Small-scale Local Leisure Facilities	Small scale development for open space, sport and recreation will be permitted within or on the edge of settlements provided they meet certain criteria.	Fully consistent	None
L9: The Provision of Countryside Recreation Facilities	Small-scale developments to provide facilities for informal countryside recreation will be permitted provided certain criteria are met.	Fully consistent	None
L10: Safeguarding and Improving Public Rights of Way	Development over Public Rights of Way will not be permitted unless alternative provision can be made.	Fully consistent	None
L11: The Ridgeway	Development will not be permitted if it would harm the Ridgeway, important trees and hedgerows or diminish the enjoyment of its users.	Fully consistent	None
L12: The Thames Path	Development that would adversely affect the Thames Path will not be permitted.	Fully consistent	None
L13: Proposed Park at Folly Hill, Faringdon	Park to provide outdoor recreational opportunities proposed.	Fully consistent	None
L14: The Wilts and Berks Canal	Restoration of the historic canal.	Fully consistent	None – policy can continue to protect the historic line. Any planning application for restoration would be determined on its merits in accordance with adopted policies.
L15: The Wilts and Berks Canal	Proposed new route for the canal south of Abingdon.	Fully consistent	None
L16: Golf Courses (not saved)	Golf courses will only be permitted in certain circumstances.	Fully consistent	None – Covered by other adopted policies DC1 - 9

Policy	Summary	Consistency with Framework	Issue Identified
L17: The River Thames	Development along the River Thames will only be permitted where the special environmental qualities are protected or enhanced.	Fully consistent	None
L18: Land south of the Abingdon marina	Development needed to facilitate the quiet recreational use of the area south of the Abingdon Marina will be permitted.	Fully consistent	None
L19: Noisy Sports (not saved)	Motorsports, shooting, war games and air sports will be permitted under certain circumstances.	Fully consistent	None – Covered by other adopted policies DC1 - 9
L20: The Keeping & Rearing of Horses for Recreational Purposes (not saved)	Development associated with the keeping of horses for recreational purposes will be permitted under certain circumstances.	Fully consistent	None – Covered by other adopted policies DC1 - 9

Vale of White Horse Sustainable Communities Strategy

- 5.7 This document set out priorities to provide access to good quality green spaces, sport, cultural and leisure facilities. It is required that the Local Plan will make sure that existing green space, sport and recreation facilities are protected and that all new housing developments either provide or contribute to appropriate open space, sport and recreation facilities with firm arrangements in place for their future maintenance.

Evidence

Summary of previous consultation stages and key issues

- 5.8 The Council has completed a number of stages of consultation over the past few years as it has developed the Local Plan. The responses to each stage of consultation have been used to help inform the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1. The main stages of consultation completed to date include:

- Issues and Options 2007
- Preferred Options 2009
- Additional Consultation 2010
- Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013
- Housing Delivery Update 2014

Draft Local Plan Consultation 2013

- 5.9 Responses emphasised the need to protect the Public Rights of Way Network, the Ridgeway, Thames Path, National trails and boating. There was also a comment relating to the important role equestrianism plays in culture, health, leisure, sport and general improvement to the quality of life.
- 5.10 Another comment suggesting that there should be a section emphasising the riverside in Abingdon as a very important leisure asset and that it should be developed appropriately.
- 5.11 The responses in relation to the Wilts and Berks Canal were mainly in support of safeguarding the route of the canal. Responses from landowners of historic sections of the canal raised concerns regarding the impacts of restoring the canal and the Council's support of this.

Housing Delivery Update 2014

- 5.12 There were no leisure policies included in this consultation.

Identifying priorities at a community level

- 5.13 A number of Community-Led Plans (Parish Plans) have been prepared by town and parish councils across the Vale district. These plans provide a useful summary of community priorities that have been identified at a local level through consultation.
- 5.14 A summary is provided below for any issues or priorities that are included in any completed Community-Led Plan across the Vale relating to the natural environment topic.

Table 5.3: Issues Identified from Community-Led Plans

Parish	Description of Issue/ Priority
Blewbury	Preserve rural character of streams, roads and footpaths, improve footpaths, open some footpaths to cyclists and wheelchair users.
Buckland	Playing Field: provide playing field/open space for the village
East Hendred	If the reservoir goes ahead, the plans must ensure that East Hendred gains what it can, for example through the provision of bridleways and cycle routes between the village and the reservoir.
Harwell	Press for improvements in footpaths and cycleways.
Shrivenham	Ensure adequate provision of sports and leisure facilities.

Leisure and Sports Facilities Strategy, Addendum and Joint Didcot Study

5.15 The Leisure and Sports Facilities Strategy⁴³ has been prepared to ensure the effective delivery of leisure services across the district in relation to:

- sports halls
- swimming pools
- artificial grass pitches
- athletics tracks
- health and fitness provision
- indoor bowls centres
- indoor tennis centres
- outdoor tennis
- multi use games areas
- squash, and
- grass playing pitches.

5.16 This document will be used to support planning applications involving sport and leisure facilities. It will also be used to justify any necessary contributions to sport and leisure infrastructure, particularly in relation to the strategic sites identified in the Vale Local Plan 2031 Part 1.

Supplementary Planning Document Open Space, Sport and Recreation Future Provision (July 2008)

5.17 This document provides additional information to the adopted Local Plan 2011 policies and a superseded Structure Plan policy in relation to providing open space, sport and recreation provision for new development⁴⁴. The document is in three sections:

- the first deals with assessing the impacts of proposed residential developments in terms of open space, sport and recreation provision.
- the second explains how the Council intends to use planning conditions relating to open space, sport and recreation provision, and
- the final section sets out the circumstances in which the Council will require developers to enter into a planning agreement or unilateral undertaking relating to open space, sport and recreation provision.

⁴³ <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/local-development-framework/core-strateg-8>

⁴⁴ <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/local-development-framework/supplementary->

- 5.18 The document relates to provision of Multi Functional Greenspaces (MFGS), Other Public Spaces, Activity Spaces, Outdoor Sports Facilities, Indoor Sports Facilities. The standards were arrived at following an audit of open space, sport and recreation carried out by consultants in 2006-07.

Thames Waterway Plan 2006-2011

- 5.19 This document was prepared on behalf of the River Thames Alliance⁴⁵, a partnership of the key organisations that have an interest in the river. The focus of the document is on the recreational aspect of the river and the various strands of this. The core objectives are:

- to improve and promote access and information for all users (on water and land)
- improve and maintain the river infrastructure, facilities and services for all users
contribute to enhanced biodiversity, heritage, and landscape value in the waterway corridor, and
increase use of the river and its corridor

- 5.20 The River Thames Alliance has begun work on their next Waterway Plan.

Oxfordshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2006-2014

- 5.21 This document outlines four objectives to be met in the county, which are:

- public rights of way are protected and well maintained.
- a better joined-up network that meets the needs and demands of users whilst accommodating the interests of land managers, the natural environment and our cultural heritage.
- a public rights of way network which enables access for all, and
- a thriving countryside where residents and visitors are able to understand and enjoy their rights, in a responsible way.

The Upper Thames Reservoir

- 5.22 Proposals have been made for a new reservoir to be created within the Vale to assist with the management of future water supply to the South

⁴⁵

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/289784/geth1205bjyc-e-e.pdf

East of England. This matter is discussed in more detail within Topic Paper 7: Responding to Climate Change (see page 2 for more details). There is however opportunity for recreational and biodiversity enhancement if the reservoir is created.

Wilts and Berks Canal

- 5.23 The Wilts & Berks canal route extends from Melksham in Wiltshire, through Swindon and on towards Abingdon-on-Thames where it meets with the River Thames. There is a branch (the North Wiltshire Canal) from Swindon to the Thames & Severn Canal near Cricklade. The Canal was formally abandoned by Act of Parliament in 1914. Unlike many other canals in the country where the towpath and canal itself remained in public ownership, the Act of Parliament returned the Wilts and Berks Canal to the adjacent landowners and Local Authorities. Much of the route of the canal is in private ownership.
- 5.24 Restoration of the Wilts and Berks Canal is being carried out by the Wilts and Berks Canal Trust (The Trust) and the Wiltshire, Swindon & Oxfordshire Canal Partnership (The Partnership). The Trust is a member of the Partnership, along with all the Local Authorities on the route and other key stakeholders. The Partnership was formed in 2001 to oversee and direct the restoration of the Canal.
- 5.25 The Canal is 60 miles in length so its restoration is a long term project taking place throughout the plan period. The Trust and the Partnership recognise that there is a lot more work to do, particularly on the sections in the Vale, before the Canal can be restored. The section of canal that traverses the district is in various different states, from restored sections around Jubilee Junction in Abingdon-on-Thames, through watered but derelict sections, to sections where the canal has been filled in. The Canal in its current state is home to a wide variety of habitats and species, some of which are European Protected Species, such as Great Crested Newts and Water Voles. Studies need to be undertaken to document this rich ecology to inform a strategy for how it can be protected.
- 5.26 Restoration of the sections of Canal in the Vale of White Horse has taken place at Abingdon, East Challow and Shrivenham (Map 5.4).

Map 5.4 – Restored sections (shown in blue, restored towpath shown in red)



Issues (Challenges and Opportunities)

5.27 Leisure policies from the adopted Local Plan 2011 will continue to apply. The key issues to take in to consideration in writing future Leisure policies in Part 2 of the Local Plan are:

- Planning policies should be based on robust, up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision.
- Planning policies should protect and enhance Public Rights of Way. This is done through Policy L10 of the adopted Local Plan 2011.
- Existing green space, sport and recreation facilities should be protected and all new housing developments should provide or contribute to provision. Policy L1 of the Adopted Local Plan 2011 already protects existing provision. New provision of facilities will be addressed in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and a core policy on infrastructure in Local Plan 2031 Part 1.
- Consideration needs to be given to how the Council can provide appropriate support for the Wilts and Berks Canal through policy.

Strategic Policy Options

5.28 No new leisure policies are proposed therefore there is nothing to assess through Sustainability Appraisal.

Recommendations

- 5.29 It is recommended that no policies on leisure are required in Local Plan 2031 Part 1 because all of the relevant issues are already covered by adopted Local Plan 2011 policies or by the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 5.30 The requirement for new leisure facilities will be set out in a core policy in Local Plan 2031 Part 1 relating to infrastructure, which will be supported by the up-to-date and forthcoming leisure strategies.
- 5.31 It is recommended that a strategic policy on the Wilts and Berks Canal is not necessary in Local Plan 2031 Part 1 but a more detailed policy could be included in Local Plan 2031 Part 2. Until Local Plan 2031 Part 2 is adopted, policy L14 of the adopted Local Plan 2011 will continue to apply and will continue to provide protection of the historic line of the Canal where it is at risk from development.

Appendix 1: List of abbreviations/Glossary

Term	Acronym	Explanation
Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard	ANGSt	This is a standard set by Natural England setting out the maximum recommended walking distance from people's homes to accessible greenspace.
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	AONB	A national designation to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.
Biodiversity Action Plan	BAP	A spatial, approach to biodiversity action planning. This helps partners to see where the main biodiversity hotspots are, and therefore where conservation efforts can be most effective. In Oxfordshire, conservation efforts are focused on Conservation Target Areas.
Conservation Target Areas	CTA	These are county-wide important areas of landscape that present the best opportunities for prioritising the conservation, enhancement and re-creation of designated sites and important habitats.
Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000	CROW	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/contents
Green Infrastructure	GI	Green infrastructure includes sites protected for their importance to wildlife or the environment, nature reserves, greenspaces and greenway linkages. Together they provide a network of green space both urban and rural, providing a wide range of environmental and quality of benefits.
Local Plan Part 1	LPP1	This document contains long-term spatial vision and strategy policies that guide growth in the district.
Local Plan Part 2	LPP2	This document will contain the more detailed development management policies and site allocations for non-strategic sites.
National Planning Policy Framework	NPPF or The Framework	This sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied at a local level.
National Planning Practice Guidance	NPPG	This is a web based resource providing detailed information to help practitioners interpret the National Planning Policy Framework.
Natural Environment and Rural Communities	NERC	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/contents

Act 2006		
Site of Special Scientific Importance	SSSI	SSSIs are the country's very best wildlife and geological sites, designated at a national level..
South East Plan	SEP	Now revoked regional guidance for the South East.
Strategic Housing Market Assessment	SHMA	Technical study undertaken on behalf of the Oxfordshire authorities to help the local authorities understand how many homes will be needed in the period 2011-2031.
Sustainability Appraisal	SA	The process of assess the economic, social and environmental effects of a proposed plan. This process implements the requirements of the SEA Directive.

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