



The Planning Inspectorate

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# **Report to Vale of White Horse District Council**

**by Malcolm Rivett BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI**

**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government**

**Date 30 November 2016**

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PLANNING AND COMPULSORY PURCHASE ACT 2004 (AS AMENDED)

SECTION 20

**REPORT ON THE EXAMINATION INTO  
VALE OF WHITE HORSE LOCAL PLAN 2031: PART 1**

Document submitted for examination on 18 March 2015

Examination hearings held between 22 and 29 September 2015 and 2 and 19 February 2016

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## **Abbreviations Used in this Report**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| AA   | Appropriate Assessment                          |
| AONB | Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty              |
| CE   | Cambridge Econometrics                          |
| CP   | Core Policy                                     |
| DCLG | Department for Communities and Local Government |
| dpa  | dwellings per annum                             |
| LDS  | Local Development Scheme                        |
| LEP  | Local Enterprise Partnership                    |
| LP   | Local Plan                                      |
| MM   | Main Modification                               |
| NPPF | National Planning Policy Framework              |
| OAN  | Objectively Assessed Need                       |
| PPG  | Planning Practice Guidance                      |
| SA   | Sustainability Appraisal                        |
| SCI  | Statement of Community Involvement              |
| SEP  | Strategic Economic Plan                         |
| SHMA | Strategic Housing Market Assessment             |
| SSSI | Site of Special Scientific Interest             |

## **Non-Technical Summary**

This report concludes that the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031: Part 1 provides an appropriate basis for the planning of the district, providing a number of modifications are made to the plan. Vale of White Horse District Council has specifically requested me to recommend any modifications necessary to enable the plan to be adopted.

All of the modifications to address this were proposed by the Council but, where necessary, I have amended detailed wording and added consequential modifications and I have recommended their inclusion after considering the representations from other parties on these issues.

The main modifications can be summarised as follows:

- Clarification of the approach to, and timescale for, providing in the Vale for unmet housing needs from other districts;
- Deletion from the plan of housing allocation sites 6 (South of East Hanney), 12 (North West of Harwell Campus) and 13 (East of Harwell Campus);
- Clarification of the approach to be adopted in respect of the Housing Supply Ring Fence;
- Amendments to policy CP13 and its supporting text making clear that only land at Abingdon, Kennington and Radley (relating to housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4) is removed from the Green Belt;
- Safeguarding of land for a possible strategic storage water reservoir to the north of Longworth; and
- Various other changes to the plan (including its appendices) to ensure that it is up to date, internally consistent, effective, justified and consistent with national policy.

## Introduction

1. This report contains my assessment of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031: Part 1 in terms of Section 20(5) of the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended). It considers first whether the plan's preparation has complied with the duty to co-operate, in recognition that there is no scope to remedy any failure in this regard. It then considers whether the plan is sound and whether it is compliant with the legal requirements. The *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF), paragraph 182, makes clear that to be sound a local plan should be positively prepared; justified; effective and consistent with national policy.
2. The starting point for the examination is the assumption that the local authority has submitted what it considers to be a sound plan. The basis for my examination is the Publication Version (November 2014) Part 1 Plan published for consultation in November 2014. The Council's Local Development Scheme (updated to September 2016) also proposes a 'Part 2' plan. This document will set out policies and locations for unmet housing needs from other districts to be met within the Vale (updating the Part 1 plan's overall development strategy if necessary) and will allocate other development sites, as far as is necessary, and will set out development management policies to replace saved policies of the 2011 Local Plan.
3. My report deals with the main modifications that are needed to make the submitted plan sound and legally compliant and they are identified in bold in the report (**MM**). In accordance with section 20(7C) of the 2004 Act the Council requested that I should recommend any modifications needed to rectify matters that make the plan unsound/not legally compliant and thus incapable of being adopted. These main modifications are set out in the Appendix.
4. The main modifications that are necessary for soundness and legal compliance all relate to matters that were discussed at the examination hearings. Following these discussions, the Council prepared a schedule of proposed main modifications (and carried out sustainability appraisal where appropriate) and this schedule has been subject to public consultation. I have taken account of the consultation responses in coming to my conclusions in this report and in this light I have made some amendments to the detailed wording of the main modifications and added consequential modifications where these are necessary for consistency or clarity. None of these amendments significantly alters the content of the modifications as published for consultation or undermines the participatory processes and sustainability appraisal that has been undertaken. Where necessary I have highlighted these amendments in the report. In a very limited number of instances I have also concluded, in the light of consultation comments, that part of some consulted-upon proposed main modifications are neither necessary nor appropriate.
5. A number of the consultation responses did not directly relate to the proposed modifications or to the soundness of the plan, have been overtaken by events (ie agreement on unmet housing needs), concern matters already previously discussed in detail at hearing sessions, are addressed by other policies of the plan (in particular policy CP1) or relate primarily to the proposed 'Part 2' plan.

## **Policies Map**

6. The Council must maintain an adopted policies map which illustrates geographically the application of the policies in the adopted development plan. When submitting a local plan for examination, the Council is required to provide a submission policies map showing the changes to the adopted policies map that would result from the proposals in the submitted local plan. In this case, the submission policies map comprises the set of plans identified as the *Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Draft Adopted Policies Map, Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Sub-Area, South East Vale Sub-Area and Western Vale Sub-Area (November 2014)*.
7. The policies map is not defined in statute as a development plan document and so I do not have the power to recommend main modifications to it. However, a number of the main modifications to the plan's policies which I am recommending require further corresponding changes to be made to the policies map. In addition, there are some instances where the geographic illustration of policies on the submission policies map is not justified and changes to the policies map are needed to ensure that the relevant policies are effective.
8. These further changes to the policies map were published for consultation alongside the MMs (referred to as MMs 35-37, 45, 46, 64-66, 68-70, 72-77 and 81 and Figs B1 – B18 of the Appendices of the Schedule of Main Modifications (July 2016)). I identify in the report a small number of amendments that are needed to these further changes in the light of the consultation responses.
9. When the plan is adopted, in order to comply with the legislation and give effect to the plan's policies, the Council will need to update the adopted policies map to include all the changes proposed in the *Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Draft Adopted Policies Map, Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Sub-Area, South East Vale Sub-Area and Western Vale Sub-Area (November 2014)* and the further changes published alongside the MMs (MMs 35-37, 45, 46, 64-66, 68-70, 72-77 and 81 and Figs B1 – B18 of the Appendices of the Schedule of Main Modifications (July 2016)), incorporating the necessary amendments identified in this report.

## Assessment of Duty to Co-operate

10. Section s20(5)(c) of the 2004 Act requires that I consider whether the Council complied with any duty imposed on them by section 33A of the 2004 Act in relation to the plan's preparation.
11. *Topic Paper 1 – Duty to Co-operate and Cross Boundary Issues* details the key cross-boundary challenges and opportunities faced by the district, including housing, infrastructure, transport, employment, retail, water supply, the natural environment and minerals and waste. In relation to each issue the paper sets out the bodies with which the Council has engaged in preparation of the plan, including neighbouring Councils and a range of other organisations through the district's membership of the Oxfordshire Growth Board. The board paved the way for the *Oxfordshire Statement of Co-operation*, agreed by the leaders of the five district councils and County Council, which details the scope and structure of co-operation between the councils. The paper also evidences engagement with, amongst others, Swindon Borough and Wiltshire County Councils, Thames Water and the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Council of Partners. The paper concludes by identifying how, in the Council's opinion, it has met the Duty to Co-operate.
12. In terms of housing, and in accordance with the *Statement of Co-operation*, the Council jointly commissioned, with the other Oxfordshire councils, the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) of March 2014. In the light of this, and the potential for Oxford City being unable to meet its objectively-assessed need for housing within its own boundaries, the Growth Board agreed in November 2014 a timescale for a programme of post-SHMA work (subsequently revised in July 2015, following submission of this plan for examination). Through this work agreed positions on the extent of Oxford's unmet need and its appropriate distribution between other Oxfordshire districts, including Vale of White Horse, were envisaged, although the Growth Board has re-confirmed its emphasis on the sovereignty of individual local plans. In late September 2016, some months after the Stage 1 and 2 hearing sessions, and following the closure of the consultation on proposed main modifications to the plan, the Vale of White Horse and three of the other Oxfordshire districts signed a *Memorandum of Cooperation* agreeing to provide for Oxford City's unmet housing needs: 2,200 dwellings in the case of the Vale, with an assumed "start date" of 2021. The memorandum makes clear it does not identify, propose or recommend any sites for additional housing within any district, this being a matter for each individual district through its own local plan process.
13. The overall approach to joint working across local authority boundaries in Oxfordshire has been, to my mind, a comprehensive and rigorous one: the joint evidence on, amongst other things, housing, in the form of the Oxfordshire SHMA, the co-operation through the Growth Board and its work programme for agreeing the level of unmet need in Oxford City and its appropriate distribution, was in line with paragraphs 178-181 of the NPPF in relation to engagement and planning strategically across local boundaries. Policy CP2 of the plan, as submitted, commits the Council to allocating land (including reviewing the plan if necessary) to provide for any other district's

unmet housing needs which the Growth Board agrees should be accommodated in the Vale.

14. Oxford City Council has expressed concern that, in preparing the plan, the Vale invited it to only one bi-lateral meeting in connection with the Duty to Co-operate. However, in the context of the *Statement of Co-operation* and the ongoing work of the Growth Board, involving all the Oxfordshire Councils, a lack of meetings between these two Councils alone is not evidence of a failure to adequately discharge the Duty to Co-operate. Reference has been made to a number of other local plan examinations in which the appointed Inspector determined that the submitting authority had not adequately discharged its Duty to Co-operate. Whilst there may be some similarities between these cases and the Vale, they are not identical: notably the Vale of White Horse has engaged fully through agreed joint working arrangements with neighbouring authorities on how potential unmet housing needs will be met.
15. The City Council, and others, criticise the plan's approach to dealing with potential unmet housing needs on a number of significant counts. However, to my mind, these are primarily matters of the plan's effectiveness, and thus soundness, which I consider in detail below. Disagreement between authorities is not, in itself, evidence of a failure to meet the Duty to Co-operate.
16. It has also been contended that, in connection with the potential use of brownfield land in South Oxfordshire (as an alternative to land within the Vale), housing allocations in the North Wessex Downs AONB and the Western Vale Villages and the plan's approach to the Green Belt, the Council has also failed to discharge its Duty to Co-operate. However, once again, the concerns raised are primarily issues of soundness, considered later in this report, and, having regard to the evidence of engagement with relevant organisations, I am satisfied that the Council has acted appropriately.
17. In conclusion, having regard to all that I have read and heard, including the Statements of Common Ground between the Council and Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Councils (in which these authorities state that they consider the Vale has met the Duty) I conclude that in relation to matters of strategic importance the Council has engaged constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis with all relevant organisations in order to maximise the effectiveness of the preparation of the plan. It has therefore met the Duty to Co-operate.

## Assessment of Soundness

### Main Issues

18. Taking account of all the representations, written evidence and the discussions that took place at the examination hearings, I have identified ten main issues upon which the soundness of the plan depends. Representations on the submitted plan have been considered insofar as they relate to soundness but they are not reported on individually. A number of representations refer to matters which will be most appropriately considered in the preparation and examination of the 'Part 2' plan.

### **Issue 1 – whether or not the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for addressing unmet housing needs from other districts.**

19. As detailed above I have concluded that having regard to all relevant matters, including the unmet housing needs of neighbouring districts, the Council has adequately discharged its Duty to Co-operate. I now turn to the related, but separate, matter of whether or not the plan is effective, and thus sound, in terms of the way it deals with potential unmet housing needs from elsewhere in the housing market area.

20. Since the publication in April 2014 of the *Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment* (SHMA) it was anticipated to be likely that Oxford City would not have the capacity to fully meet its objectively assessed need for housing within its own boundaries. Through the Oxfordshire Growth Board the Oxfordshire local planning authorities agreed in principle to seek to provide for any unmet need from Oxford elsewhere within the housing market area. However, at the time of the submission of the Vale's plan for examination in March 2015, the Growth Board had not agreed the level of housing needed to be catered for outside Oxford City, nor its distribution. In the light of this the plan, as submitted, sought to provide for the objectively-assessed housing needs of the Vale itself. Nonetheless, policy CP2 indicates that should ongoing joint working through the Growth Board identify that an unmet housing need is required to be accommodated in the Vale, the Council would either allocate appropriate housing sites, in the 'Part 2' plan, in conformity with the Spatial Strategy of the Part 1 Local Plan, or would undertake a full or partial review of the plan, dependent upon the scale of the unmet need to be accommodated.

21. It is argued that in not providing for, at least some of, the likely unmet needs of Oxford the plan is contrary to the NPPF's statements on the importance of housing needs being met within the housing market area, including through joint working to provide for unmet needs of neighbouring authorities. Throughout the examination it was suggested that there was a good indication of the likely level of unmet need which would ultimately be agreed appropriate for the Vale to accommodate – somewhere between 2000 and 5500 dwellings. As detailed above, in late September 2016 agreement was reached (*Memorandum of Co-operation*) that the Vale will provide for 2,200 dwellings to assist in delivering the city's unmet housing needs, with an assumed "start date" of 2021, albeit that this assumption does not preclude earlier delivery.

22. Nonetheless, until the September 2016 agreed position on the overall amount of Oxford's needs to be met outside the city and its appropriate distribution



between the relevant authorities, it would have been very difficult for the Vale's plan to provide for such needs. Firstly, any assumed level of Oxford's unmet housing need provided for in the Vale's plan could have, potentially inappropriately, influenced the evidence-based, joint working approach envisaged for agreeing the distribution between the authorities of the unmet need. This could have resulted in either more or less housing being provided for in the Vale (and consequently also the other districts) than the evidence indicates is appropriate. Moreover, the Councils, and others, envisaged it likely that Oxford's unmet housing needs may be most appropriately provided for in areas surrounding the city boundary currently designated as Green Belt. It would have been likely to be difficult for the Council to demonstrate that the exceptional circumstances exist to justify reviewing the Green Belt boundary to accommodate this housing when a significant level of uncertainty existed concerning the amount of unmet need which would be appropriately accommodated in the Vale.

23. Partly in the light of these difficulties, and with reference to the fact that the overall strategy of the plan might need to change to accommodate unmet housing needs, it has also been argued that the Vale's plan should have been delayed until agreement had been reached on the level and distribution of Oxford's unmet needs, and an appropriate number of sites to cater for this, had been identified in the Vale. However, this would have run counter to the Government's aim (most recently expressed in the 21 July 2015, House of Commons Written Statement by the Minister of State for Housing and Planning) of getting local plans in place quickly, in particular to help accelerate house building over the next five years.
24. Whilst it is obviously a positive step forward that agreement has now been reached that the Vale will seek to accommodate 2,200 dwellings of Oxford's City's housing needs, this has occurred very late in the plan examination process – after the close of the consultation on main modifications to the plan. Notwithstanding that the *Memorandum of Co-operation* specifically states that the Vale's contribution to the unmet needs will be addressed through its 'Part 2' plan, it would, in theory, now be possible for the Part 1 plan to be further modified to allocate sites to meet this need. However, for several reasons I concur with the Council that, at this late stage, this is not the appropriate course of action.
25. Firstly, such an approach would inevitably delay adoption of the plan by many months, contrary to the Government's aim for local plans. Secondly, the plan as submitted, proposes revision of the Green Belt boundaries around Abingdon-on-Thames, Radley and Kennington and the allocation of sites for more than 1,500 new dwellings. Whilst allocated with the primary intention of meeting the Vale's own objectively-assessed need for housing, as discussed at the hearings, Oxford City Council consider these sites to be well-located to provide for their own unmet housing needs. Notwithstanding the primary purpose of their allocation, housing on these sites would be available just as much to people falling with the category of Oxford's need as to those of the Vale. And in reality it would be all but impossible to determine if a potential occupier of this housing represents a Vale or Oxford 'housing need'.
26. As detailed in Issue 4 I conclude that these housing sites are soundly-based and the evidence I heard at the hearings indicates that, following adoption of

the plan, they could proceed relatively quickly providing housing to meet some of the unmet needs of Oxford, as well as those of the Vale, within the next few years. Whilst for the plan period as a whole additional housing allocations will be required to cater for the Vale's own housing needs and its contribution towards the city's unmet ones, the Abingdon, Radley and Kennington sites would alone provide for, in suitable locations, more than two-thirds of the 2,200 unmet need dwellings recently agreed to be catered for in the Vale. However, given these sites' current Green Belt status, it seems to me highly unlikely that planning permission would be granted for residential development on them until they are deleted from the Green Belt through adoption of this plan. Thus, whilst the plan as submitted does not provide for all the unmet needs of Oxford which have been agreed should be provided for in the Vale (with an assumed "start date" of 2021), its adoption now would allow for some housing suitable to meet these needs to come forward quickly. Delaying adoption of the plan would allow for it to provide for all the unmet needs which have recently been agreed to be appropriately accommodated in the Vale, but would inevitably also delay the actual provision of houses to meet any of these needs.

27. Given the indications that it is possible that it will be concluded that Oxford's unmet housing needs would most appropriately be provided for in the Vale on land currently designated as Green Belt, adoption of the plan now would potentially mean that its Green Belt boundaries would not remain unaltered for the plan period to 2031. Whilst this is not ideal in the context of the Green Belt's intended permanence in the long term, the plan as submitted does not seek to pretend that its Green Belt boundaries will necessarily remain unchanged: policy CP2 and the supporting text of policy CP13 refer to the potential for a future, further, review of the Green Belt to provide for unmet housing needs.
28. Despite the above I share the concerns of some that neither policy CP2 as originally proposed, nor the initial modification to it suggested by the Council, would adequately incentivise the Vale to take the steps necessary to provide for all the housing needs from Oxford which it agrees should be accommodated in the district. Possible solutions to this were discussed at the hearings and **MM1** and **MM3** introduce clearer statements in the plan regarding the arrangements and timescales to provide for these needs. Crucially they make clear that, if an adopted plan is not in place to cater for these housing needs within two years of the adoption of this plan, the housing requirement figure for the Vale will be a plan period total of the Vale's own OAN plus its agreed share of Oxford's unmet needs. The rendering out of date of relevant policies of the plan (in line with paragraph 49 of the NPPF) if a five year supply of housing could not be demonstrated to cater for both the Vale's own and Oxford's unmet housing needs will be a suitably strong, and thus sound, incentive for the Council to provide for its agreed share of Oxford's housing needs as soon as possible.
29. Whilst **MM3** does not refer to the *Memorandum of Co-operation*, which was signed after the end of the consultation period on the main modifications, the two are not inconsistent. Thus, in the absence of any suggestions that it should be, I conclude that it is not necessary to the soundness of the plan for **MM3** to be further modified to reflect the memorandum at this stage. However, this would not prevent the Council from making factual, additional

modifications to the plan before its adoption in order to refer to the *Memorandum of Co-operation*.

30. The two year deadline is appropriate having regard to both the time it is likely to take to identify and fully assess the allocations necessary to meet Oxford's housing needs and the fact that, in the meantime, the housing sites at Abingdon-on-Thames, Kennington and Radley would be available for development and suitable to meet some of the city's unmet needs. This implies adoption of a plan providing for Oxford's unmet housing needs some time in advance of the assumed 2021 "start date" for this provision. However, the Council has not, in the light of the *Memorandum of Co-operation*, indicated that it would wish for the two year deadline to be altered and the memorandum is clear that delivery of housing to meet these needs in advance of 2021 is not precluded. In the light of consultation responses, and so as not to inappropriately constrain future decisions on further allocations to meet outstanding housing needs, I have slightly amended **MM1** to refer to the potential for the 'Part 2' plan to include "additional" (instead of "smaller/local") development sites. However, in advance of thorough assessment of all the potential sites to cater for this need, and bearing in mind the *Memorandum of Cooperation's* statement that the allocation of sites to meet Oxford's needs remains the responsibility of the "receiving" district, it would not be appropriate for the Part 1 plan to identify a preference for any particular areas or sites.
31. **MM2** is a factual correction of the plan (and thus necessary for its effectiveness). The change to the Local Development Scheme, removing the intention to prepare a Science Vale Area Action Plan, is a matter for the Council and does not affect the soundness of this plan.
32. In conclusion, subject to **MM1 - MM3**, the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for addressing unmet housing needs from other districts.

**Issue 2 – whether or not the identified objectively assessed need for housing in the district, the overall distribution of housing and the proposed housing supply ring fence are soundly-based.**

Objectively Assessed Need for Housing

33. The Council, in conjunction with the other Oxfordshire local planning authorities, commissioned the April 2014 *Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment* (SHMA). Having regard to house prices, migration and commuting flows the document concludes that a sub-regional housing market extends across much of Oxfordshire and that, thus, this area represents an appropriate basis on which to assess housing need. There is no persuasive evidence to indicate otherwise. In addition to Oxfordshire-wide figures the SHMA also sets out an analysis of housing need on a district by district basis.
34. In line with the *Planning Practice Guidance* (PPG) the SHMA uses as its starting point for the assessment of housing need the, then, most up to date, 2011-based DCLG household projections. Extended forwards to 2031 this suggests a new housing need of 367 dwellings per annum (dpa) for Vale of White Horse for the plan period. However, in line with the PPG, the document considers demographic patterns not reflected in the 2011-based projections. Having regard to more recent migration data, calibrated to Census data, the SHMA concludes that average annual net migration into the Vale is around 100 people per year higher than suggested by the 2011-based projections. On this basis the housing need for the district would be 468 dpa in the period 2011-2031.
35. The PPG indicates that an assessment of the likely change in job numbers based on past trends and/or economic forecasts should also be considered in determining housing needs. It advises that where the supply of economically active population is forecast to be less than the projected job growth consideration should be given to how the location of new housing could help address possible problems of unsustainable commuting patterns and/or reduced resilience of local business. Accordingly, the partner authorities commissioned SQW and Cambridge Econometrics (CE) to undertake economic forecasting to inform the SHMA.
36. As a baseline the SQW/CE report forecasts what would happen, on a sector by sector basis, if past trends of growth in employment in Oxfordshire, relative to the rest of the South East and UK, were to continue. This indicates that an additional 9,100 jobs (rounded to the nearest 100) are likely to be created in the Vale of White Horse 2011-2031. However, taking account of the adjusted population/household projections of the SHMA, which the report contends would impact on population-related employment such as health, education and social care, there is forecast to be a baseline of 10,600 additional jobs in the Vale in this period.
37. In addition to the baseline and additional population growth in employment the report considers a "Planned Economic Growth" forecast, reflecting influences such as the Science Vale Enterprise Zone and the prospects for the area's economic assets. Strong potential is identified for both inward investment and growth of existing businesses, particularly on the existing employment sites within and nearby the Enterprise Zone, in the space science,

satellite communication, physical sciences and biomedical industries. 12,400 additional jobs in the Vale of White Horse are forecast as a result of this (2,200 of which would be "indirect" employment growth). Together with the baseline and additional population growth in employment the SQW/CE report concludes that 23,000 additional jobs are likely to be created in the Vale during the plan period.

38. Having regard to employment rates, commuting patterns, household headship rates and assumptions on vacant and second homes, the SHMA identifies that 1,028 additional dpa would be needed in Vale of White Horse (2011-2031) to support the baseline and planned economic growth. The Council contends that, notwithstanding the much lower "starting point" for the assessment of housing need and adjusted demographic based forecast, not providing for this significantly higher level of new housing would run the risk of unsustainable commuting into the Vale and/or difficulties for local employers in filling posts.
39. The SHMA also concludes that the 1,028 dpa required to support the baseline and planned economic growth would simultaneously appropriately respond to market signals and ensure that its identified need for affordable housing is met in the district, in line with the guidance in the PPG. It is on this basis that the Council contends that the full, objectively assessed need for new housing in the district is 1,028 dpa or 20,560 for the plan period.
40. Shortly before the submission of the plan for examination the DCLG 2012-based household projections were published and the Council subsequently commissioned a report looking at the implications of these projections for housing need in the district. This indicates a more up-to-date "starting point" for assessing need of 432 dpa, approximately midway between the unadjusted and adjusted demographic forecasts based on the 2011-based household projections. In terms of the housing required to support the forecast 23,000 additional jobs and using the household formation rates in the 2012-based projections, more up-to date commuting trends data and an allowance for people with more than one job, the report indicates a requirement of 1,001 dpa, increasing to 1,045 dpa if it is assumed that household formation rates for the 25-34 age group returns to the levels seen in 2001 by 2025. In the light of this the Council contends that the, not significantly different, figure of 1,028 dpa remains appropriate as the objectively assessed need (OAN) for housing in Vale of White Horse.
41. There is widespread criticism of the forecast of 23,000 additional jobs (an average 1.5% pa growth in employment) with many people arguing that it is not realistic. In writing and at the hearings evidence of various types has been put forward indicating that there are flaws in the assumptions on which the forecasts are based. These points have mostly been countered by explanations by the Council and others in support of the figure. In general I find these detailed points to be inconclusive in terms of precise jobs growth and housing need figures. However, it is notable that the SQW/CE report is not alone in forecasting high levels of employment growth in the Vale, table 6.1 of Doc ECO02 indicating that Experian, another respected economic forecaster, projects average annual employment growth of 1.9%, around 25% higher than the SQW/CE forecast. Moreover, although the 1.5% pa employment growth is three times that actually achieved in the Vale in the 2000-2011 period, it is significantly less than the 2.1% growth experienced in the district

between 1981 and 2000. Whilst this is now many years ago it is also notable that levels of growth similar to, or higher than, the 1.5% forecast were achieved much more recently in Oxford City itself (1.4% 2000-2011) and in the comparator authority of South Cambridgeshire (2.1%, 2000-2011).

42. Furthermore, in the first two years of the plan period itself (2011-2013) the number of jobs in Vale of White Horse has increased by 2% (ie an average of 1% pa) Whilst this is below the 1.5% pa plan forecast in the years to 2031, it is already double that achieved on average in the 2000-2011 period. Moreover, since 2011 the increase in "hi-tech" jobs (ie the expanding sectors in the planned economic growth forecast) has been 9% (BRES data (via SQW) referred to at the hearings). Consequently, in the light of all that I have read and heard, and having particular regard to these figures, I conclude that the 23,000 jobs growth forecast is soundly based.
43. There are arguments as to whether the planned economic growth based forecast of housing need is a "policy on" or "policy off" projection. However, to my mind these arguments are over-simplistic and essentially futile in the context of this local plan examination. The 9% increase in "hi-tech" jobs in the district since 2011 in the absence of an up to date, adopted plan indicate that significant jobs growth in the Vale can be expected irrespective of the Council's policy towards it. Implementation of the plan (including provision for high levels of additional housing) would be likely to promote a higher level of employment growth than would otherwise be the case but, in principle, that would support the Framework's core principle of proactively driving and supporting sustainable economic growth. Of course that does not mean that the plan should necessarily provide for the housing necessary to support the forecast economic growth regardless of any constraints to development in the area or its effect on the district's character; matters I consider later in this report.
44. It is contended that there has been no independent assessment or review of the SQW/CE Economic Forecasting report and that the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), whose Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) influenced the forecasting work, is not democratic. However, insofar as it relates to the Vale's Local Plan Part 1, I have assessed the soundness of the report's employment forecasts, in the light of consultation comments, and, irrespective of the LEP's status and democratic make-up, it is the locally elected Vale of White Horse District Council who has decided to seek to support the forecast level of economic growth through the policies and provisions of the plan.
45. Given the forecast increase in employment and migration of people into the Vale, it is appropriate to consider their likely effects on neighbouring districts beyond the Oxfordshire housing market area. At the hearings the Council contended that the district would be likely to be competing internationally, rather than with neighbouring districts, for much of the forecast economic growth and that employees moving to the Vale would be likely to be attracted from all over the UK, and indeed the World, rather than from a small number of neighbouring authorities. Whilst the forecast housing requirement is based on current commuting patterns (an almost "in balance" ratio of 1.04 for the Vale) it is almost inevitable that some employees of newly created jobs in the district would commute from neighbouring authority areas, whilst some residents of newly built dwellings in the Vale would commute out of the district

for work. However, it is not the role of, or possible for, the plan to prescribe where people live and work, although this does not mean that a plan should not seek to provide jobs and the related housing requirements in the same local authority area, subject, obviously, to a consideration of constraints.

46. I have given careful consideration to the very detailed critique of the SHMA, prepared by a respected planner. I have addressed above a number of the points it raises and others, whilst interesting, are to my mind more challenges of government policy and guidance than evidence of failure of the Oxfordshire SHMA. Reference has been made to the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU), held subsequently to the examination hearings. However, at this stage with the precise nature and timescale for the country's exit from the EU remaining uncertain, it is not feasible to assess the likely implications for housing need in Oxfordshire.
47. Late in the examination, following the completion of hearing sessions, the DCLG 2014-based household projections were published, once again indicating a somewhat different "starting point" figure for assessing housing need. However, having regard to the fact that there is a strong, economic growth, led reason to substantially adjust new housing requirements in the Vale from the "starting point" figure, and in the absence of any convincing evidence to the contrary, I concur with the Council that these figures do not undermine the robustness of the 20,560 dwelling requirement for the district.
48. In conclusion, having regard to the Council's aspiration to support a significant, but realistic, growth in employment, 20,560 new dwellings (1,028 dpa) is a soundly-based figure for the objectively assessed need for housing in the Vale of White Horse in the period 2011-2031. I consider in Issue 8 below the related matter of the plan's housing requirement figure.

#### Objectively-assessed need for pitches for Gypsies and Travellers

49. Policy CP27 indicates that, in addition to safeguarding existing pitches, provision will be made for at least 13 additional pitches for gypsies and travellers during the plan period, in line with the need for the district identified in the *2013 Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Show People Accommodation Needs Assessment*, prepared jointly with Oxford City and South Oxfordshire District Councils. The policy states that the need will be provided for through the implementation of extant planning permissions; the extension of existing sites, where possible, to meet the needs of existing residents and their families; and (in line with the approach for a proportion of housing for the settled community) the allocation of specific sites in the 'Part 2' plan. There is no convincing evidence to suggest that the assessment of need or the proposed approach to meeting it is not soundly based.

#### Overall distribution of housing

50. Policy CP3 categorises each of the main settlements in the district as a Market Town, Local Service Centre, Larger Village or Smaller Village, based on the 2014 *Town and Village Facilities Study*. I understand that since 2014 there have been some changes in the facilities at a number of the settlements and this is likely to continually be the case. However, I have read or heard nothing to demonstrate that the settlement hierarchy or the distribution of settlements

between the three sub-areas is fundamentally flawed. Moreover, the proposed deletion of some housing sites originally included in the plan does not alter the categorisation of the relevant settlements. However, in the interests of effectiveness, **MM4** is necessary to correct errors in policy CP3 and to ensure consistency with the rest of the plan, which makes clear that Sutton Courtenay is in the South East Vale Sub-Area and that East Challow, Shrivenham, Stanford-in-the-Vale, Uffington and Watchfield are larger villages, not local service centres.

51. Policy CP4, as submitted, indicates the intention that 13,960 (approximately 68%) of the 20,560 OAN will be provided for on 22 strategic sites of 200 dwellings or more. In the light of my conclusions on Issues 4 and 5, **MM5** is required to delete references to three of the 22 sites, reducing the total number of dwellings envisaged to be delivered on the strategic sites to 12,495 (taking account of a minor adjustment to the housing numbers on the Monks Farm site).
52. Of the 12,495 dwellings on allocated sites, policy CP4 (as proposed to be modified) identifies that around 54% would be in/adjoining the market towns of Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon and Wantage or the town of Didcot (which is just outside the district boundary); approximately 28% would be in/adjoining the local service centre of Grove and around 18% would be in/adjoining other settlements across the district. Whilst concerns are raised about specific settlements and sites (considered in Issues 4, 5 and 6) the strategy of focussing more than three-quarters of new housing on large allocated site at/adjoining Didcot and the district's three largest settlements is soundly-based and supportive of the Framework's core planning principle of focussing significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable.
53. The plan identifies three sub-areas within the district: Abingdon-on-Thames/Oxford Fringe, South East Vale and Western Vale and together policies CP8, CP15 and CP20 (as updated/modified) indicate the proportion of the overall housing requirement in each sub-area would be around 26%, 59% and 15% respectively. The Council argues that providing for the majority of the district's new housing needs in the South East Vale Sub-Area is justified, given the a large proportion of the need for new housing will be generated by new jobs in this area.
54. Seeking to co-locate new jobs and houses makes sense in principle although the deliverability of the strategy is an important consideration. However, whilst slower than anticipated delivery of housing on individual sites is always a possibility, the approach of allocating eight strategic sites for housing in the South East Vale sub-area, varying in size from 200 to 2,550 units and across a range of settlement types, appropriately minimises the risk of the overall need for housing not being met because of delays or more fundamental problems on individual sites. Moreover the plan provides for more than a quarter of all housing on strategic allocated sites outside the South East Vale area.
55. Whilst the majority of new housing in the district will be located in the South East Sub-Area, the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area contains the Vale's largest settlement (Abingdon) in addition to the local service centre of Botley and a number of larger villages, including Radley and Kennington. A



substantial part of the OAN arises from demographic changes which points to a need for new housing in this part of the district as well as in the area of greatest employment growth. Moreover, this part of the district is closest to Oxford City which, notwithstanding the growth of Science Vale, is likely to remain a very important centre for employment and services for residents of the Vale. The indicated requirement for housing in this sub-area (5,438 new dwellings as set out in policy CP8 as updated/modified) is thus soundly based.

56. It has been argued that the proposed distribution of new housing does not adequately reflect the role of Oxford as a centre for employment, shopping and services for the Vale of White Horse. Aside from its own unmet needs (considered in Issue 1) Oxford City Council has contended that 1,000 more dwellings (around 3,000 in total) of the Vale's identified needs should be located in the Abingdon-on-Thames/Oxford Fringe area. However, there is no detailed or convincing evidence to support this contention. Moreover, whilst the Abingdon-on-Thames/Oxford Fringe sub-area is closer to Oxford, it is true that more than 3,000 dwellings proposed in the South East Vale (the two Valley Park sites) would also be close to Didcot Station with its fast and frequent rail service to Oxford.
57. Conversely it has been argued that it does not make sense to allocate 13% of housing in the west of the Vale, distant from the new employment opportunities. However, this is a relatively small proportion of all housing, and will (in line with guidance in the NPPF) support the main settlements in this area – the market town of Faringdon and two larger villages.
58. Concern has been raised that the boundaries of the sub-areas are artificially and inappropriately drawn such that more housing has been allocated to some settlements, in support of Science Vale, than would otherwise be the case. In particular it is pointed out that Wantage and Grove, within the South East Vale sub-Area, are no closer to the envisaged employment growth at Harwell and Milton Park than Abingdon-on-Thames which is outwith the South East Vale Sub-Area. However, irrespective of the appropriateness of Wantage and Grove in providing housing to support Science Vale (considered in issue 5 below), and as detailed above, significant housing development in Wantage and Grove are appropriate given their position as some of the district's largest settlements.
59. Overall I conclude that the proposed broad distribution of new housing across the district is, in principle, soundly-based.
60. In addition to completions, existing commitments and the plan's allocated sites, Policy CP4 identifies that up to 1840 dwellings will be allocated through the 'Part 2' plan, Neighbourhood Plans and/or through the development management process, the latter primarily "windfalls" of which the Council envisages around 840.

#### Housing Supply Ring Fence

61. Policy CP5 (and the policies map) identifies ring fenced areas which it indicates will, together, be treated as a separate sub-area with a housing requirement of 11,850 dwellings in support of the 15,850 jobs planned in the Science Vale area. The Science Vale area is broadly the same as the South East Vale Sub-

Area but excludes Blewbury and its surrounding countryside. It is clear from responses to the plan that policy CP5 and its supporting text lack clarity and many participants expressed confusion as to how the policy would operate. In its written evidence and at the hearings the Council indicated that its intention is that, should a five year supply of deliverable housing land not exist within the ring fenced area, it would only permit applications for residential development on sites elsewhere within the ring fenced area.

62. National policy and guidance is silent with regards to such an approach. However, in the context of paragraph 47 of the Framework, which refers to the importance of housing needs being met within the housing market area, each district within the single Oxfordshire housing market area is, in effect, already operating as a housing supply ring fence. So, as a matter of principle, I see no reason why more than one such ring fence should not exist in a district. Moreover, there would be little point in the plan allocating housing sites on the basis of the sound planning principle of the co-location of new jobs and housing if the approach were then to be, in effect, abandoned if delivery of housing were to go slightly awry.
63. Nonetheless, in addition to the policy's lack of clarity, I share a number of the other specific concerns expressed about the policy as submitted for examination. The four ring fences are drawn very tightly around the existing settlements/allocated sites of Milton Park/Heights, Harwell Village, Harwell Campus and Wantage/Grove, almost to the extent that the plan proposes a number of reserve sites for housing rather than ring fenced areas. There is little to indicate why land outside the proposed ring fenced areas, but within the Science Vale, could not support Science Vale employment growth as well as sites within the proposed ring fenced areas; albeit that sites adjoining very small settlements, away from existing settlements altogether or within the AONB, might well be considered to not represent sustainable development.
64. Furthermore, the illogicality of policy CP5, as proposed, is highlighted by the fact that whilst the Council would not seek to grant permission for dwellings to maintain a five year supply of housing in the Science Vale outside of the ring fenced areas, it would have no grounds, in principle, to refuse permission for dwellings outside of the ring fence areas, within the Science Vale, in response to there being a lack of a five year supply of housing in the rest of the district.
65. Consequently, whilst I conclude that the principle of the housing ring fence is, in the specific circumstances of the Vale, soundly based, policy CP5 as it stands is not effective. **MM6**, which expands the ring fence area to be the same as the identified geographical Science Vale area and explains more clearly how the ring fence would operate, is thus necessary to the plan's soundness. The modified policy's reference to the importance of conformity of development proposals with relevant national and local policy is necessary given that the ring fence is purely a geographical area and does not take account of any possible constraints to sustainable housing development (eg the AONB).
66. Whilst noting the arguments that it should do so, the ring fence policy would not prevent the plan's policies for the supply of housing (which would be likely to include policy CP5 itself) being considered not up-to-date if a five year supply could not be demonstrated across the Vale of White Horse as a whole.

And I envisage that this is likely to be a decision maker's ultimate test of five year housing supply in the district. The modified policy's indication that the supply calculations for the ring fence area and the rest of the district will be combined to provide a district wide calculation is, thus, merely a factual statement. Policy CP5's aim of locating housing to meet the Science Vale's identified housing requirement in that area would apply if there were a five year supply across the district as a whole but not within the ring fence area. Moreover, it would remain a relevant consideration for the decision maker, along with paragraph 14 of the NPPF, in the unlikely event that a five year supply of housing were not to exist across the district as a whole.

67. In the light of consultation responses to the modification I have slightly amended the wording of **MM6** in the interests of clarity and have removed the reference to the ring fence area comprising sites and settlements immediately adjacent to the pre-determined boundary of the Science Vale. Whilst this boundary somewhat illogically includes only part of some settlements, I recognise that a definitive ring fence area is necessary for the practical operation of the policy, in particular to determine whether or not a five year supply of housing exists within the area. In the event that a five year supply of housing were not to exist in the ring fence area this would not prevent the case being made for, and the Council applying flexibility to permit, a housing scheme on a site outwith but immediately adjacent to the ring fence area. This would overcome any illogicality resulting from the Science Vale boundary. The operation of the ring fence policy in relation to the recent agreement that the Vale will accommodate 2,200 dwellings arising from Oxford's city's unmet needs will be a matter for the 'Part 2' plan.

### Conclusion

68. In conclusion, subject to **MM4 – MM6**, the identified objectively assessed need for 20,560 new dwellings in the Vale of White Horse for the plan period is soundly-based, as are the proposed overall distribution of housing and the housing supply ring fence policy.

**Issue 3 – whether or not the plan sets out a strategy for employment land which is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.**

69. The forecast of a 23,000 growth in jobs in the district during the plan period has been much criticised although, as detailed in Issue 2 above, I have concluded that it is soundly based. In support of this figure, and in the light of the *2014 Employment Land Review*, policy CP6 (subject to minor, factual correction, additional modifications) identifies a need for 218ha of land for [new] employment development on strategic sites, 180ha of which are existing "saved" allocations of the Local Plan 2011, including 128 ha at Harwell Campus and the safeguarding of Local Plan 2011 employment allocations totalling 24.2ha on eight other sites.
70. However, the policies map actually allocates circa 274 ha of land for employment at Harwell Campus (364 ha across the district as a whole). The "excess" over the requirement figure is 146 ha of "saved" allocations from the previous 2011 Local Plan, which the Council does not expect to be actually available for development during the current plan period. There is no convincing evidence to the contrary and thus, notwithstanding the requirement figure, it would make little sense to modify the policies map to de-allocate this land which may well become available and necessary for employment growth beyond the plan period.
71. Additionally it has been pointed out that the 218 ha requirement figure for employment land identified in the plan is significantly higher than amount of "B Class" land which the SQW/CE *Economic Forecasting* report identifies would be necessary in the Vale to provide for the forecast growth in jobs. However, the "above background trends" jobs growth forecasts for the Vale and the other Oxfordshire districts are derived substantially from influences such as the presence in the area of the University of Oxford, the Science Vale Enterprise Zone and, in particular, Space Science and Satellite technologies, rather than from the overall amount of employment land available. I have seen nothing which persuasively indicates that a higher than strictly necessary allocation of employment land in the Vale would result in significantly more than 23,000 jobs being created in the district and, thus, there being a need to further increase housing provision.
72. Moreover, the Vale is not alone in having more employment land than is needed to provide for the forecast of jobs growth. Table 6.2 of the SQW/CE report indicates that across the county as a whole allocated B class sites would, in theory, provide for around 34% more jobs than are forecast to require B class land. Several districts have allocated capacity for over 60% more B class land than the employment forecasts indicate are strictly necessary. Table 6.2 assumes an allocation of around 164ha of B class employment land in the Vale (based on Table K.4) giving capacity for 14,300 jobs. Thus it can be reasonably be extrapolated that the submitted plan's allocation of 218 ha of employment land would, in theory, give capacity for 19,000 jobs on B class land, around 38% more than the 13,800 new B class jobs which are forecast in the district. Nonetheless, based on the 218ha requirement figure, the "oversupply" of employment land in the Vale, which as a general concept is not stated by the SQW/CE report to be problematic is, proportionally, much the same as the Oxfordshire-wide average and

significantly less than in several neighbouring districts.

73. Whilst national policy advises against an oversupply of employment land, that in the Vale is primarily of longstanding allocation, not currently available for development but maybe required beyond the current plan period. Furthermore, much of the allocated employment land is located in the AONB and there is no persuasive evidence to suggest that it is needed, or would be appropriately allocated, for any other use. Consequently, policy CP6 is, in principle, soundly-based. However, in the interests of clarity, and thus effectiveness, **MM7**, **MM8** and **MM9** are necessary to identify specific mixed use developments, to make clear that the policy is concerned with new, as opposed to existing, employment development and to ensure consistency with MM2 (see Issue 1).
74. In summary I conclude that, subject to **MM7 – MM9**, the plan sets out a strategy for employment land which is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

**Issue 4 – whether or not the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area, including whether or not exceptional circumstances exist to justify the plan's proposed revisions of the Green Belt boundary.**

75. Supported by an overview and a vision of the area in 2031, Policy CP8 sets out the spatial strategy for the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area. It details the overall new housing provision to be planned for in the area, and identifies the strategic sites, identified through a robust, five stage site selection process, which will contribute towards delivering this provision. In support of policy CP6 the policy also safeguards existing strategic employment sites in the area and identifies 3.2 ha of land for future business/employment use.

*The Green Belt – housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4*

76. As explained above it is appropriate that, whilst the majority of new housing will be located in the South East Vale Sub-Area, a proportion of the overall provision for new housing is in the Abingdon-on-Thames/Oxford Fringe area, primarily to meet the requirement for additional housing from people currently living in this area and those who have close links with Oxford City. This would be the case even if more of the district's overall requirement for housing could be met outside the Abingdon-on-Thames/Oxford Fringe Sub-Area through, for example, higher densities on other housing allocation sites or the allocation of additional sites.
77. Within this Sub-Area there is very limited potential for housing development within the main settlements themselves and the built-up areas of Botley, Radley and Kennington are very closely bounded by Green Belt, as are the eastern, northern and western sides of Abingdon. Whilst land to the south of Abingdon is outside the Green Belt, access difficulties and potential flooding render its development for housing highly problematic. Moreover, whilst some new housing is appropriate to support the villages in the south and western parts of the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe sub-area (which lie beyond the Green Belt), given their distance from, and limited public transport links with, Abingdon, Botley and Oxford they would not be a sustainable location to provide for the majority of the sub-area's housing requirement, much of which is likely to arise from people currently living in Abingdon and Botley.
78. It has been suggested that an extensive area of land some distance to the south-west of Abingdon, beyond the Green Belt, could be developed as a Garden City as an alternative to housing sites proposed in the plan and to meet housing needs in the post-plan period. However, the deliverability of such a scheme is in doubt given the safeguarding of much of the land for a reservoir through policy CP14 and, in any case, it is not envisaged that the site could deliver housing in the short term.
79. Informed by a three stage Green Belt Review study, the plan proposes the deletion from the Green Belt, and the allocation for around 1,500 dwellings, of land to the north of Abingdon and at Kennington and Radley (sites 1, 2, 3 and 4). I note there are discrepancies in the findings of the Vale's Green Belt Review Study and that undertaken on behalf of the County Council. However,

this is not surprising given that the studies' considerations are to a significant degree subjective. In reaching my conclusions I have had regard to both studies, all other written evidence, the discussions at the hearings and, importantly, what I saw on my visits to the relevant sites and their surrounding areas. However, I see no reason why, as a matter of principle, any review of Green Belt boundaries in the Vale of White Horse with the objective of meeting the district's own housing needs should await the completion of a more strategic review of the Oxfordshire Green Belt.

80. Site 1 and the westernmost part of Site 2 lie between the existing built-up area of Abingdon and the A34 dual carriageway, which forms a bypass to the north west of the town. The Council has appropriately proposed a policies map change (consulted upon as MM36) to amend the boundary of Site 1 (and thus also that of the Green Belt) to reflect updated flood risk evidence. Whilst these sites' development for housing would represent encroachment of the countryside, the A34 would become a strong and logical physical and visual boundary to the built-up area of Abingdon. Moreover, development of the sites would have a minimal effect on the separation of Abingdon from the surrounding settlements or on the setting of Oxford. The central and easternmost parts of Site 2 would extend the built-up area of Abingdon several hundred metres to the north. Whilst these parts of the site are not bounded by the A34, the land rises to the north at Lodge Hill to the extent that, to my mind, the whole of Site 2 has the sense of being part of Abingdon rather than the countryside to the north. It would also be bounded by field boundaries and belts of woodland. Site 2 appropriately includes a parcel of land which, through a policies map change (consulted upon as MM37), would be retained as Green Belt. Facilities, which are consistent with Green Belt designation (primarily open space and landscaping) would be provided as part of the housing development on this land and **MM38** is necessary to amend the site development template to require Green Belt compatible development in this respect.
81. Housing on these sites would be within 2-2.5km of Abingdon town centre a distance readily cycleable and walkable by some people. Moreover, they would be well-served by existing bus services including high frequency routes to Oxford and Abingdon. Inevitably there would be an increase in traffic on existing roads in the area resulting from this development although the plan provides for major improvement to the A34 Lodge Hill interchange which would be likely to mitigate the impact to a significant degree. The strategic transport assessment undertaken by the County Council does not identify any unacceptable transport impacts likely to arise from the development of these sites, although the precise details of mitigation measures and their timing are appropriately considered at planning application stage. It cannot be guaranteed that exacerbation of air quality problems, particularly in Abingdon Town Centre, would not result but it appears to me that a plan which provided for housing elsewhere, where public transport links to Abingdon Town Centre would almost certainly be less comprehensive, would be more likely to cause such problems.
82. Kennington is a linear village and housing allocation site 3 would be a logical extension of the settlement to the south, strongly defined and bounded to the east by the railway line and to the west by Kennington Road, on the opposite side of which is a large mobile home park. Whilst again some encroachment of

the countryside would result, separation of Kennington and Radley to the south would be maintained by a width of remaining Green Belt of a kilometre or so and there would not be a material impact on the setting of Oxford. Housing on the site would be well-located in relation to this 'larger' village's own services and the frequent bus service to both Abingdon and Oxford.

83. Site 4 would extend the existing built-up area of Radley to the clear boundary of White's Lane, which itself, in parts, already has dwellings fronting it. A relatively narrow Green Belt of around 400m width currently separates the closest parts of the built-up areas of Radley and Abingdon although, nonetheless, there is a clear and strong separation of the two settlements. Housing on site 4 would extend the northern part of Radley towards Abingdon although not closer than the existing 400m or so separation, and the distance to the closest part of site 2, to the north of Abingdon, would be at least 600m. Moreover, the reinforcement of existing landscaping along White's Lane (as required by the site development template) would mean that, unlike the existing dwellings on this road, the housing on site 4 would be unlikely to be prominent when viewed across the countryside from Abingdon. Similarly, landscaping of Site 2 would mean that housing on this site would be much less prominent when viewed from Radley than existing housing in Abingdon. As a 'larger' village with local services, including a station with direct trains to Oxford, Didcot and London, there is little to support the argument that Radley could not appropriately accommodate the 240 or so dwellings envisaged for Site 4.
84. At a very late stage in the examination it was argued that the boundary of Site 4 (and thus that of the Green Belt) should be amended to reflect the extent of land which the representor wishes to promote for development. Whilst it is the case that the extended site boundary has been shown on plans previously put before the examination, it was not until the consultation on proposed main modifications (which proposed no change in respect of Site 4) that it was contended that the site boundary shown on the policies map was incorrect. The boundary could not be altered without a visit to the site by me, further full consultation and potentially a subsequent hearing session. I therefore conclude that the inevitable delay to the adoption of the plan does not outweigh any benefit which might result from amending boundary of Site 4 at this stage.
85. It is the case that the NPPF identifies Green Belt as a constraint which may prevent an authority from meeting its objectively assessed needs for housing. However, national policy does not prohibit an authority from revising Green Belt boundaries subject to it being done in exceptional circumstances, through a local plan and having regard to the need to promote sustainable patterns of development. I therefore do not accept the argument that a revision of the Green belt boundaries is inherently unsustainable. Moreover, whilst a Ministerial Written Statement has indicated that unmet housing needs are unlikely to represent the very special circumstances necessary to justify inappropriate development in the Green Belt, the very special circumstances test concerns planning applications, not the removal of land from the Green Belt in a local plan.
86. In summary there is an objectively-assessed need for more than 20,000 new dwellings in the Vale during the period to 2031. Whilst the majority of these



dwellings will be located in the South East Vale and Western Vale areas it is appropriate to provide for some housing in the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area, in particular to meet the future housing needs of people already living in this area. However, the Council's evidence shows there is minimal potential to provide for this housing within the existing main settlements in the area and Abingdon, Botley, Cumnor, Radley and Kennington are closely bounded by Green Belt or land subject to other constraints. It would not be a sustainable solution to meet the increasing housing needs of these settlements distant from them in the villages or countryside beyond the Green Belt. Housing on sites 1-4 would be well-related to existing settlements and their services and for access to both Abingdon town and Oxford city centres, including by public transport, cycling and walking. Evidence also indicates that housing on these sites could be delivered quickly.

87. I recognise that the Green Belt around Abingdon, Kennington and Radley is much valued by many people and the alteration of its boundaries would not be entirely without harm. However, the Council's proposal to remove from the Green Belt housing sites 1,2 3 and 4, enabling some 1500 or so dwellings to be built, would have only limited impacts on the function of the Green Belt, primarily being localised encroachment of the countryside.
88. Balancing all of these factors I conclude that the Council's assessment that the exceptional circumstances exist to justify removal from the Green Belt of housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4 is a soundly based one.

*Other proposed revisions to the Green Belt boundary*

89. In addition to sites 1, 2, 3 and 4, the plan, as submitted, also proposes to delete from the Green Belt some 15 or so other parcels of land at Botley, Chawley, North Hinksey, Cumnor, Wootton and Appleton, which would not be allocated for any particular use. Whilst there is interest in developing some of these parcels of land for housing it has not been argued that any could accommodate the plan's minimum threshold of 200 dwellings. My conclusion on the appropriateness of this threshold is set out in Issue 8 below.
90. Given their distance from housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4 it cannot reasonably be argued that deletion of land from the Green Belt at Botley, Cumnor, Wootton and Appleton would be necessary to ensuring logical, defensible and permanent Green Belt boundaries in respect of the deletion of Green Belt for housing at Abingdon, Radley and Kennington. I am also unconvinced by the Council's contention that these are all parcels of land which make little or no contribution to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. If nothing else it appears to me that many of them prevent encroachment of the countryside. Moreover, based on the limited reasoning set out in the Green Belt Review, it is unclear to me why some parcels of land at/adjacent to specific settlements are proposed to be removed from the Green Belt whilst other, apparently similar, parcels of land at/adjacent to the same settlement are not.
91. The Council has argued that, whilst not currently identified for housing, these parcels of land could potentially come forward for such use through Neighbourhood Plans or the 'Part 2' plan, to provide for the 1000 or so of the yet to be allocated Vale's housing needs and/or to meet unmet needs from

other districts. I note that the plan does not identify these parcels of land as "safeguarded land" and nor do I consider that they could be so classed given the statement in the NPPF that such land is to meet longer-term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period. Secondly, based on what I have read and heard, it appears to me unlikely that many such allocations would come forward through Neighbourhood Plans. Moreover, the Council has accepted that the total amount of land proposed to be deleted from the Green Belt across these parcels of land would be likely to far exceed that required to meet the Vale's yet to be allocated housing needs for the current plan period. It has been suggested that some of these parcels of land should be removed from the Green Belt and allocated for housing in the Part 1 plan. However, as detailed in Issue 8 below, I conclude that the plan allocates sufficient sites for housing at this time. Retaining these parcels of land in the Green Belt now would not prevent their deletion from Green Belt through the 'Part 2' plan or any other local plan or local plan review, if the necessary exceptional circumstances were to be demonstrated.

92. Moreover, in finding the plan's overall approach to addressing unmet housing needs from other districts sound (see Issue 1), I concur with the Council's fundamental argument that, until very recently, such needs could not be soundly planned for when their total amount and appropriate distribution between the Oxfordshire districts was unknown. Whilst agreement has recently been reached that the Vale will seek to deliver 2,200 dwellings in respect of Oxford City's housing needs I conclude, for the reasons detailed in Issue 1, that the benefits of getting the Part 1 plan adopted as soon as possible outweighs the delay in allocating sites to provide for all the Vale's agreed share of the city's unmet housing needs. Until detailed consideration has been given to determining the most appropriate sites to be allocated for housing to meet these needs, it will not be possible to determine how much land in the Green Belt (if any) will be required. Moreover, as explained in Issue 1, it is not appropriate, at this stage, for this plan to identify a preference for any particular locations or sites in this regard. Consequently, the 15 or so parcels of land proposed by the submitted plan to be deleted from the Green Belt might prove to be either insufficient or more than is required.
93. The supporting text of policy CP13 indicates that a future Green Belt Review may be necessary in respect of addressing unmet housing needs and policy CP2 identifies that any resulting alterations to the Green Belt boundary would be progressed through a full or partial review of the local plan or separate DPD. It is of course the case that as a result of such a review the exceptional circumstances may exist to justify the removal from the Green Belt of some or all of these 15 or so parcels of land.
94. Having regard to the NPPF it is not ideal for a local plan to include alterations to Green Belt boundaries and also an indication that further alterations may be necessary during the plan period. However, any such alterations could only come forward through a new or reviewed local plan and I conclude that this approach is much preferable to deleting land from the Green Belt when a significant degree of risk exists that some of the land may not be suitable, or that in its entirety it would be either insufficient, or more than is needed, to meet housing needs. For these reasons I conclude that, at the present time, the exceptional circumstances necessary to justify removing from the Green Belt the parcels of land at Botley, Cumnor, Wootton and Appleton do not exist.

Updating of the policies map to reflect the retention of these sites within the Green Belt (as consulted on as MM81) will therefore be necessary.

95. The plan also proposes the removal from the Green Belt of the built-up area of the 'smaller' village of Farmoor, such that it would be "inset" within the Green Belt. Whilst this would bring Farmoor in line with the already "inset" settlements of Appleton, Botley, Cumnor, Kennington, Radley and Wootton, I have seen no specific evidence to justify this particular change. Moreover, it is unclear to me why Farmoor should be an "inset" village when other smaller villages (as defined by policy CP3), including Dry Sanford, Shippon, South Hinksey, Sunningwell and Wytham would remain "washed-over" by the Green Belt. If and when a subsequent review of the Green Belt takes place it would make sense to consider, as part of this, the appropriateness of each of these villages as being either "inset" or "washed-over" by the Green Belt. However, at the current time I conclude that the exceptional circumstances necessary to remove Farmoor from the Green Belt do not exist. **MM16** is therefore necessary to the soundness of the plan. This deletes the reference, in policy CP13, to Farmoor as an "inset" village and corrects a drafting error in the plan by including the already "inset" North Hinksey. The policies map will also need to appropriately reflect this (as consulted on as MM81).
96. To ensure accordance with national policy **MM16** also modifies policy CP13 to make explicitly clear that it is through this local plan that the Green Belt boundaries are being revised (ie in respect of housing sites 1, 2, 3 and 4) and, in the light of consultation comments, I have amended the modified wording slightly to include a specific reference to the existence of exceptional circumstances.
97. It has been argued that the plan should remove from the Green Belt the Harcourt Hill Campus of Oxford Brookes University. The parcel of land concerned is already substantially built-up and it appears to me that it is likely to be only through redevelopment at a much greater height than currently exists that new building would materially reduce the openness of the Green Belt or affect the setting of Oxford City. Moreover, the effect on Oxford's setting would be much the same if tall buildings were to developed at the immediately adjacent parts of Harcourt Hill and Botley which are not within the Green Belt, not that I have read or heard anything to suggest that this is likely.
98. Policy CP9 specifically seeks to prevent development at the campus which would harm the setting of Oxford and this would apply whether or not the campus is in the Green Belt. However, removing the campus from the Green Belt would leave an awkward, and undesirable in planning terms, "island" of Green Belt at Raleigh Park. To this extent it would make sense to consider the case for the campus's removal from the Green Belt if and when the Green Belt boundary in the Botley area is more widely reviewed, as indicated above. In the meantime, and having regard to the flexibilities set out in national policy in terms of infilling/redevelopment of previously developed sites in the Green Belt, together with the requirements of policy CP9, I conclude that the campus's continued inclusion within the Green Belt is unlikely to significantly prejudice or make difficult appropriate redevelopment at the campus. The retention of the site within the Green Belt for the present time is therefore soundly-based.

99. Nonetheless, to ensure the effectiveness of policy CP9, **MM13** is necessary to reflect the requirement for a masterplan. However, other suggested amendments to this policy are either already covered by other policies of the plan or do not affect its soundness.
100. In addition to housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4, the plan as submitted proposes that several other parcels of land at Abingdon, Kennington and Radley are deleted from the Green Belt but not allocated for any purpose. In terms of the land at Abingdon and Kennington I can see some sense in their removal from the Green Belt, in the context of the removal of housing sites 1, 2, 3 and 4 and the desirability of producing logical and permanent Green Belt boundaries. However, given the prospect of a further Green Belt boundary review, permanence of the submitted plan's Green Belt boundary at Abingdon, Kennington and Radley cannot currently be guaranteed. Indeed, there is interest in developing some of this land for housing to assist in contributing towards Oxford city's unmet housing needs, although this remains a matter for the 'Part 2' plan. It would therefore make sense to retain these parcels of land in the Green Belt until either a further Green Belt review has taken place or there is some certainty that such a further review will not be necessary. Once again the policies map will need to appropriately reflect this.
101. Finally in relation to the Green Belt is the issue of the clarity of the submitted plan and the extent to which I can be assured that, at the time of the 'publication stage' consultation, people were fully aware of the extent of revision of the Green Belt boundaries proposed. It is the case that, as submitted, the plan does not specifically list or otherwise identify the parcels of land proposed for removal from the Green Belt. However, in relation to housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4, the plan and the policies map are very clear that housing is proposed for these sites and it appears unlikely to me that anybody with an interest in the matter was unaware of this proposed change.
102. The submitted plan is much less clear about the other changes proposed to the Green Belt, many of which are extremely difficult to identify on the policies map as submitted and several of which are not even shown due to drafting errors. However, whilst I cannot be assured that all interested parties were fully aware of the extent of the changes proposed, in reality this matters little as I am recommending modification to the plan to retain the existing Green Belt boundaries other than in respect of housing allocation sites 1, 2, 3 and 4. The Council has proposed changes to the policies map (consulted on as MM81) to clearly show the changes to the boundaries of the Green Belt which would be effected by the plan, as it is proposed to be modified.

#### Housing Allocation Site 7 – Kingston Bagpuize

103. This housing allocation site immediately adjoins the existing built-up area of Kingston Bagpuize. The site has outline planning permission for 280 dwellings, a number appropriate to support the settlement's role as a 'larger village'. There is no convincing evidence to suggest that the allocation is not soundly based (or that any other site would be a better alternative), although **MM40** is necessary, in the interests of a justified plan, slightly rewording the relevant site development template in respect of landscape considerations.

### Housing Allocation Site 6 – East Hanney

104. The plan as submitted includes the allocation for around 200 dwellings of a site at East Hanney. Since submission of the plan the Council has refused planning permission for a housing scheme on the site for slightly less than 200 dwellings citing, amongst other things, concerns about the development's density. Whilst at the hearings confidence was expressed that the allocation could still be appropriately developed, since then the housing scheme has been dismissed at appeal. In view of the current level of doubt concerning the deliverability of a housing development of the order of 200 dwellings on this site, I concur with the Council that the allocation is not, at this stage, soundly-based. **MM5, M12** and **MM41** (and consequent change to the policies map) are thus necessary to delete reference to this allocation from policy CP8 and the plan appendices. I consider the implications of this for housing supply in the district in Issue 8 below.

### Abbey Shopping Centre and Botley Central Area

105. Policy CP10 supports proposals for retail-led development of the Abbey Shopping Centre and the Charter in Abingdon-on-Thames town centre. I understand there is considerable uncertainty over the deliverability of a specific proposal which has been put forward in line with the policy, although I see no reason why, during the life of the plan, retail development envisaged by the (fairly flexible) policy should not come forward. It is the case that the central Abingdon retail development, together with the envisaged local shopping facilities to be provided as part of new housing development to the north of the town, would be unlikely to provide for all the identified retail needs in the Abingdon area. It has, thus, been argued that, following an assessment of potential opportunities, the plan should allocate other sites to meet the identified retail need, although as it appears that there are not any available and suitable town centre or edge of centre sites, the need would almost certainly have to be met 'out of centre'.

106. In such circumstances the NPPF advises that policies should be set for the consideration of proposals for main town centre uses which cannot be accommodated in, or adjacent to, a town centre. Policy CP32 of the plan complies with the NPPF in this respect and in this context I conclude that the plan (including policy CP10) is soundly-based.

107. Policy CP11 supports, and sets out requirements for, a comprehensive retail-led redevelopment and upgrading of Botley Central Area. The policy is supported by a Supplementary Planning Document and I understand that, since submission of the plan, planning permission has been granted for a redevelopment scheme which would provide 1,498 sq m of additional retail floorspace. The *2014 Retail and Town Centre Study* evidences the need for approximately 1,500 sq m of new retail floorspace in Botley during the plan period and the Council also argues that the central area of Botley does not currently perform as a town centre or provide the range of services/facilities that would normally be expected of the centre. In the light of this, and notwithstanding strong objections to the policy and specific development proposals, I am satisfied that the policy is, in principle, a soundly-based and positively-prepared approach to addressing retail requirements in the district. Local plan policies must be realistic and deliverable and, therefore, that the

policy reflects the evolvment of specific development schemes which have been put forward in recent years does not, as a matter of principle, make it unsound. Moreover, the Sustainability Appraisal's assessment of the alternative of refurbishment of the existing centre is adequate: it is not necessary for assessment of multiple alternatives to every policy in the plan.

108. However, in the interests of clarity and effectiveness and to ensure the policy is justified, **MM14** is required to state (in the supporting text) the amount of retail floorspace required in the area during the plan period (which, in effect, would be provided by the approved redevelopment scheme) and to make clear that redevelopment proposals should (if applicable) replace both churches and the residential accommodation in the area. The Council has also appropriately proposed (and consulted on) a policies map change to align the boundary of the Botley Central Area with that shown in the Supplementary Planning Document.

#### Strategic Water Storage Reservoirs

109. Policy CP14, as submitted for examination, safeguards land for a possible reservoir between the settlements of East Hanney, Marcham and Steventon. In response to the submitted plan the Environment Agency recommended the safeguarding of an area to the west of Abingdon for a proposed flood alleviation scheme and Thames Water recommended that the area of safeguarding for the reservoir be expanded and that an alternative possible reservoir site, to the North of Longworth, also be safeguarded. Following discussion at the hearings these were, thus, the subject of a proposed main modifications and proposed policies map changes (MM76 and MM77). However, in the light of the consultation comments, there is not currently the evidence to determine whether or not the extended safeguarded area for the reservoir between East Hanney, Marcham and Steventon is soundly-based. I have therefore concluded that it is not appropriate to extend the safeguarded area at this stage although, for the plan's effectiveness, **MM17** is necessary stating that possible revisions to the safeguarded area will be considered as part of the preparation of the 'Part 2' plan. Nonetheless, **MM17** does modify policy CP14 to appropriately reflect the possible alternative reservoir to the north of Longworth, to refer to the possible flood alleviation scheme to the west of Abingdon and to reflect archaeological constraints. Changes to the policies map, amending those previously proposed at main modifications stage, will thus be necessary.

#### Conclusion

110. In summary, and subject to **MM5, MM12, MM13, MM14, MM16, MM17, MM38, MM40** and **MM41**, I conclude that the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area and that the exceptional circumstances exist to justify the modified plan's proposed revisions of the Green Belt boundary.

**Issue 5 – whether or not the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the South East Vale Sub-Area, including whether or not the housing allocations proposed in the North Wessex Downs AONB are soundly-based.**

111. Supported by an overview and a vision of the area in 2031, policy CP15 sets out the spatial strategy for the South East Vale Sub-Area. It details the overall new housing provision to be planned for in the area and identifies the strategic sites, identified through a robust, five stage site selection process, which will contribute towards delivering this provision. In support of policy CP6 the policy also identifies that 208 ha of land will be provided for new business and employment development and safeguards 7 existing strategic employment sites.

*Housing Allocations in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*

112. The plan, as submitted, envisages that housing allocation sites 12 and 13, which are located within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), would be developed for around 550 and 850 dwellings respectively. This would be major development, which the NPPF indicates should be refused in an AONB other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated it is in the public interest. The NPPF advises that in considering applications for such development assessment should be made of the need for the development and its impact on the local economy, the scope for developing elsewhere outside the AONB or meeting the need for the development in some other way, and any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities.

113. In determining whether or not these allocations are soundly-based I have therefore considered whether it is likely and reasonable that the exceptional circumstances necessary to permit applications for housing development on the sites would be considered to exist.

114. Whilst it is not specifically referred to in the plan itself, in terms of the need for housing development in the AONB it has been argued that to fully realise the economic growth potential of Harwell Campus, which itself is of national importance, it needs to evolve from a science and innovation park to a world class campus environment offering a "work-live-play community". The integration of housing with the employment function at the campus is contended as being essential to this and reference has been made to a number of locations across the world where such communities exist.

115. I recognise the importance of Harwell Campus to the local, regional and national economy and do not doubt that some existing or potential employees at the campus would wish to live there. However, there is little, if any, evidence to support the contention that this is essential to the realisation of the employment growth which the plan and the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) envisage taking place at Harwell in the period to 2031. Whilst I note that the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership strongly supports the housing allocations, its SEP of March 2014 makes no reference to the "work-live-play community" of the scale proposed by the plan (ie 1,400 dwellings in total). It does, however, refer to the development of the Research Village at the campus involving the creation of the "...feeling of a campus-

based university with 5 accommodation blocks (each with up to 40 bedrooms with shared kitchen facilities on each floor and 5 self-contained apartments for those visiting for longer periods)....”

116. The written evidence proposing/supporting the “work-live-play community” approach to the development of the campus mostly post-dates the publication of my questions for the relevant part of the examination and none of it quantifies, in terms of job creation, the economic importance of either permitting or refusing housing development in the AONB. Moreover, despite requests from me at the hearing for evidence on the point, no details have been provided of any businesses who have indicated that they would only, or even be more likely to, locate at Harwell if it were to be developed as a work-live-play campus. Evidence in the form of third party ‘validations’ refers to the need for convenient and affordable housing (particularly to rent), although there is nothing to suggest that this could not be appropriately provided for a short distance from the campus outside the AONB. The validation from a university professor does refer to the value of on-campus accommodation, although specifies the need for affordable rooms and apartments for several days to carry out experiments or for longer periods for the training of PhD students. This would appear to indicate a need for the campus-based university-style accommodation referred to in the SEP which is very different from the 1,400 dwellings proposed in the plan as submitted.
117. Other evidence indicates that 25% of those currently employed at Harwell would consider moving to the campus if dwellings to rent were available there. However, clearly these people have been attracted to work at Harwell notwithstanding the lack of housing at the campus and I have seen no convincing evidence to indicate that any existing or new employers at Harwell would, in the future, not be equally successful in attracting people to work there as long as there is sufficient, suitable housing within the Science Vale area generally.
118. I therefore conclude that, on the basis of the evidence put before the examination, the need for a “work-live-play community” at Harwell, and thus housing on sites 12 and 13 within the AONB, has not been demonstrated. Moreover, there is no convincing evidence to indicate that refusing such development would have an adverse effect on the local economy. The updated Sustainability Appraisal’s assessment of the modified plan in this respect is therefore appropriate.
119. Turning to alternative sites I recognise that the proposed “work-live-play community” at Harwell could not be delivered by development outside the AONB. However, this matters little given the lack of a demonstrated need for such a form of development. Nonetheless, the 1,400 dwellings are also intended to contribute towards the Science Vale’s element of the district’s objectively-assessed need for housing. There is nothing to suggest that alternative sites for this housing, outside the AONB but within/close to Science Vale, could not be found if necessary. However, I appreciate that housing on sites 12 and 13 could be accommodated without the need for significant highways infrastructure upgrades which might be necessary if the housing were to be provided for elsewhere outside the AONB. Moreover, notwithstanding the lack of evidence of need for housing of the scale proposed at the campus, I recognise that, were it be provided, there would potentially



be sustainability benefits in terms of shorter journeys to work (which would also be more likely to be made on foot/by cycle) for residents working at the campus.

120. In terms of the landscape and recreational opportunities I consider that, subject to very careful design and landscaping, housing development on sites 12 and 13 would not be prominent when viewed from the surrounding higher ground, most notably the Ridgeway path to the south. Moreover, it would be seen in the context of the much larger and more prominent existing Harwell Campus development. However, the developments would be very prominent from the roads and footpaths which bound sites 12 and 13. I understand that the footpaths which bound the north and east sides of site 13 are well-used by residents of Harwell and Chilton villages in particular. Whilst landscaping might substantially obscure views of the dwellings themselves it would also all but eliminate the current, attractive wide, open views from these footpaths across agricultural fields to the Downs beyond. Harm would thus be caused to the landscape of this particular part of the AONB and to the recreational opportunities it currently provides.
121. In summary the need for development of sites 12 and 13 for housing has not been demonstrated and, having regard to the potential for mitigation, it would be likely to cause some harm to the landscape of the AONB and the recreational opportunities it offers. Nonetheless, and given that the campus will become an increasingly large centre for employment, there would potentially be some highway infrastructure and travel-to-work sustainability benefits in locating housing at sites 12 and 13 as opposed to elsewhere. The NPPF's exceptional circumstances and public interest tests would be ultimately applied as part of the consideration of any planning applications for housing on these sites, having regard to the evidence available at that time. However, balancing my findings in respect of all that I have read, heard and seen at this point in time, I consider it unlikely that the exceptional circumstances necessary to approve such an application would reasonably be considered to exist. Consequently, the plan's housing allocations on sites 12 and 13 are not soundly-based.
122. An alternative proposal to housing allocation site 13 has been put forward, involving the development for housing within the northern part of the Harwell Campus itself. This would be significantly less harmful to the landscape of the AONB than the development of site 13 and would, in part, have the benefit of recycling previously-developed land. However, it would involve the development for housing of land recently designated as Enterprise Zone and would reduce the amount of employment land available at the campus. Moreover, and fundamentally, given that the need for housing in the AONB has not been demonstrated I conclude that the exceptional circumstances necessary to approve such a development would also be unlikely to exist.
123. **MM5, MM18, MM54 and MM55**, which delete from policy CP15 (and the plan appendices) housing allocation sites 12 and 13, are therefore necessary to the soundness of the plan. However, it is not necessary for the policy to explain why these sites have been deleted: a plan needs to justify the policies and allocations it includes but not those it does not include. Moreover, I am not persuaded that it would be appropriate for the plan to include a criteria-based policy setting out the requirements a housing development in the AONB would

need to fulfil to demonstrate exceptional circumstances: to my mind exceptional circumstances are ones which cannot be envisaged by policy requirements.

124. I deal in Issue 8 below with the implications of the deletion of sites 12 and 13 for the sub-area's and district's housing requirements and the supply of housing land.

#### Didcot Power Station

125. Policy CP16 supports the redevelopment of Didcot A Power Station to provide a high quality mixed-use development. In view of the site's location and, given the Council's aspirations to deliver the forecast 23,000 growth in jobs during the plan period, the allocation of the site for employment use (amongst others) is soundly-based. Whilst it has been argued that more residential development on this brownfield site would reduce the requirement for greenfield sites to be allocated for housing elsewhere in the district, the evidence indicates that the site's constraints mean that more than 400 dwellings would be unrealistic. Nonetheless, **MM19** is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the policy, providing greater clarity as to the employment and residential uses which will be permitted and as to the requirements for retail development. The Council has appropriately proposed a policies map change (consulted on as MM64) to take account of a recent permission for employment use in the Didcot Power Station area.

#### Housing allocation sites 5, 8, 9, 10 and 11

126. Policy CP15 (as proposed to be modified) allocates eight strategic housing sites in the South East Vale Sub-Area, in total contributing around 9,055 dwellings towards the identified sub-area requirement of 12,450. Three of these are in Wantage and Grove and are considered below.

127. The evidence indicates that sites 11 and 8 (Valley Park and North West of Valley Park), located close to Milton Park employment area and on the edge of Didcot town, are, in principle, soundly based and deliverable. However, **MM5** and **MM18** appropriately include reference in policy CP15 to the fact that more than the identified 2550 dwellings could be delivered at Valley Park, albeit beyond the plan period. There is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that the land safeguarded for the possible Southern Didcot Bypass would preclude the viable delivery of the required level of housing on site 11, or that alternative road proposals would be more appropriate, although in the interests of the plan's internal consistency the Council may wish to make an additional modification to reference in policy CP17 the Southern Didcot Bypass. The development of site 8 will need careful co-ordination with the neighbouring A34 service area and, in this regard, **MM49** and **MM51** are necessary for effectiveness, amending the site's development template.

128. Concern has been raised at the effect of the Valley Park development on the existing gap between, and the separate identities of, Harwell Village and what will in effect become Greater Didcot. The allocation's site development template (in the plan's appendices) identifies the importance of protecting these separate identities and, having visited the area and noted the dividing presence of the A34, I am satisfied that this can be appropriately achieved

without inclusion in the plan of more precise requirements, eg a 200m wide gap north and south of the B4493. The Council has appropriately proposed a policies map change (consulted on as MM46) altering the boundary between sites 8 and 11 to reflect land ownership/control.

129. Site 9 (Milton Heights) also requires careful co-ordination with the nearby A34 service area although there is no need for a modification to the plan in this respect. Having regard to the various arguments put forward on the matter, I am satisfied that 400 dwellings at this site represents the appropriate balance between developing the critical mass necessary to enable the site to be feasibly served by buses and preventing serious adverse highway problems at the nearby A34 junction. However, a policies map change (consulted on by the Council as MM45) appropriately amends the site boundary to include land for school expansion proposals, a sustainable urban drainage system and to respond to the topography of the area.
130. Based on what I have read and heard and my visit to the area, an allocation of around 200 dwellings is appropriate in scale to Harwell village (site 10). Some specific development constraints have been raised although there is no convincing evidence to indicate that these cannot be overcome or that the site is not deliverable. However, for the plan to be justified and effective, **MM52** is necessary to include sewer upgrade and water supply strategy requirements in the site's development template.
131. Similarly, site 5 (around 220 dwellings east of Sutton Courtenay) is a suitable-scale development for this settlement. Whilst **MM42** and **MM43** are necessary to provide more clarity in the site development template regarding access arrangements and sewer upgrades, I have seen no evidence to convincingly indicate that, in this regard or in terms of the nearby landfill site or water/waste water infrastructure, the site is either inappropriate for housing or not deliverable. Nonetheless, in the light of consultation comments, I have amended **MM43** to delete reference to any specific access points.

#### *Role of Wantage and Grove and housing allocation sites 14 and 15 and H5*

132. Housing allocation sites 14, 15 and H5 would, together, provide for an additional 4,885 dwellings or so at Wantage and Grove, which by any measure would represent a significant expansion of these settlements. It is the case that Wantage and Grove are some distance from the envisaged employment growth at Harwell Campus, although I understand from comments made at the hearings that historically many Harwell employees lived in Wantage/Grove. Moreover, significant public transport improvements are envisaged and it is much more feasible for public transport to serve journeys between these sizeable settlements and Harwell, notwithstanding the distance, than were the housing to be distributed more widely across a range of smaller settlements, even if they were closer to Harwell Campus.
133. Furthermore, the AONB is a constraint to housing delivery in the area immediately around Harwell Campus and, as a Market Town and the district's second largest settlement, it is (as identified under Issue 2) appropriate for a significant proportion of the Vale's overall housing needs to be located at Wantage. Inevitably the character of both Wantage and Grove will change to some degree, but this is not to say that it would be harmed. Moreover, having

carefully considered the evidence on the matter, I am satisfied that the plan is soundly-based in terms of its approach to employment, retail, roads and infrastructure/services for these settlements. In this context housing allocation sites 14, 15 and H5 are therefore, in principle, soundly-based.

134. Concern has been expressed about the deliverability of sites 14, 15 and H5 although there is nothing convincing to demonstrate that there are fundamental problems which cannot be overcome, bearing in mind that development of the majority of the housing on these sites has either full permission, outline permission or a resolution to grant planning permission subject to a s106 agreement. However, **MM56**, **MM57** and **MM58** are necessary to soundness, amending the site development template for Monks Farm (site 15) to reflect the up to date housing delivery forecast, to provide appropriate flexibility for addressing the site's education needs and to suitably reflect flood risk. The development template for Crab Hill (site 14) requires development to minimise any impact on the adjacent AONB and the plan is sound in this respect.

### Conclusion

135. In summary I conclude that, subject to **MM5**, **MM18**, **MM19**, **MM42**, **MM43**, **MM49**, **MM51**, **MM52** and **MM54-58**, which modify the plan to, amongst other things, delete housing allocations in the North Wessex Downs AONB, the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the South East Vale Sub-Area.

## **Issue 6 – whether or not the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the Western Vale Sub-Area.**

136. Supported by an overview and a vision of the area in 2031, Policy CP20 sets out the spatial strategy for the Western Vale Sub-Area. It details the overall new housing provision to be planned for in the area and identifies the strategic sites, identified through a robust, five stage site selection process, which will contribute towards delivering this provision. In support of policy CP6 the policy also safeguards the existing strategic employment site at Faringdon Park Road and identifies that 7.38 ha of land will be provided for future business/employment use.
137. Policy CP20 allocates six strategic housing sites in the Western Vale to provide around 1,650 of the 3,173 dwellings the policy identifies are required in this sub-area. It is, in principle, appropriate that four of the six sites (950 dwellings) are at/adjoining Faringdon, given that this is the largest settlement and only Market Town in the Western Vale. Concern has been raised about the balance of new housing and employment growth in Faringdon. In addition to safeguarding of the existing Faringdon Park Road Industrial Estate, policy CP6 allocates 3ha for new employment use south of Park Road and 4.4ha for new development on "saved" Local Plan 2011 allocations north of Park Road and adjacent to the A420 (a policies map change (consulted on as MM65) being necessary for the latter to address an omission). These allocations align with the recommendations of the independently prepared *Vale of White Horse Employment Land Review 2013 Update* and I have seen no persuasive evidence to indicate that the plan is unsound in not allocating more sites for employment in Faringdon, or that the number of proposed dwellings is consequently inappropriate. Nonetheless, policy CP28 (see Issue 9), would allow for additional employment development to come forward in Faringdon should a developer identify a market for such a proposal.
138. Whilst some specific concerns are raised there is nothing to suggest that the housing allocations at/adjoining Faringdon (sites 17, 18, 19 and 20) are not soundly-based and that the various constraints cannot be appropriately addressed as part of their development, bearing in mind that sites 18 and 19 have outline planning permission and the Council has resolved to grant planning permission for site 17, subject to a legal agreement. Moreover, in the light of my findings in Issue 8, there is not a need to increase the housing capacity of any of these sites. However, to ensure clarity, **MM60** updates the site development template in respect of the parish in which site 18 is situated.
139. Housing allocation site 16 provides for approximately 200 dwellings on a site to the west of Stanford-in-the-Vale and based on all that I have read, heard and seen the allocation is, in principle, soundly-based and deliverable. It is argued that the site could readily and appropriately accommodate significantly more than 200 dwellings, although, for the reasons detailed in Issue 8, there is not a need for it to do so, nor I have seen comprehensive evidence to demonstrate that higher housing provision in this location would be appropriate. However, the development template for the site states that the 200 dwelling figure is "subject to masterplanning" and this would not prevent a scheme for more houses on the site coming forward if it could be demonstrated that the various requirements could be accommodated and no demonstrable harm would be caused.

140. Site 21 (North of Shrivenham) would provide for around 500 dwellings. Phase 1 of the scheme has a resolution to grant planning permission, subject to a s106 agreement, and the evidence I have read, heard and seen on site indicates that the allocation is soundly-based and deliverable. It has been contended that site 21, and in particular the necessary mitigation in respect of the nearby SSSI, would be most appropriately delivered together with housing development on another neighbouring site. However, as detailed in Issue 8, there is not a need for the current plan to allocate more land for housing in the Shrivenham area and, whilst the suggestion is made by some others, there no indication from Natural England (who I understand have looked at the matter in some detail) that the necessary SSSI mitigation measures cannot be successfully implemented through the development of site 21 alone. Nonetheless, **MM61**, **MM62** and **MM63** are required for the plan to be effective, amending the site's development template in respect of the Shrivenham A420 junction, a sewer upgrade, a water supply strategy and SSSI impact.

141. Matters relating more generally to transport and infrastructure in the Western Vale Sub-Area are considered in Issue 7 below.

### Conclusion

142. In summary I conclude that, subject **MM60 – MM63**, the plan sets out a soundly-based strategy for the Western Vale Sub-Area.

**Issue 7 – whether or not the plan makes adequate and soundly-based provision for infrastructure and services to support new development.**

143. A number of policies of the plan provide for improvements to transport and other infrastructure/services which evidence indicates is necessary to support the new development which is proposed. Policy CP7 is an overarching one setting out infrastructure/service improvement requirements in relation to new development, whilst policies CP12, CP17 - CP19 and CP21 address specific proposals for transport schemes and the safeguarding of land for them. Policies CP33 – CP36 seek to, more generally, promote sustainable transport and accessibility, improved electronic communications and improvements to both the operation of, and the air quality around, the A34. However, it is a strongly held concern of many, in particular local residents, that the plan's infrastructure/services requirements are insufficient and/or that there is not an adequate guarantee that they will be delivered before they are required, or at all.
144. In relation to transport Oxfordshire County Council, as Highway Authority, commissioned the November 2014 *Evaluation of Transport Impacts Study to Inform the Vale of White Horse District Council Local Plan 2031: Part 1*. Following several earlier stages this report assessed the likely transport impacts of the plan's proposed 20,560 new homes and 23,000 additional jobs in the district, based on a range of different transport interventions and improvements (one of medium scale and two of large scale). The report concludes that the Stage 5ETI mitigation package (which in essence comprises those transport improvements identified in the plan) would largely mitigate the impacts of the proposed new development in the district, albeit that some congestion issues would remain.
145. I have read and heard much debate about the robustness of the Impacts Study's findings and whether or not the residual congestion issues it identifies would be "severe" in terms of paragraph 32 of the NPPF. However, there is no convincing and detailed evidence to demonstrate that the study's conclusions are not robust, bearing in mind that they can only ever be a strategic-level forecast and that more detailed transport impact appraisals will be necessary as part of the consideration of specific development proposals. Moreover, whilst it is to a significant degree a matter of judgement, I have read and heard nothing which persuades me that the District and County Councils' conclusion that the likely residual transport impacts would be acceptable is not a soundly-based finding. In considering this point I have borne in mind that the "starting point" situation for the Vale is as a district which very much suffers from traffic congestion.
146. The A420 has been raised as a particular concern, notably in relation to the housing allocations proposed at Faringdon and Shrivenham. Policy CP21 safeguards land for junction enhancements on the road at Faringdon and Shrivenham and the site development templates for the housing allocations at these settlements indicate that, in some instances, significant A420 junction upgrades will be required as part of the development and that in connection with other sites contributions towards wider improvements along the A420 corridor will be necessary. Paragraph 5.130 of the plan (as proposed to be modified) refers to the Route Strategy proposed to minimise congestion on the A420. Whilst I appreciate that there are aspirations for a more substantial

upgrade of the road, there is nothing to convincingly indicate that this is either necessary to enable the development in the A420 corridor or that it is a realistic prospect.

147. Policy CP17 safeguards an alignment for the West Wantage Link Road. Whilst there are some aspirations for this scheme to be implemented as soon as possible, to address existing congestion in/around Wantage, the Impacts Study does not indicate that it is currently necessary. However, the County Council contends that it is possible that it would be needed later in, or beyond, the plan period. It has been argued that if additional housing sites to the west of Wantage were included in the plan the Link Road could be funded and delivered. However, bearing in mind the Impacts Study's conclusions, and in the context of there not being a need for this plan to allocate more sites for housing (as detailed in Issue 8), I conclude that the plan is not unsound in excluding these possible housing sites at this stage.
148. Concern is raised at the safeguarding, through Policy CP12, of an alignment for a possible South Abingdon-on-Thames bypass. Whilst the Impacts Study does not indicate this scheme to be currently required, work undertaken by the County Council as part of its *Local Transport Plan 4 (2015 - 2031)* (Volume 2, part ii, page 14) indicates that it may be necessary in the future to support development in the Science Vale area, albeit most probably beyond the current plan period. Since the plan does not include the bypass as a specific proposal it is not necessary or appropriate for me to determine whether or not it is the most appropriate solution to transport problems in the area in the future. Moreover, detailed concerns about a wide range of possible impacts including wildlife, biodiversity, and heritage are appropriately considered if and when the scheme is included in a local plan and/or through the planning application process. However, having regard to paragraph 41 of the NPPF, I am satisfied that the *Local Transport Plan 4* provides robust evidence that the alignment of the possible bypass could be critical in developing infrastructure to widen transport choice. Consequently, the safeguarding of this alignment is soundly-based. The issue of "blight" is fundamentally a legal matter between any affected parties and the District and County Councils.
149. In addition to transport requirements the site development templates, included in the plan's appendices, detail a range of other infrastructure/services which are likely to be required in respect of the plan's housing and employment allocations including primary and secondary education, community, utility supply and water/sewerage facilities. These are based on evidence from the relevant "providers" and I am not persuaded by the anecdotal comments of others of the need for additional such infrastructure/services beyond those referenced in the plan, as proposed to be modified.
150. Policy CP7 states that all new development will be required to provide for the necessary on-site and off-site infrastructure requirements arising from the development. However, it goes on to indicate that, where viability constraints are demonstrated, the Council will (i) prioritise contributions sought, giving first priority to essential infrastructure and second priority to other infrastructure (ii) defer part of the contribution to a later date (iii) as a last resort, refuse planning permission if the development would be unsustainable



without the unfunded infrastructure requirements. With reference to recent specific examples significant concern has been raised that this would lead to development being permitted without the timely implementation of necessary infrastructure, or even its provision at all.

151. The policy is written such that there is a presumption that the necessary infrastructure will be provided when required and that any relaxation of the requirements will only be considered where viability constraints are demonstrated. However, ultimately it is appropriate that the Council reaches a decision on this issue on a case by case basis at the planning application stage, balancing the benefits of the development against the harm likely to result from delayed or unfunded infrastructure. Consequently, and bearing in mind that it makes clear that ultimately proposals which are unsustainable because of an absence of supporting infrastructure will be refused, the policy is soundly-based. Nonetheless, to ensure the effectiveness of the policy, **MM10** and **MM11** are necessary to define "essential" and "other" infrastructure in the supporting text of the policy and to require collaboration between developers where infrastructure is necessary to serve more than one site. I have noted the suggested changes to the wording of **MM10** but conclude that the modification is appropriate as consulted on, bearing in mind that the supporting text should not alter the meaning of the policy to which it relates.
152. In response to various comments a number of modifications are necessary to address errors and omissions in the plan and to update the site development templates, particularly having regard to the comments of Oxfordshire County Council. **MM15** is necessary to address the omission, by error, in policy CP12 of safeguarding of land for improvement to Frilford Lights junction (it has always been shown on the policies map) and **MM27** is required (policy CP33) to ensure consistency with national policy in respect of historic heritage. **MM39, MM44, MM47, MM48, MM53** and **MM59** update the site development template for housing allocation sites 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 16 in respect of education. However, in view of consultation responses, it is necessary and appropriate for **MM39** and **MM44** to be amended to refer in more general terms to contributions to education provision. **MM50** is also necessary to update the development template for site 8 in respect of widening of the A4130. In the light of comments from the County Council the Council has also appropriately proposed a number of policies map changes (consulted on as MM66, MM68, MM69, MM70, MM72, MM73, MM74, MM75) in respect of safeguarding of land for transport schemes. In this regard **MM67** and **MM71** are necessary, in the interests of effectiveness, to make clear that the maps of safeguarded land for transport schemes are indicative and, in the case of the Abingdon Southern Bypass, to show an 'area of search' (within South Oxfordshire) rather than an 'area of investigation'.

### Conclusion

153. In summary, subject to **MM10, MM11, MM15, MM27, MM39, MM44, MM47, MM48, MM50, MM53, MM59, MM67** and **MM71** the plan makes adequate and soundly-based provision for infrastructure and services to support new development.

**Issue 8 – whether or not the plan sets out a soundly-based housing requirement figure and whether or not a 5 year supply of deliverable housing land is likely to be available throughout the plan period.**

154. In relation to the Vale's own needs the plan identifies a plan period housing requirement (policy CP4) of at least 20,560 dwellings, which equates to the contended objectively assessed need (OAN) for new housing in the district. As detailed in Issue 2 I conclude that the OAN is soundly-based. Whilst, I have identified that three of the strategic housing allocations included in the plan, as submitted, are not soundly-based, and notwithstanding arguments that there is more suitable land for development in neighbouring districts, there is not persuasive evidence to demonstrate that, overall, there are constraints which would justify not seeking to meet the full objectively-assessed need for new housing in the Vale of White Horse itself. I recognise that the character of parts of the district would be likely to change as a result of the amount of new housing proposed in the plan. However, a change in an area's character is not necessarily harmful (and can potentially have positive impacts) and it is an almost inevitable consequence of the locally-elected Council's aim to promote significant economic growth; an aim which is consistent with national policy. The plan's 20,560 housing requirement figure is therefore soundly-based.
155. The evidence (updated to 31 March 2016 but excluding housing allocation sites 6, 12 and 13 in accordance with my conclusions set out in Issues 4 and 5) (Doc Ref PHD23) indicates that, on the Council's preferred measure, a 7.1 years supply of deliverable housing land can be demonstrated across the district as a whole. Whilst the Council's forecast of housing delivery has been criticised by some as too optimistic, particularly in terms of start dates and build out rates, they are set out on a very detailed basis and are informed by developers' indications. Indeed, in connection with many sites, the developers have explained knowledgeably and persuasively in hearings statements, in statements of common ground and/or at the hearings, in response to challenge, why the forecasts are realistic and, in some cases, conservative. Moreover, it is clear that in recent years the Council has been accurate (and indeed slightly cautious) in its forecasts of delivery: the number of dwellings completed in both 2014/15 and 2015/16 was slightly higher than the Council's forecasts at the beginning of each year. Consequently, I believe confidence can generally be had in the Council's housing supply figures.
156. With specific regards to concerns about start dates it is notable that a significant proportion of the sites which constitute the five year supply are ones on which construction has already commenced or which have full planning permission. Many others have outline permission or a resolution to grant planning permission subject to legal agreement. Overall, having regard to all the available evidence, and aside from my conclusions on the Grove Airfield site detailed below, I consider that the start dates are not unrealistic. Nonetheless, the robustness of the district's housing supply position is demonstrated by the fact that, even if implementation of all of the plan's housing allocation sites were to be delayed by a year beyond the Council's forecasts (and there is no reason to believe that this is likely) a supply of deliverable housing land exceeding six years would still exist.
157. Since the hearings evidence has been submitted indicating that the Grove Airfield site has not progressed as the Council envisaged a few weeks earlier,

suggesting that the Council's delivery forecast for this site might be somewhat over optimistic. However, in the light of my comments above, I remain confident that the Council's housing supply figures, considered across the board, are robust.

158. The Council's preferred approach to measuring housing supply sensibly applies a 20% buffer to account for past under-delivery and assumes that the shortfall in delivery since the start of the plan period would be addressed across the rest of the plan period (the 'Liverpool method') in the housing supply ring fence area but within the next five years (the 'Sedgefield method') in the rest of the district. However, even applying the 'Sedgefield method' to the district as a whole a 5.8 years supply exists. I am satisfied that it is appropriate for the Council to apply the 'Liverpool' method to calculation of supply in its "self-imposed" ring fence area and in the application of policy CP5 (giving a supply of 5.9 years within the ring fence even excluding sites 12 and 13), given that across the district as a whole a supply well in excess of 5 years exists when calculated on the more demanding Sedgefield method. Moreover, given that some concern has been raised about the possibility of saturation of the housing market in the South East Vale Sub-Area, it is questionable whether the number of dwellings required to provide a five year supply using the Sedgefield method could be delivered. The five year supply figure includes a very modest (1.3%) allowance for 140 dwellings to come forward as "windfalls". Whilst there is evidence to indicate that these are likely to come forward at this rate, even if no such dwellings were to be built an around 7.0 years' supply of deliverable housing land would exist.
159. Looking across the plan period as a whole the plan's housing allocations (even accounting for the deletion of sites 6, 12 and 13) together with existing completions, commitments, a small windfall allowance and the envisaged 1,000 dwellings to be allocated through the 'Part 2' Plan or Neighbourhood Plans, would provide for approximately 106% of the 20,560 plan period housing requirement. Moreover, the trajectory of housing delivery strongly suggests that a five year supply of housing land will be maintained in the Vale throughout the plan period. In the light of this, and my conclusions on the current five year supply situation, there is no need to allocate more sites for housing in advance of the 'Part 2' Plan and/or Neighbourhood Plans.
160. Whilst the district-wide housing requirement of 20,560 is slightly exceeded, there is variation in the extent to which the housing requirement identified in the plan for each of the sub-areas is met by the plan's allocations and existing commitments. The 'Part 2' plan will need to take account of this in allocating any further sites for housing. However, in the context of there being a five year supply of deliverable housing land both across the district as a whole and within the ring fence area, there is not a need for this to be addressed in the Part 1 plan. Nor is there a need for the Part 1 plan to set out more guidance, in terms of the number and location of additional housing allocations, beyond the already clearly identified housing requirement figures for each sub-area. However, as detailed in Issue 1, I have adjusted the precise wording of MM1 so as not to inappropriately constrain future decisions on additional housing allocations.
161. I recognise that the 200 dwelling threshold for the inclusion of housing allocations in the Part 1 plan is somewhat arbitrary and that, in terms of

achieving projected delivery, there is a benefit in the housing supply comprising a mix of site sizes. However, in addition to 22 or so sites of 200 dwellings or more, the current supply of housing includes more than 1,000 dwellings on sites of less than 10 units and around 100 sites of between 10 and 199 dwellings. This provides an appropriate portfolio of site sizes and, thus, there is not a need for the Part 1 plan to allocate more sites for housing of either less than or more than 200 dwellings.

Conclusion

162. In summary I conclude that the plan sets out a soundly-based housing requirement figure, that a 5 year supply of deliverable housing land is likely to be demonstrable throughout the plan period and that there is not a need for the Part 1 plan to allocate any additional sites for housing.

**Issue 9 – whether or not the plan sets out district-wide policies which are positively-prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.**

163. Chapter 6 of the plan sets out district-wide strategic policies to complement the spatial strategy and sub-area strategies. Together they seek to ensure that a balance is met between addressing housing needs, supporting economic growth and protecting the Vale's natural/built environment and the quality of life in existing settlements.

*Sustainable Development and Building Healthy and Sustainable Communities*

164. Policy CP22 and CP23 concern the mix and density of new housing. The policies provide sufficient flexibility to allow alternative approaches, on specific sites, if evidence indicates that development in accordance with the SHMA or a minimum density of 30dph would be inappropriate. However, there is no clear evidence to indicate that, within the Vale, specific requirements should be set, or would be deliverable, in respect of bungalows or live-work units.

165. Policy CP24 indicates that the Council will seek 35% affordable housing with a 75:25 split for rented and intermediate housing respectively. This is shown in the *Planning and Development (2014) Local Plan Viability Study* to be viable although, in order to ensure accordance with the specific requirements of national policy as set out in the *Planning Practice Guidance*, **MM20** is necessary to set a minimum threshold of eleven dwellings for requiring affordable housing. I have seen no evidence to justify a lower threshold being set in the AONB as permitted, but not required, by national policy. Given that it contains a clause permitting alternative provision when 35% (or the 75:25% split) would not be viable, there is no need for the policy to state that up to 35% affordable housing will be sought, or otherwise to be worded more flexibly. National policy sets out definitions of affordable housing and there is not the convincing evidence necessary to justify a departure from this by relating the affordable housing requirements to local average wages. Moreover, until the full details of national policy and regulations in respect of Starter Homes are known, it is not feasible at this stage for policy CP24 to be modified to reflect this issue although review of the policy may be required in due course.

166. Rural Exception Sites are addressed by policy CP25, its principle according with national policy and being soundly-based over and above the general requirement for new housing development to include affordable housing. However, given that the NPPF identifies affordable housing exception sites as not inappropriate development in the Green Belt, **MM21** is necessary to clarify the relevant tests for proposals in the Green Belt. **MM21** also addresses the fact that whilst the district Council appropriately wishes to encourage the involvement of Parish Councils in agreeing the methodology for establishing local affordable housing needs, it would be inappropriate for a local plan policy to require their involvement.

167. Policies CP26 and CP27 concern the housing needs of the ageing population, gypsies, travellers and travelling show people. **MM22**, which deletes the CP26 reference to Lifetime Homes standards, is necessary for accordance with national policy. More specific requirements in relation to housing for older people, on which I have seen little detailed evidence, are not necessary to

policy CP26's soundness.

Supporting Economic Prosperity

168. Subject to listed criteria, policy CP28 allows for new employment development on unallocated sites. As detailed in Issue 6 **MM23** is necessary for the policy to be justified and effective; this clarifies the locations in which such development will be permitted – within, or on the edge of, the built up area of market towns, local service centres and larger and smaller villages. I have included the “or on the edge of” wording in response to consultation comments, acknowledging the fact that representations have been made suggesting that the plan should allow for employment development at smaller settlements and that, without this clause, there are likely to be very few sites which could be so developed in line with the policy. **MM82** appropriately clarifies the plan's glossary in respect of employment sites.
169. Policy CP29 concerns the change of use of existing employment land and premises. This seeks to protect strategic employment sites for such use, unless an Updated Employment Land Review identifies that a site is no longer needed, whilst permitting the change of use of other employment land/premises if there is no reasonable prospect of it being used for employment during the plan period. **MM24** introduces the appropriate rider that, nonetheless, there is a preference for alternative uses that generate employment. The policy, and the supporting text's indication that a 12 month marketing period is necessary to demonstrate the lack of a prospect of a site being used for employment is reasonable and appropriately flexible and not inconsistent with national policy.
170. Policy CP30 is a positively prepared approach to promoting facilities for further and higher education in the district. Notwithstanding the precise wording of the policy's supporting text, appropriate support is given to the development of both Oxford Brookes and Cranfield Universities. To ensure consistency with national policy in respect of heritage assets **MM25** is necessary to modify policy CP31 concerning development to support the visitor economy. It would be almost impossible to effectively define “larger scale development”, as referred to in this policy, and this is a matter which can only realistically be assessed in relation to a specific planning application. Moreover, the plan is not unsound in not specifically providing for a hotel/enhanced conference facilities at Williams Grand Prix Engineering site.
171. Retail development and other main town centre uses are addressed by policy CP32, **MM26** being necessary for effectiveness. It allows for the fact that primary and secondary shopping frontages may be amended through Neighbourhood Plans. The facilities permitted at highway service stations are addressed by policy TR10 of the 2011 Local Plan which would remain “saved” following the adoption of the current plan. Consequently CP32 is sound even though it does not address this point.
172. Reference has been made to likely changes in farming and the need for “starter farms”. To my mind this is a matter most appropriately considered in the review of the district's development management policies as part of the emerging ‘Part 2’ plan.

Protecting the Environment and Responding to Climate Change

173. Policies CP37 and CP38 list criteria by which the quality of design of new development will be assessed and set out the requirement for design strategies to support applications on major development sites. **MM28** (CP37) is necessary for consistency with national policy in terms in heritage assets and in making clear that high quality design is a requirement. However, it is not necessary for CP37 to require independent expert design consideration of proposals, the Council being the locally-elected body responsible, in the first instance, for determining planning applications. Car parking provision is appropriately addressed by other policies of the plan and, thus, need not be referenced in this policy. **MM29** is necessary for effectiveness and introduces a reference in policy CP38 to "accessible" spaces. Whilst concern has been raised that, in the past, consultation with the local community has not been meaningful, I am satisfied that a reasonable interpretation of the existing policy wording is that community consultation should be undertaken on a meaningful basis.
174. Policy CP39 sets out the Council's strategic approach to conservation and enhancement of the historic environment, although to accord with national policy **MM30**, which adjusts the detailed wording, is necessary. Concern has been raised that the policy lacks specificity although I conclude that it is soundly-based, bearing in mind that policies HE1, HE4, HE5, HE7 and HE8 of the 2011 Local Plan will remain as extant policies.
175. In the light of national policy following the *Housing Standards Review* **MM31** and **MM33** are necessary. These replace the requirement that new development incorporates climate change adaptation measures (policy CP40) and makes provision for the effective use of natural resources (policy CP43) with an encouragement that they should do so. It has been argued that the modifications conflict with national policy and guidance. However, paragraphs 17 and 94 of the NPPF state that the encouragement of the reuse of existing resources is a core planning principle and that authorities should adopt proactive strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The relevant Ministerial Written Statement (25 March 2015) advises that authorities should not set in Local Plans requirements relating to the construction or performance of new dwellings. An encouragement is not a requirement and it is clear to me that the Council would not, reasonably, refuse permission for a development which did not respond to these encouragements. Evidence indicates that the Vale is in an area of water stress and, thus, in line with the Written Ministerial Statement, **MM31** also appropriately requires that housing development is designed to achieve a water efficiency standard of 110 litres per day. Furthermore, to ensure accordance with national policy set out in the Ministerial Written Statement of 18 June 2015, **MM32** is required to make clear that policy CP41 (renewable energy) does not apply to wind energy development.
176. Policies CP42, CP44, CP45 and CP46 are positively-prepared policies addressing flood risk, the landscape, green infrastructure and biodiversity which, notwithstanding the various detailed criticisms of them, are soundly-based.

Conclusion

177. In summary, subject to **MM20 – MM26, MM28 – MM33** and **MM82** the plan sets out district wide policies which are positively-prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.



**Issue 10 – whether or not the plan is soundly-based in terms of economic viability issues and its delivery, monitoring and contingency arrangements.**

Viability

178. The plan has been appraised by the independently-prepared *Planning and Development (2014) Local Plan Viability Study*. This persuasively concludes that the cumulative impact of the proposed policies of the plan would not put its implementation at serious risk. The plan thus complies with paragraphs 173 and 174 of the NPPF in this respect.

Delivery, Monitoring and Contingency

179. Policy CP47, concerns delivery and contingency and relates to the monitoring framework set out in the plan's appendices. Whilst the policy and the framework have been the subject of significant criticism, in the context of assessing the soundness of the plan, I note that neither national policy nor guidance requires a local plan to include a monitoring framework. That said, the NPPF is clear that plans should be kept up to date (and reviewed in full or in part if necessary) and the inclusion of a monitoring framework in the Vale's plan is a way in which that aim can be realised. Notwithstanding work on the issue by the Council jointly with a number of other parties, following the hearing sessions, disagreement still exists with regard to (i) the extent to which key elements of the plan's strategy (eg the housing requirement figure) should be reviewed if progress is not on track and (ii) the extent to which development (eg housing) should be halted if other development (eg employment uses or supporting infrastructure) does not materialise as envisaged.

180. Both are sensible points although (ii) is, in reality, particularly problematic. Even if approval of housing, employment and infrastructure development is carefully co-ordinated, including through the use of planning conditions and obligations, there is, in practice, little the Council can do to ensure that implementation of multiple developments is equally co-ordinated. And once approved the Council cannot readily halt a housing scheme, for example, if approved employment development does not come forward as quickly as envisaged. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the new housing development included within the plan already has permission, in principle at least.

181. On point (i) the Council's proposed "actions" within the Monitoring Framework are predominantly ones which to seek to get delivery of the plan back on track, whereas as it has been suggested that missed targets should trigger a review of the strategy. In my view both are potentially appropriate, but key to determining which is the most suitable approach in a specific case is investigation of the causes of implementation of the plan not being on track. This is something which the Monitoring Framework, nor related policy CP47, as submitted, do not require.

182. Consequently, for the plan to be effective **MM34** is necessary, altering policy CP47 to make clear that where implementation of the plan is not taking place as envisaged the Council will investigate the reasons for the situation and then

implement appropriate action. Accordingly **MM79** and **MM80** amend and update the monitoring framework itself, the "actions if not on target" referring back to policy CP47 where relevant. Moreover, the monitoring framework will not operate in isolation of policy CP1 which indicates that where the plan's relevant policies are out of date the Council will determine a planning application in line with the presumption in favour of sustainable development set out in national policy.

183. Appendix G of the plan lists the saved policies of the Local Plan 2011 which will remain in place until reviewed/replaced by the 'Part 2' plan. **MM78** is necessary to correct omissions, by error, in the list.

### Conclusion

184. In summary, subject to **MM34** and **MM78-80**, the plan is soundly-based in terms of economic viability issues and its delivery, monitoring and contingency arrangements.

## Assessment of Legal Compliance

185. A number of criticisms have been made of the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) of the plan. It has been argued that it should have tested the option of Oxford City's unmet housing needs being met in the Vale through allocations in the plan. However, the law requires the testing of reasonable alternatives for meeting the objective of the plan and, in the context of the level of unmet needs being, until very recently, unknown, it has always been clear that it was not an objective of the Part 1 plan that it should seek to meet any neighbouring authority's unmet housing needs. It is also contended that the SA does not sufficiently thoroughly appraise a range of impacts including, amongst others water resources, climate change, agricultural land and transport effects. Bearing in mind that the appraisal is of a strategic level plan and that more detailed assessment of the effects of specific schemes (including potentially further Environmental Impact Assessment) will be required, I am satisfied that it is adequate. Others disagree with the SA's conclusions on specific impacts. Whilst this is understandable, given that there is often an inevitable degree of judgement in such assessments, its conclusions are reasonable.
186. It has been argued, that with specific respect to carbon reduction, the plan fails to contribute towards the achievement of sustainable development, as required by s39 of the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. However, s39 indicates that this requirement should be exercised having regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The NPPF and PPG are such policies and advice, the former stating that sustainable development has three (economic, social and environmental) dimensions. I have found that, subject to the recommended modifications, the plan is consistent with this policy and guidance.
187. Concern has also been raised about consultation during the preparation of the plan. It is unfortunate that a representation submitted at Regulation 19 stage was mislaid although no prejudice was ultimately caused and there is no evidence to indicate there has been a widespread problem in this particular respect. Others have contended that the process, involving various rounds of consultation, has been complex and confusing. However, regulations require several rounds of consultation and it is also an inevitable that if the plan is revised to respond to representations further rounds of consultation will be necessary. Several thousand representations were made on the plan at both the Regulation 18 and Regulation 19 stages and, to my mind, this is evidence of a high level of engagement of the local community in the plan's preparation. Moreover, there is little to indicate that the Council has not, as a matter of course, undertaken consultation in accordance with its *Statement of Community Involvement*.

### Conclusion

188. My examination of the compliance of the plan with the legal requirements is summarised in the table below. I conclude that the plan meets them all.

| <b>LEGAL REQUIREMENTS</b>   |   |
|---|---|
| Local Development Scheme (LDS)                                    | The Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031: Part 1 is identified within the approved LDS (January 2016) which sets out an expected adoption date of October 2016. The plan's content is compliant with the LDS and whilst the likely adoption date is some weeks after that envisaged in the LDS this does not represent a material failing of the plan. |
| Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and relevant regulations | The SCI was adopted in December 2009 and consultation has been compliant with the requirements therein, including the consultation on the post-submission proposed 'main modification' changes (MM).  |
| Sustainability Appraisal (SA)                                     | SA has been carried out and is adequate.  |
| Appropriate Assessment (AA)                                       | The Habitats Regulations AA Screening Report (February 2014) sets out why AA is not necessary.  |
| National Policy   | The plan complies with national policy except where indicated and modifications are recommended.  |
| 2004 Act (as amended) and 2012 Regulations.                       | The plan complies with the Act and the Regulations.   |

## Overall Conclusion and Recommendation

189. The plan has a number of deficiencies in relation to soundness and/or legal compliance, for the reasons set out above, which mean that I recommend non-adoption of it as submitted, in accordance with Section 20(7A) of the 2004 Act. These deficiencies have been explored in the main issues set out above.

190. The Council has requested that I recommend main modifications to make the plan sound and/or legally compliant and capable of adoption. I conclude that with the recommended main modifications set out in the Appendix the Vale of White Horse Local Plan: 2031 (Part 1) satisfies the requirements of Section 20(5) of the 2004 Act and meets the criteria for soundness in the National Planning Policy Framework.

*Malcolm Rivett*

INSPECTOR

This report is accompanied by the Appendix containing the Main Modifications