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# **Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment for the South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan**

**Technical Addendum to Scoping Report**

**December 2024**

# Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment for the South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan

## Technical Addendum to Scoping Report

<b>Client:</b>	South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse District Council	
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<b>Author:</b> Hannah Clement BSc (Hons) PIEMA	<b>Proofed:</b> Giulia Civello BSc (Hons) MSc PIEMA	<b>Approved:</b> Nick Pincombe BA (Hons) MSc CEnv MIEMA MCIEEM
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# Abbreviations

AQMA	Air Quality Management Area
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
CO <sub>2</sub>	Carbon Dioxide
LNRS	Local Nature Recovery Strategy
NH <sub>3</sub>	Ammonia
NO <sub>x</sub>	Nitrogen Oxides
ONS	Office for National Statistics
SAC	Special Areas of Conservation
SSSI	Sites of Special Scientific Interest
SuDS	Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems
TVERC	Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council are working together to create a Joint Local Plan. The Joint Local Plan will cover the entirety of both Districts and provide a set of planning policies guiding development in the area to 2041.
- 1.1.2 A [Scoping Report](#) for the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Joint Local Plan was compiled by the Councils in May 2022. This addendum provides detail on the likely evolution of the baseline in the absence of the Joint Local Plan, in relation to each the topic areas set out in the original Scoping Report.
- 1.1.3 This addendum is structured by scoping topic area. For each topic area the key challenges are replicated from the Scoping Report to provide context. This is followed by a description of the 'future baseline' across the Districts, in the absence of the Joint Local Plan, as required by paragraph 2, Schedule 2 of the SEA Regulations<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004

## 2 Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan

### 2.1 Air Quality

#### **Key Challenges**

2.1.1 Section 4.44 of the Scoping Report sets out the key challenges facing the Districts with respect to Air Quality, including:

- ▶ Needing to reduce pollution of all kinds;
- ▶ Tackling air quality issues in populated areas to improve the health of residents;
- ▶ Reducing the need to travel by car, due to its associated impact on air quality and reducing emissions from all forms of transport;
- ▶ De-designating Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) because of continuing trends of reduced NO<sub>2</sub> levels; and
- ▶ Reducing emissions from all forms of transport.

#### **Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan**

2.1.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2), South Oxfordshire District Council Air Quality Action Plan 2014 (and Developer's Guidance), Vale of White Horse Air Quality Action Plan 2015 (and Developer's Guidance) and National Planning Policy would continue to apply.

2.1.3 Traffic flow and congestion in and around the Districts may increase as the population increases. This could lead to worsening air quality due to pollutants associated with transport. Both Districts contain three designated Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) due to high levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) from traffic emissions. South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse directly adjoin the Oxford City AQMA and South Oxfordshire also directly adjoins the Reading AQMA. A stretch of the M40 running east from the South Oxfordshire boundary into Buckinghamshire is also designated as an AQMA. In the absence of the Joint Local Plan, development may be located in less sustainable locations that increase reliance on car use and therefore could increase air pollution.

2.1.4 On the other hand, recent national policies and the emergence of new technologies (such as electric vehicles) are likely to improve air quality, through cleaner fuels/energy sources. Measures to improve air quality are incorporated in the action plans and developer guidance described in section 2.1.1 above.

## 2.2 Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

### **Key Challenges**

2.2.1 The key biodiversity challenges for the Districts, as set out in paragraph 5.59 of the Scoping Report, are outlined below:

- ▶ Achieving net gains in biodiversity across the Districts, with new developments expected to secure at least 10% net gain in line with national legislation<sup>2</sup>;
- ▶ Protecting, and where possible enhancing all biodiversity assets in the Districts and surrounding areas, not just designated assets;
- ▶ Achieving “good” ecological status in the River Thames upstream of the Oxford Meadows SAC, and maintain a hydrological regime which provides a consistently near-surface water table in the SAC;
- ▶ Reducing ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>), oxides of nitrogen (NO<sub>x</sub>) and sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), and critical loads for nutrient nitrogen deposition and acid deposition across all SACs in the Districts. This should give particular attention to vehicular emissions at Aston Rowant and Oxford Meadows SACs;
- ▶ Maintaining natural hydrological processes to provide the conditions necessary to sustain the alkaline fens at Cothill Fen SAC;
- ▶ Maintaining surface water and/or groundwater water quality and quantity at Little Wittenham SAC, and to reduce recreational pressure on the SAC;
- ▶ Maintaining the overall extent, quality and function of the wider supporting landscape and hydrological processes of the Aston Rowant and Chiltern Beechwood SACs; and
- ▶ Maintaining artificial light at a level that is unlikely to affect natural phenological cycles and processes at the Aston Rowant and Chiltern Beechwood SAC.

### **Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan**

2.2.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2) and National Planning Policy would continue apply. The emerging Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) will also establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature recovery and enhancement across the county.

2.2.3 Other baseline trends relevant to biodiversity, flora and fauna that may continue under such a scenario include:

- ▶ Overall gains in biodiversity are likely to increase due to the increasing integration of biodiversity considerations, such as the mandatory BNG legislation;
- ▶ Increased demand for water coupled with diffuse pollution via run-off may place additional pressure on habitats;

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<sup>2</sup> Policy NH2 of the Joint Local Plan requires a higher level of net gain (20%), but the statutory requirement is 10%

- ▶ Most of the designated biodiversity assets in the Districts are either in favourable, or unfavourable but recovering condition. There has been an overall improvement in the designated sites in the period of data collected as part of the scoping work and this is likely to continue in light of national policy and the emerging LNRS;
- ▶ Data from Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) collected as part of the scoping work suggested there has been an overall decline in priority habitats across both South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse. This could continue in the absence of the Joint Local Plan; and
- ▶ Climate change has the potential to affect biodiversity in a range of ways, including through changes in the distribution and abundance of species (including non-native species) and changes to the composition and character of habitats.

## 2.3 Climatic Factors

### **Key Challenges**

2.3.1 The Scoping Report highlights that there is a clear need to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Districts. Both Districts have targets in place to become carbon neutral by 2045.

2.3.2 The key climatic challenges facing the Districts, as set out in paragraph 6.34 of the Scoping Report, are outlined below:

- ▶ Making a significant contribution to achieving net zero carbon emissions in both Districts to meet the Councils' carbon reduction targets, specifically focussing on domestic and transportation emissions as the largest contributors in 2019;
- ▶ Ensuring new developments are resilient to the effects of climate change, and that proposals do not weaken existing communities' and businesses' resilience to climate change;
- ▶ Only supporting new development or growth proposals where they can achieve net zero carbon emissions and contribute to the green economy;
- ▶ Supporting the retrofitting of existing buildings to reduce their carbon emissions;
- ▶ Creating new carbon sinks (such as woodland and green infrastructure);
- ▶ Supporting battery storage technology to manage time of day challenges in electricity supply and tackling grid supply constraints; and
- ▶ Supporting the delivery of new renewable energy installations.

### **Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan**

2.3.3 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2), South Oxfordshire Climate Action Plan 2022-2024 and the Vale of White Horse Climate Action Plan 2022-2024 would continue to apply.



- 2.3.4 Targets for both Districts to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045 would likely remain in place, driven by UK Government targets; however, the absence of the Joint Local Plan would limit opportunities to strengthen local policy drivers towards net zero development and ensure adaptation through design.
- 2.3.5 Baseline trends relevant to climate change that may continue under such a scenario include:
- ▶ Increases in mean winter and summer temperatures;
  - ▶ Increases in mean precipitation during winter and decreases in mean precipitation during summer;
  - ▶ Increased frequency of extreme weather events, particularly flooding events;
  - ▶ Increase in risks associated with climate change;
  - ▶ Per capita emissions are likely to continue to decrease;
  - ▶ Emissions from road transport and households are likely to continue to be the two largest inputs to greenhouse gas emissions in the Districts;
  - ▶ Road traffic use may increase as the population increases which could lead to increases in greenhouse gas emissions; and
  - ▶ Increased renewable energy generation as progress is made towards the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions within developments.

## 2.4 Cultural Heritage and Townscape

### **Key Challenges**

- 2.4.1 The key challenges for Cultural Heritage and Townscape across the Districts, as set out in paragraph 7.58 of the Scoping Report, include:
- ▶ Conserving, and where possible, enhancing all heritage assets and their settings in the Districts;
  - ▶ Reducing the number of heritage assets “at risk” in the Districts;
  - ▶ Protecting, and where possible, enhancing the built character of existing settlements;
  - ▶ Providing a strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets most at risk through neglect, decay, or other threats;
  - ▶ Continuing a recurring programme of review of the Districts’ conservation areas and published documents; and
  - ▶ Supporting the development of appropriately scaled renewable energy / energy efficiency improvements within the historic environment, where it is sensitively and appropriately designed.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan***

- 2.4.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2) and National Planning Policy would apply.
- 2.4.3 The Joint Design Guide for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse (adopted in 2022) would provide assistance through all stages of the design and planning process to achieve high quality development. However, the setting of cultural heritage assets within the Districts may continue to be affected by development, both positively and negatively.
- 2.4.4 The effects of climate change could also increasingly cause damage to heritage assets, including increasing temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, flooding and severe weather events.

## **2.5 Human Health and Wellbeing**

### ***Key Challenges***

- 2.5.1 Section 8.37 of the Scoping Report sets out the key challenges for Human Health and Wellbeing across the Districts, including:
- ▶ Improving pockets of low income, education, skills and training across the plan area, while also improving access to services and facilities in remote areas;
  - ▶ Ensuring new developments create healthy places, ensuring residents can access services, facilities, and publicly accessible open space by active travel; and
  - ▶ Creating safe places that are free from crime and free from the fear of crime and protected from acts of terror.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of Joint Local Plan***

- 2.5.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2), the Oxfordshire Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2024 to 2030), the Police and Criminal Justice Plan 2021-2025 and National Planning Policy would continue to apply.
- 2.5.3 Baseline trends relevant to health and wellbeing may continue under such a scenario including:
- ▶ Obesity, seen as an increasing issue by health professionals, may contribute to significant health impacts on individuals and increase the risk of a range of diseases (including heart disease, diabetes and some forms of cancer);
  - ▶ Medical advances, including those linked to improved diagnosis, pharmaceutical innovations and technological enhancements, which have the potential to lead to improvements in the prediction, prevention and treatment of illnesses;
  - ▶ Changes in the extent of noise pollution alongside road traffic growth; and

- ▶ Increased likelihood of speculative development in unsustainable locations without the Joint Local Plan, which could lead to poor community cohesion and social inequalities.

2.5.4 The Joint Local Plan provides significant opportunities to plan for healthy communities across the Districts which would be missed in its absence.

## 2.6 Landscape

### **Key Challenges**

2.6.1 The key landscape challenges across both Districts, set out in Section 9.39 of the Scoping Report, are outlined below:

- ▶ Protecting and managing the character and appearance of the landscape/townscape, maintaining and strengthening local distinctiveness and sense of place, the countryside and landscape quality;
- ▶ Ensuring great weight is given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty of the National Landscapes (formerly Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) including development within their setting, which should be sensitively located and designed;
- ▶ Identifying and protecting locally significant landscape assets; and
- ▶ Avoiding development in the Oxford Green Belt where this would erode the functions of the Green Belt.

### **Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan**

2.6.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2), The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2019 to 2024), The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2019 to 2024) and National Planning Policy would continue to apply.

2.6.3 These targets and policies require the use of sensitive design to ensure the protection of the landscape, but increased pressures from housing and development may compromise the ability to achieve this.

## 2.7 Material Assets

### **Key Challenges**

2.7.1 As in Section 10.24 of the Scoping Report, there are a number of challenges for material assets across the Districts. These include:

- ▶ Ensuring that extraction of resources takes place prior to any development in Mineral Resource Areas, Mineral Safeguarding Areas and Mineral Consultation Areas;
- ▶ Avoiding development in safeguarded Mineral Infrastructure Zones; and

- ▶ Minimising the use of new materials and prioritising the reuse and recycling of existing materials and aggregate.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan***

- 2.7.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2), Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Core Strategy 2017 and National Planning Policy would continue to apply. In due course the Minerals and Waste Core Strategy will be replaced by the new Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan (2042).
- 2.7.3 Whilst these targets and policies would remain in place, without the Joint Local Plan, the opportunity to strengthen policies on the effective use of materials and re-using, retaining and retrofitting buildings would be missed.

## **2.8 Population**

### ***Key Challenges***

- 2.8.1 The key population challenges across both Districts, as set out in Sections 11.66 to 11.68 of the Scoping Report, include:
- ▶ Planning for an increasing and ageing population and continuing to maintain low income-deprivation rates (or improving where necessary);
  - ▶ Planning and design for safe developments and increasing job opportunities; and
  - ▶ Improving on the physical proximity of local services, and removing geographical and other barriers, including those issues relating to access to housing, such as affordability of local housing stock.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan***

- 2.8.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2, and National Planning Policy (including Planning Policy for Traveller Sites (updated 2023)) would continue to apply.
- 2.8.3 Baseline trends relevant to Population that may continue under such a scenario include:
- ▶ Population growth in both Districts is expected (South Oxfordshire by 4.17% and Vale of White Horse by 3.98% by 2028) and will increase demand for housing, services and infrastructure;
  - ▶ Continuing ageing population within the Districts;
  - ▶ Continuing pattern of families moving out of Oxford city into the surrounding Districts;
  - ▶ The 19-22 year old demographic will likely remain lower than average, due to individuals moving away for University or other further education and training opportunities;

- ▶ Levels of inequality may continue to increase in pockets of the Districts, particularly in South Oxfordshire; and
- ▶ Employment and earnings could increase as the economic climate improves.

## 2.9 Soil Quality

### **Key Challenges**

2.9.1 Section 12.14 of the Scoping Report sets out the key challenges associated with soil quality in the Districts. They focus on the protection of the best and most versatile agricultural land to ensure local food production can still take place whilst avoiding soil contamination.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan***

2.9.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1 and 2) and National Planning Policy would continue to apply.

2.9.3 Soils in England continue to be degraded by human actions including urban development, which can make them vulnerable to erosion, compaction and loss of organic matter. Without the emerging Joint Local Plan, delivery of development which is not plan-led could increase pressure on South and Vale's soil resource.

## 2.10 Water Quality

### **Key Challenges**

2.10.1 Section 13.27 of the Scoping Report sets out the key challenges associated with water quality in the Districts. The majority of water bodies monitored in South Oxfordshire are of moderate standard, with some poor. There are currently no water bodies achieving good status. In Vale of White Horse District, there is one water body achieving good status, and one achieving bad status. The remaining water bodies are a mix of poor and moderate status.

### ***Likely Evolution of the Baseline in the Absence of the Joint Local Plan***

2.10.2 If the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan is not adopted, it is assumed that relevant targets and policies in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Part 1, core policies 40 & 43), The Water Environment Regulations (2017) and National Planning Policy would continue to apply.

2.10.3 Baseline trends relevant to Water Quality that may continue under such a scenario include:

- ▶ Continued population growth will increase demand for water, placing increased pressure on water resources in both Districts;

- ▶ Continued population growth will also increase pressure on waste water infrastructure some of which is already at capacity with the potential for adverse water quality effects to rivers and streams in the Districts;
- ▶ Housing demand could result in an increase in the amount of land being developed in areas at risk of flooding;
- ▶ New development has the potential to increase diffuse water pollution through surface water run-off and via the release of contaminants into water courses/bodies from the re-use of previously developed land;
- ▶ South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Districts lie within the Thames Water region, which is one of the driest in the country. The Environment Agency has assessed the Thames Water supply region as an area of 'serious' water stress which is expected to get worse; and
- ▶ Increased demand and reduced water availability from less predictable rainfall as a result of climate change will affect the environment and reduce security of supply to homes and businesses.

## 3 Summary

- 3.1.1 This document is a technical addendum to the SA/SEA Scoping Report. The Plan, Programme and Policy review and the baseline information presented in the Scoping Report have been examined to explore how the current state of the environment is likely to evolve in the absence of the Joint Local Plan, as required by paragraph 2, Schedule 2 of the SEA Regulation 2004.

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## Urban Edge Environmental Consulting Ltd

Unit 5 | Westergate Business Centre | Brighton | BN2 4QN

T: 01273 68 67 66 | E: [enquiries@ueec.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@ueec.co.uk)

[www.ueec.co.uk](http://www.ueec.co.uk) |  LinkedIn |  TEMA

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## Urban Edge Environmental Consulting Ltd

Unit 5 | Westergate Business Centre | Brighton | BN2 4QN

T: 01273 68 67 66 | E: [enquiries@ueec.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@ueec.co.uk)

[www.ueec.co.uk](http://www.ueec.co.uk) | 

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