

Statement of Common Ground

between

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse
District Councils

and

Natural England

in relation to the
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse
Joint Local Plan 2041

December 2024

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) has been prepared by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils ('the councils') and Natural England (NE) hereafter referred to as 'the parties'. It sets out matters that are agreed and those that are not between the parties in relation to the South and Vale Local Plan 2041 ('the Plan').
- 1.2 The agreed matters in this SoCG do not preclude any further written or verbal representations that the councils and NE may wish to make as part of the Local Plan Examination, in relation to any other matters which may not have been agreed and/or which do not form part of this SoCG.
- 1.3 To date, the councils have consulted on the:
- Joint Local Plan at Regulation 18 Part 1 (Issues) stage - June 2022
 - Joint Local Plan at Regulation 18 Part 2 (Preferred Options) stage - Jan 2024
 - Publication draft of the Joint Local Plan in accordance with Regulation 19 - Oct 2024
- 1.4 NE has engaged with the preparation of the Joint Local Plan (JLP) at each of the above stages and have met with the councils outside these formal consultation/ publication periods. The councils support and recognise the value of this on-going working relationship for positively prepared local plans.
- 1.6 At each stage of the plan making process the councils have prepared a range of evidence-base documents and published them on the councils' websites. These have informed and helped to shape policy wording within the plan. The councils have sought NE's input on various stages of the Habitats Regulations Assessment of the emerging JLP. NE has also been closely involved in the development of the councils' Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy, funding a pilot project on the implementation through planning policy of NE's new national GI tools. The councils have also involved NE as a stakeholder in the formulation of a suite of new landscape evidence documents, prepared specifically to support the JLP.

2. Geographies and Issues

South and Vale

- 2.1 The district of South Oxfordshire covers nearly 670km² and the Vale covers an area of some 580km². The district boundaries of South Oxfordshire reach from the edge of the city of Oxford to the north-west, along the borders of

Buckinghamshire and Berkshire to the outskirts of Reading to the south. The Vale of White Horse district falls between the larger centres of Oxford to the north-east and Swindon to the south-west. South Oxfordshire has four main towns: Didcot, Henley, Thame and Wallingford. Larger villages within South Oxfordshire provide a range of services and facilities. The main settlements within the Vale are the three historic market towns of Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon and Wantage, which provide essential services for the surrounding rural areas.

- 2.2 South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils are working together on a Joint Local Plan which will guide the kinds of new housing and jobs needed and where they should go, informing planning application decisions for the districts. In the Joint Local Plan the councils propose developing planning policies that help address the climate emergency, restore nature, and meet the needs of our residents, such as delivering genuinely affordable low-carbon homes with the right infrastructure to go with it.
- 2.3 South and Vale have an extremely rich and varied natural environment. The districts are both predominantly rural and contain significant swathes of National Landscape (the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns) as well as rivers and river floodplains, and a variety of designated sites, irreplaceable habitats, priority habitats and protected species.

3. Habitats Regulations Assessment

- 3.1 The councils have engaged with NE on work relating to the 'Habitat Regulations'. This has involved obtaining NE's advice on Habitats Regulations Assessment of the emerging JLP, from the Preliminary Screening Report stage through to submission of an Appropriate Assessment (AA) report (December 2024). There is a joint commitment from the parties to continuing work on air quality for the next stages of AA work, as required.
- 3.2 A South and Vale Habitats Regulations Assessment Appropriate Assessment (December 2024) (Examination library reference: CSD04.1) has been prepared on behalf of the councils by Urban Edge Environmental Consulting and has been shared and considered by Natural England.
- 3.3 The AA identified likely significant effects in relation to the Cothill Fen Special Area of Conservation (SAC) associated with recreational disturbance in combination with other plans and projects. However, NE agree with the AA that, when taking account of the mitigation measures incorporated within Policy AS10 of the Joint Local Plan, no adverse effects to the integrity of Cothill Fen SAC are predicted.

- 3.4 The AA also concludes that no likely significant effects were identified associated with water quality and quantity and site-specific impacts, either alone or in combination with other plans and projects.
- 3.5 The AA finds that likely significant air pollution effects cannot currently be ruled out for Oxford Meadows SAC, Cothill Fen SAC and Aston Rowant SAC as there are roads which fall within 200m of these sites. The parties are involved in ongoing discussions about the scope of modelling work required to inform the assessment of air quality impacts on these three European Sites. An update to the December 2024 AA report will be published once this work is completed.

4. Duty to Cooperate

- 4.1 The parties agree that they have engaged effectively and on an on-going basis during the plan making process.

5. Summary

- 5.1 The parties agree that the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041 can be considered compliant with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended), with regard to Aston Rowant SAC, Chiltern Beechwoods SAC, Cothill Fen SAC, Hackpen Hill SAC, Hartslock Wood SAC, Kennet & Lambourn Floodplain SAC, Little Wittenham SAC, Oxford Meadows SAC and River Lambourn SAC, for all impact pathways except for atmospheric pollution, on which further work will be undertaken.
- 5.2 The parties agree that they have engaged effectively and on an on-going basis during the plan making process, in accordance with the Duty to Cooperate.

Signatures

Signed on behalf of Natural England:

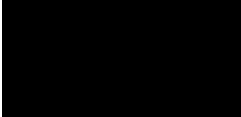


Name: Isabella Jack

Job title: Sustainable Development Senior Officer

Date: 9th December 2024

Signed on behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council:



Name: Tim Oruye

Job title: Head of Policy ad Programmes

Date: 9 December 2024