



# Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Town Centres and Retail Study

Final Report

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ON BEHALF OF SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE AND VALE OF WHITE HORSE COUNCILS

December 2023

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## Executive Summary

1. This Town Centres and Retail Study has been jointly commissioned by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils. The preparation of the Study has been led and co-ordinated by Nexus Planning, with specialist input from NEMS Market Research on the empirical survey work, and Experian on data production.
2. The primary focus of the Study is to establish the current position in respect of the need for additional retail and leisure facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and to consider the vitality and viability of the authorities' principal defined centres.
3. The Study has been prepared to reflect the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2021, Planning Practice Guidance (PPG), and the Use Classes Order (2020 amendments).
4. The Study starts by summarising the key current and future retail trends. The current economic circumstances arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the conflict in Ukraine cause the retail and leisure market to continue to be somewhat unstable. Sluggish expansion in household incomes and tepid consumer confidence mean a limited ability or appetite for consumer spending across retail goods and leisure activities. In the meantime, the rise in internet retailing has been accelerated and this continues to have clear implications on the viability of some 'bricks and mortar' retailers. However, this does not mean that physical retail is to become obsolete. Omni-channel retailing is increasingly becoming the norm across the industry.
5. Overall, in a market disrupted by continued changes in consumer behaviour, investing in the consumer experience is anticipated to be the key to success in securing resiliency in retail stores moving forward. Planning policy can play an important role in helping to future-proof city, town and village centres against the ongoing uncertainty and we recommend that the authorities ensure that policies are sufficiently flexible to allow for a wide range of town centre uses beyond retail, and that consideration is given to repurposing surplus stock to accommodate residential, leisure and community uses.
6. New healthcheck assessments have been undertaken for the major town centres (Didcot and Henley-on-Thames) and town centres (Thame and Wallingford) in South Oxfordshire, and the market towns (Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage) and local service centres (Botley and Grove) in Vale of White Horse, as identified in the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 and the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Parts 1 and 2) respectively.
7. The findings of the detailed healthchecks have then been used to help us shape the policy recommendations which form part of the Study, including the overarching general policy approach to help support the future vitality and viability of centres, alongside the specific policies relating to the local impact threshold and defined boundaries.
8. The Study then goes on to review existing market shares across the Study Area, as informed by the telephone Household Survey which comprised 1,405 interviews split between the 13 Zones, representative of geographic areas that may accommodate broadly similar patterns of shopping behaviour. Overall, the Study summarises the key findings on internet shopping patterns, as well as a survey-derived market share analysis for convenience and comparison goods spending at 'bricks and mortar' locations. We also examine the level of take-up for various leisure activities and examine any locally identified deficiencies in provision.
9. There is no capacity to support further convenience goods floorspace across either of the authority areas in the period to 2041. In respect of the prospect of additional operator demand for new stores, we note that the two authorities' principal centres have generally grown in an organic manner around a marketplace or central square. Residential land values are typically strong and there is not an abundance of industrial land (which often provides

redevelopment potential) in central locations. As such, there are limited opportunities for additional foodstores within or immediately adjacent to existing centre boundaries. Should further convenience goods retail proposals come forward on edge or out of centre sites, then these will need to be considered carefully with reference to the key retail sequential and impact tests.

10. In terms of comparison goods floorspace, the level of capacity identified relates to a modest requirement for additional floorspace in South Oxfordshire only. At 2041, this equates to a need for between 1,900 sq.m and 3,200 sq.m of floorspace. If this requirement transpires in practice, it should be met through the reoccupation of vacant premises. We do not anticipate a need to build out any further comparison goods floorspace over the plan period and recommend that any planning applications which support such a use are carefully considered in respect of their compliance with the sequential and impact town centre policy tests.
11. The Study concludes by providing guidance to inform the review of the Local Plan. The spatial extent of centres is considered and proposed amendments to the centre boundaries are recommended. Existing retail and leisure impact thresholds are reviewed and it is concluded that the threshold is lowered to allow the Council to retain appropriate control in respect of the potential for development to impact on the future health of the defined centres.

# 1. Introduction

## Instruction and Purpose

- 1.1 Nexus Planning has been instructed by the joint client of South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council (hereafter referred to respectively as 'South Oxfordshire' and 'Vale of White Horse') to undertake a new Town Centres and Retail Study for the two authority areas. The primary focus of the Study is to establish the current position in respect of the need for additional retail and leisure facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and to consider the vitality and viability of the authorities' principal defined centres.
- 1.2 The Study replaces the previous South Oxfordshire Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (2016), which was undertaken by Bilfinger GVA, and the Vale of White Horse Retail and Town Centres Study (2013), which was undertaken by Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners, and the subsequent updates of these reports. The principal purpose of the commission is to inform the emerging Joint Local Plan 2041, and to assist in the determination of future planning applications for retail and other main town centre uses.
- 1.3 The Study is underpinned by new empirical evidence in the form of a new household shopper survey, stakeholder consultation, and our site visits to survey and assess the health of the principal centres. The household survey was undertaken by NEMS Market Research in July 2022 and covers 13 separate zones, which are collectively considered representative of the principal catchment area for retail facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. The zones have been developed with reference to those utilised in the previous 2013 and 2016 Studies.
- 1.4 A plan of the Study Area is provided at Appendix 1, and the tabulated household survey results are provided at Appendix 2. Whilst the Study Area largely corresponds with the boundaries of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas, it does include parts of neighbouring authority areas of Buckinghamshire, Wokingham, Reading, West Berkshire, Swindon, West Oxfordshire and Oxford, where residents sometimes look to facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to meet at least some of their retail and leisure needs.
- 1.5 Shopping habits are not governed by local authority area boundaries. It is therefore appropriate to consider the 'inflow' of expenditure from residents of neighbouring authority areas to centres in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, to identify these centres' overall turnover and understand their role across the wider area. The survey also allows us to consider the proportion of expenditure which originates within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse but which 'leaks' to destinations outside of the two authority areas.

## Structure of Report

- 1.6 Our report firstly provides an overview of prevailing retail and leisure trends, before then going on to consider the planning policy context for the Study. We then considering the vitality and viability of defined centres within the authority areas. We then review the shopping patterns established by the household survey before setting out our assessment of retail needs.
- 1.7 Accordingly, our report is structured as follows:
  - Section 2 sets out key retail and leisure trends of relevance to the commission;
  - Section 3 provides an overview of the planning policy context;
  - Section 4 summarises our assessment of the vitality and viability of the defined centres;
  - Section 5 provides an overview of forecast changes in Study Area population and expenditure;

- Section 6 summarises the findings of the household survey;
- Section 7 sets out an updated assessment of retail needs;
- Section 8 sets out an updated assessment of leisure needs; and
- Section 9 provides a summary of our key findings and conclusions.

## 2. Current and Emerging Retail and Leisure Trends

- 2.1 In order to provide a context for this Study and help identify the sectors that are more likely to be the subject of additional development proposals, we provide an overview of current retail and leisure trends below. It should be noted that the retail and leisure sectors are dynamic and, whilst online shopping has impacted on the retail sector, new retailers and formats continue to evolve to meet shoppers' needs.
- 2.2 The below commentary should therefore be taken as a 'snapshot' in respect of current market conditions; it will be necessary to judge future development proposals for main town centre uses with reference to the prevailing conditions at the time of a proposal's determination. Whilst the impact of Covid-19 on the retail and leisure sectors has lessened in 2022 and 2023, the trading outlook is currently challenging due to inflationary pressures and significant increases in the cost of living. We reflect further on the current economic outlook below.

### Economic Conditions

- 2.3 The UK economy was impacted significantly by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and by restrictions on movement and behaviour which sought to mitigate its impact. This uncertain background caused business investment and expenditure to decline. Household spending fell by over 20% quarter-on-quarter in the second quarter of 2020 following the imposition of national lockdown measures. This is the largest quarterly contraction on record. Retail sales volumes also suffered double-digit falls in April 2020 as all but essential stores closed during the height of the lockdown.
- 2.4 However, as a result of the gradual reopening of businesses over summer 2020, the economy returned to growth, with this gathering momentum as a greater number of sectors reopened, including hospitality and leisure services followed by the full reopening of schools. A more pronounced resurgence in the number of cases of Covid-19 resulted in the Government reinstating a nationwide lockdown in early 2021. The general outlook in 2022 and 2023 has continued to be of concern given very significant increases in the rate of inflation and the cost of living.
- 2.5 In February 2023, Experian published its Retail Planner Briefing Note 20 ('ERPBN20'), which reflects current economic conditions and identifies anticipated future growth in the retail sector and considers likely changes in bricks and mortar retail floorspace and online sales.
- 2.6 ERPBN20 anticipates that retail spending will be squeezed in 2022 and 2023 as a consequence of inflationary pressure and increases in the cost of living. Page 5 of ERPBN20 provides the following summary of the short-term economic outlook:
- 'Pay is expected to grow strongly given a tight labour market, though will fail to keep pace with inflation, underpinning a decline in real personal disposable incomes and a curbing of consumer spending. Further out real incomes will recover as inflation subsides, however the rebound in spending is mild given unfavourable demographics and a rising tax burden on households.'**
- 2.7 Overall retail sales are forecast to be volatile in the short term, but growth is less impacted over the medium and longer term. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift to online retailing with a consequent reduction in bricks and mortar retail floorspace. As a consequence, the proportion of expenditure committed via special forms of trading (i.e. internet and mail order sales) has increased.
- 2.8 More generally, as a result of relatively modest growth forecasts and the shift to online retailing, Experian forecasts that there will be a reduction in the stock of retail floorspace over the next few years.

- 2.9 In terms of inflation, Office for National Statistics data<sup>1</sup> indicates that the rate of inflation (as measured by the consumer price index) increased from 0.8% at April 2020 to 1.5% at April 2021, before then increasing significantly to 9.0% at April 2022. The rate of inflation appears to have peaked at 11.1% in October 2022 and reduced to 8.7% at April 2023. At July 2023, inflation was at 6.8%. Retail has been an industry under significant stress, as many retailers find themselves squeezed between rising costs and the increasing volume of sales over the internet. Such difficulties have, of course, been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis associated with rising energy prices and inflation.
- 2.10 There will still be the need and demand for physical stores, despite the increase in shopping online. This is particularly the case for convenience goods sales in light of the fact that the online shopping orders are typically picked from the shelves of physical stores. In respect of comparison goods, there is a need for the offer to become more 'experiential' in order to encourage shoppers onto the high street, and to ensure that shopping is viewed as a pleasurable pastime. The shopping experience needs to evolve and diversify both to attract footfall and convert increased activity into sales. Independents clearly have an important role to play in adding interest and in providing differentiation between shopping venues.
- 2.11 In considering the current strength of the retail and leisure sectors, it is important to recognise that different types of retailers have been the subject of different fortunes.
- 2.12 Non-essential retailers have been impacted by enforced 'lockdown' closures in 2020 and 2021. However, dispensing chemists traded more strongly from March 2020, and their sales continued to in June 2022 even after restrictions were eased and other non-essential stores were allowed to reopen. Non-specialised foodstores, which include supermarkets, also traded consistently above their pre-pandemic levels. This was initially due to a degree of stockpiling of grocery goods, but some ongoing benefit was evident due to the ongoing prevalence of working from home. Furniture and homeware retailers have also generally benefitted from people spending more time in their homes and wanting to improve their own environment. However, in light of increasing inflation and changes to working patterns throughout 2022, it is understood that there has now been a shift away from this pattern<sup>2</sup>.

### **Available Expenditure and the Impact of the Internet**

- 2.13 Experian expenditure data and growth forecasts confirm that the pandemic has resulted in fairly turbulent short term growth in per capita convenience and comparison goods expenditure. In this regard, ERPBN20 identifies that per capita convenience goods expenditure decreased by 6.7% in 2022 with a further reduction of 2.4% forecast to follow in 2023. This follows a further reduction of 1.4% in 2021. Before this, in 2020, per capita convenience goods expenditure increased by 10.2%. The strong level of growth at 2020 is largely attributable to consumers spending more on such goods as a result of lockdown measures. Very limited annual per capita expenditure growth is anticipated to return across the medium to long term.
- 2.14 As the below Table 2.1 indicates, the position in respect of annual per capita comparison goods expenditure has been changeable in the past few years. Whilst annual growth of 6.7% was recorded in 2021, this followed a reduction of 6.8% in 2020. Forecast per capita comparison goods expenditure increases over the medium and longer term are positive but still below the level apparent at the turn of the millennium. Experian identifies that UK per capita comparison goods expenditure growth dropped from 3.9% at 2017 to 1.0% at 2018, and forecasts that it will remain between 2.8% to 2.9% per annum in the medium to long term.

<sup>1</sup> ONS 'Consumer price inflation tables' dataset, July 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Article headlined 'Retail sales in Great Britain rise despite cost of living crisis', The Guardian, 19 August 2022.



**Table 2.1: Experian’s Identified and Forecast UK Convenience and Comparison Goods Per Capita Expenditure Growth**

Volume Growth per Head (%)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025-29	2030-40
Convenience goods	0.1	0.2	10.2	-1.4	-6.7	-2.4	0.4	0.1	0.2
Comparison goods	0.7	2.5	-6.8	6.7	-0.4	-1.6	0.3	2.5	3.0

Source: Figure 1a and Figure 1b of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20

2.15 Whilst the above figures relate to a level of growth which is significantly below that which has historically been available to retailers, the situation for high street stores is exacerbated through the increasing amount of expenditure which is committed through special forms of trading<sup>3</sup> and, in particular, online.

2.16 In this regard, Figure 5 of ERPBN20 indicates that special forms of trading accounted for just over 30% of total retail sales at 2021 as a consequence of Covid-19 and subsequent to very strong growth in online retailing over the past decade. Although the growth in special forms of trading is anticipated to drop back slightly in 2022, Experian believes that special forms of trading will again account for over 30% of retail sales by 2024, increasing to around 36% of retail expenditure by 2033.

2.17 The below Table 2.2 sets out Experian’s identified and forecast level of special forms of trading as a proportion of overall convenience and comparison goods expenditure. Experian estimates that special forms of trading will account for more than four out of every ten pounds spent on comparison goods and almost a quarter of convenience goods expenditure at 2033.

**Table 2.2: Experian’s Identified and Forecast Market Share of Non-Store Retail Sales for Convenience and Comparison Goods Sectors**

Volume Growth Per Head (%)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2028	2033	2038
Convenience goods	10.9	12.8	16.6	19.3	19.4	18.6	22.5	24.4	25.5
Comparison goods	21.4	24.5	37.6	38.3	36.0	35.4	39.5	41.5	42.7

Source: Figure 5 of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20

2.18 The ongoing popularity of internet shopping continues to have clear implications in respect of the viability of some ‘bricks and mortar’ retailers. However, it is important to note that changes in how people shop also bring about some opportunities for retailers trading from the high street. In particular, many stores sell online but fulfil orders from regular stores rather than warehouses<sup>4</sup>, with purchases therefore helping to sustain tangible retail floorspace. As a consequence, Experian also provides an ‘adjusted’ estimate of special forms of trading, which relates to expenditure which is not available to actual stores.

## Convenience Goods

2.19 Recent socio-economic conditions have led to significant shifts in convenience goods retailing, which have resulted in the ‘big four’ supermarket operators’ market share being cut. Indeed, recent analysis from Kantar has identified that the traditional ‘big four’ supermarket operators are no longer such, with Aldi’s market share overtaking that of Morrisons over the 12 weeks to 4 September 2022. Over this period, Aldi’s market share of 9.3% was ahead of

<sup>3</sup> Including internet sales, mail order, stalls and markets, door-to-door and telephone sales.

<sup>4</sup> This is particularly the case with food shopping and speciality comparison goods purchases, where retailers often try to tap into a wider market through an online presence.

Morrisons' share of 9.1%<sup>5</sup>. Mintel<sup>6</sup> finds that the decline of the food superstore is well established and that this can be attributed to two matters.

2.20 Firstly, people are undertaking food shopping in different ways. More people are living in town and city centres and are generally purchasing their own home at a later age than was previously the case<sup>7</sup>. Mintel indicates that such people are more likely to undertake food shopping on an 'as needs' basis and are more likely to eat out or use takeaways. As such, they are less likely to have need to undertake a 'main food shop'.

2.21 Secondly, the current uncertainty in the economy has made discount foodstore operators (namely Aldi and Lidl) a more attractive proposition, and many such stores are thriving given that shoppers are currently having to be 'money savvy'. Discounters have also made efforts to try to compete more directly with the 'big four' supermarket operators, with larger stores, greater ranges of goods, fresh foods and premium products becoming increasingly prevalent. It is clear that the likes of Aldi and Lidl are no longer 'hard discounters' in quite the same way they once were, as they are able to meet a wider range of customers' needs by offering a greater range of premium products. The move towards the middle ground has allowed discounters to secure market share from both superstores and smaller convenience stores. In addition, we note that discount retailers are often happy to trade alongside more upmarket convenience goods retailers (such as M&S Foodhall) as, collectively, the two stores can meet many food shopping needs.

2.22 The shifts in the sector are illustrated with reference to changes in retailers' market share in recent years, as shown in Table 2.3.

**Table 2.3: Market Share of Convenience Goods Operators**

Operator	December 2016	December 2017	December 2018	December 2019	December 2020	December 2021
Tesco	28.4	28.1	27.8	27.4	27.3	27.9
Sainsbury's	16.5	16.5	16.1	16.0	15.9	15.7
Asda	15.3	15.3	15.2	14.8	14.3	14.2
Morrisons	10.8	10.8	10.6	10.3	10.4	10.1
Aldi	6.2	6.8	7.4	7.8	7.4	7.7
Co-op	6.3	5.8	5.9	6.1	6.0	5.8
Lidl	4.6	5.0	5.3	5.9	6.1	6.3
Waitrose	5.1	5.2	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.1
Iceland	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.5	2.4
Symbols & Independent	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.6
Other Outlets	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.8	1.8
Ocado	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.7

Source: KANTAR Grocery Market Share. Figures shown are for the final reporting period in each calendar year

2.23 The past few years has seen the closure of a number of unprofitable foodstores and the continuation of Aldi and Lidl's expansion programme. Aldi announced in September 2021 that it intends to open another 100 stores in the next two years<sup>8</sup>. Lidl's expansion plans are similar ambitious as it intends to open a further 220 stores in the period to 2025<sup>9</sup>. Whilst the 'big four' remain more cautious in respect of new openings, a limited number of proposals for mid-sized foodstores are currently being promoted by these operators in areas where there is a growing population or an obvious shortfall in existing provision. These stores are typically of a scale that is broadly

<sup>5</sup> Article headlined 'Big four no more': where now for UK grocers as Aldi overtakes Morrisons?', The Guardian, September 2022

<sup>6</sup> 'UK Retail Rankings', Mintel, April 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Article headlined 'Average UK first-time buyer is now older than 30, says Halifax', The Guardian, January 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Article headlined 'Aldi to create 2,000 jobs in £1.3bn UK expansion plan', The Guardian, 27 September 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Article headlined 'Lidl to ramp up UK store opening with 1,100 stores by 2025', BBC, 24 November 2021.

comparable to that provided by Aldi and Lidl, which allows customers to shop in a convenient and efficient manner.

## Comparison Goods

- 2.24 The comparison goods sector is currently being squeezed by a number of factors, the most substantial being the effects of Covid-19 and the efforts to contain it. Other factors include reduced expenditure growth, the ability of internet shopping to plug gaps in retailer representation, increases in the minimum wage, business rates changes and inflation.
- 2.25 Whilst the sector is continually evolving and there are a number of ongoing success stories (including Boots, JD Sports, Next, Primark and Zara), recent headlines have focussed on failing retailers and store closures. High profile retailers that have struggled include Debenhams, which announced the closure of all 124 stores in December 2020<sup>10</sup>, and the Arcadia Group, which owned Topshop, Topman and Dorothy Perkins. Arcadia Group announced the closure of around 500 stores in February 2021<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, Intu Properties, one of Britain's biggest shopping centre owners, fell into administration in June 2020 after failing to secure an agreement with its creditors<sup>12</sup>.
- 2.26 Whilst the loss of some of the above names will have significant repercussions for certain towns (particularly those that lose one or more of Debenhams, Marks & Spencer or House of Fraser from their high street), some well-known retailers have failed to 'move with the times' and update their offer, accommodation and online presence. This is partly a consequence of retailers struggling to reinvest in their business when margins are tight (or non-existent).
- 2.27 Many operators have also rationalised their portfolio with the aim of serving the UK by concentrating on larger centres supplemented by a strong online presence. It will be interesting to see whether any permanent change in respect of working from home may act to counterbalance this 'polarisation' trend, given the prospect of fewer commuters travelling to larger centres and greater numbers of people spending the working day in and around their home. The impact on larger centres may be to reduce footfall, particularly during the week, and result in the shift in expenditure being directed to the smaller town, district and local centres. Whilst this will be a positive for the smaller centres, larger centres may suffer as a result.
- 2.28 Whilst structural changes have had a material impact on the vitality and viability of many UK high streets, there are some beneficiaries. In particular, 'discount variety' operators, such as B&M, Home Bargains and Poundland, have taken advantage of lower rents and reoccupied a number of medium to large retail units. However, as evidenced by the failure of Poundworld and Wilko, there is some evidence that this market may be approaching capacity.
- 2.29 It remains to be seen what additional long-term impacts will eventuate from retail closures resulting from Covid-19 containment measures. However, prior to the implementation of lockdown measures, trading conditions for retailers were already challenging and many retailers were struggling to meet costs, including rents, resulting in a higher proportion of retailers restructuring or entering administration. As has been seen throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022, the conditions have only become more challenging.

<sup>10</sup> Article headlined 'Debenhams set to close putting 12,000 jobs at risk', BBC, 1 December 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Article headlined 'After Topshop owner Arcadia's demise, what now for UK clothes shopping?' The Guardian, 13 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Article headlined 'Shopping centre owner Intu collapses into administration', The Guardian, 26 June 2020.

## Leisure and Food & Drink

- 2.30 The greater availability of high street units appears to have helped stoke an entrepreneurial spirit in recent years, with a number of centres beginning to benefit from a greater focus on independent retailers and also modern markets, which are frequently focussed around food and drink operators.
- 2.31 More generally, the food and drink sector has also been buoyed in recent years by the success of mid-market national multiples, which expanded quickly across the UK. However, this market has become saturated in many locations and a number of high profile operators have been in financial difficulty. Given the problems suffered by such operators, the market has become more cautious and mid-market operators are picking new sites carefully as a result. Instead, we have seen a number of independent operators flourish, both before and throughout the pandemic, and a desire for customers to choose local operators over larger regional and national brands.
- 2.32 A further significant recent high street success story has been the resurgence of the town centre leisure sector, which has resulted in new cinemas being developed close to the shopping core and the emergence of ‘competitive socialising’ concepts, which include bowling, crazy golf, table tennis, darts, axe-throwing, escape rooms and other seemingly niche pursuits.
- 2.33 Cinema openings have been on the up in recent years and ‘boutique’ cinema operators – including Curzon, Everyman and The Light – are able to operate from smaller sites in town centres (partly as a consequence of digital technology). Town centre cinema development has successfully underpinned wider mixed-use developments, as food and drink operators are typically keen to locate in close proximity to benefit from spin-off custom. New, innovative leisure operators have been particularly beneficial both in re-using existing difficult to let premises, and in driving the evening economy.
- 2.34 More generally, the gym market continues to perform well, with there now being around 7,200 health and fitness clubs across the UK, which are estimated to have a total turnover of approximately £2bn<sup>13</sup>. Around one in every seven Britons has a gym membership. Budget gyms are currently particularly popular, with operators such as Pure Gym, the Gym Group and easyGym utilising a format that is based on low costs and high volume.
- 2.35 The impact of the pandemic on the leisure industry is still to be determined. Support provided by the Treasury helped support businesses in 2020 and 2021 and mitigated the effects of ‘lockdown’ restrictions to some degree. However, the stabilisation of the sector has not yet occurred due to inflationary pressure and resultant issues in the cost of living.

## The Night-Time Economy

- 2.36 The term night-time economy is used to describe a wide range of activities that (typically) take place after 5 pm. This could range from a trip to the theatre or cinema, to a family meal, to a night out at a club. The night-time economy is about catering for a wide range of demographics and interests.
- 2.37 Creating a safe, vibrant and well-balanced evening and night-time offer is a challenge that can dramatically improve the overall health of a town centre and boost the economy.
- 2.38 The Association of Town and City Management (‘ATCM’) has identified a number of themes to help improve the attraction and operation of the night-time economy, which are summarised as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Number of health clubs in Europe in 2020, by country’ dataset, Statista, 27 October 2022.

- **Alive After Five** – This relates to revisions to trading hours to better suit customers' shopping needs and availability. A Retail Trading Hours Study commissioned by ATCM found that sales between 5 pm and 8 pm are typically 50% greater than those between 9 am and 11am. Revising trading hours to open and close later could increase sales by around 10% to 12%.
- **Late Night Transport** – The lack of frequent, efficient and safe public transport late at night, or at least the perception of this being the case, could be having a detrimental effect on night-time economy and social scene. One way of increasing night-time visitor numbers is to promote late-night travel provision and its publicity.
- **Purple Flag** – This is an accreditation scheme which recognises excellence in the management of town and city centres at night. Obtaining Purple Flag accreditation demonstrates that a town's night-time economy offers clean and safe environments, great bars and clubs, a variety of arts and cultural attractions, and excellent transport links.
- **Evening Economy Ambassadors** – The ambassadors improve the evening and night-time experience in a town centre by liaising between visitors, police, door staff, licensees, and transport operators.
- **Light Night** – This is an initiative where town or city centres stays open after dark for people to enjoy local shops and services within a wider cultural event involving music, art and, most importantly, through the lighting up of buildings and light-based art installations.

2.39 The above list is not exhaustive, and the development of a bespoke evening economy strategy can help prioritise and deliver events and initiatives which draw on a town centre's strengths and address weaknesses.

## Planning Reform on the High Street

- 2.40 One of the most impactful planning reforms in recent times has been the consolidation of a number of separate Use Classes under a single Class E 'Commercial, Business and Service' use. This update to the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (the 'UCO') came into effect in September 2020. The new Use Class combines shops, restaurants, offices, gyms and nurseries (amongst other uses) such that planning permission is no longer required to switch uses.
- 2.41 Furthermore, in March 2021, an update was made to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. This allows for the change of use from Class E properties to residential from August 2021 (extending a right that had previously been restricted to office uses). This permitted development right is subject to maximum size requirements, the property having been in use as Class E for two years and vacant for three months. An application to the determining authority for 'prior approval' is also required for limited consideration of impacts relating to transport, contamination, flood risk, noise, light, and neighbourhood amenity. Further limitations apply in Conservation Areas and for nurseries, as well as in areas covered by 'Article 4 directions' where the rights are extinguished.
- 2.42 On 20 July 2021, paragraph 53 of the latest iteration of the National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF') introduced new limitations on the use of Article 4 directions. The revised national policy significantly narrows the areas in which it is justified to introduce Article 4 directions, limiting local authorities' ability to control development.
- 2.43 The changes in the application of Article 4 directions were first put forward in the January 2021 consultation for draft revisions to the NPPF. However, the final update differs from the initial consultation in a couple of key areas. The text recognises that the loss of the 'essential core of a primary shopping area' could result in wholly unacceptable adverse impacts on an area's vitality and viability. This is the Government's first acknowledgement of

the potential for the permitted development rights to undermine the health of centres in the NPPF. The updated text also introduces a requirement for 'robust evidence'.

- 2.44 This provides some assurance for local authorities which have concerns about the erosion of retail and service uses, and the need to protect vulnerable centres from potentially poor quality residential development. Protection of the vitality and viability of a high street or town centre against the adverse impacts of change of use is now established as justification for issuing an Article 4 direction.
- 2.45 In addition to the above, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is currently making its way through Parliament. The Bill seeks to provide for a more streamlined, focussed plan-making process so that local plans and minerals and waste plans can be produced, examined and adopted more quickly, and updated more often.
- 2.46 Of particular relevance to town centres is the Bill's intention to confer on local authorities the power to hold rental auctions for vacant commercial premises located on high streets and within defined town centres (the High Street Rental Auction Process).
- 2.47 Further details in respect of the proposed process are provided by the High Street Rentals consultation document which was published in March 2023. Paragraph 8 of the consultation document confirms that:

**'As part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, introduced to Parliament on 11 May 2022, the government is introducing High Street Rental Auctions, a new power for local authorities to require landlords to rent out persistently vacant commercial properties to new tenants, such as local businesses or community groups.'**

- 2.48 Paragraphs 9 and 10 then go on to provide further clarification as to how the process would work in practice:

**'High Street Rental Auctions will be a permissive power for local authorities which aim to tackle the problem of persistently vacant property on high streets by empowering places to bring vacant units back into use. As an addition to a range of tools local authorities might use when attempting to regenerate an area; they will seek to increase cooperation between landlords and local authorities, and to make town centre tenancies more accessible and affordable for tenants, including small businesses and community groups.'**

**High Street Rental Auctions will allow local authorities to auction the rental rights of commercial high street property that has been vacant for longer than 12 months in a 24-month period. Successful bidders will enter into an agreement for lease with the landlord upon completion of the auction, and then a lease of between one to five years following completion of any pre-tenancy works.'**

- 2.49 The objective is to reduce the number of vacant premises and ensure that short to medium-term 'meanwhile uses' can help drive footfall on the high street.

## **Implications for the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Authority Areas**

- 2.50 The above trends have a number of potential implications for retail and leisure provision within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.
- 2.51 Didcot town centre is the principal retail and leisure centre serving South Oxfordshire, and (as we would expect) provides a local focus in respect of national multiple retail provision. The retail offer in Didcot has changed substantially in recent years, initially as a consequence of the Orchard Centre development and then as a result of structural changes in the retail sector. Furthermore, as we demonstrate in greater detail later in the report, Didcot town centre acts as a focus for convenience and comparison goods shopping trips originating in South Oxfordshire and across parts of Vale of White Horse.

- 2.52 In Vale of White Horse, Abingdon is the principal town centre, albeit there have been a number of changes in the centre's retail offer in recent years. Like Didcot, Abingdon town centre maintains the greatest concentration of national multiple operators in the authority area within which it sits. This is despite the centre's proximity to Oxford, which has a strong influence on shopping patterns in the Abingdon area.
- 2.53 Notwithstanding the structural changes across the retail and leisure sectors, retail will remain an important element of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's centres. In Didcot, and to a lesser extent Abingdon and Wantage, the current comparison goods function includes a diverse range of 'day-to-day' retailers, such as chemists and household goods retailers, together with a number of more specialist retailers. Niche operators, such as antique shops and art dealers, are particularly evident in Henley-on-Thames and Thame, which are likely to be able to draw some trade from a relatively wide catchment as a result. Such uses can help differentiate town centres and provide an 'experiential' offer that is not directly replicable online. In addition, the high proportion of independent operators in town centres such as Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford similarly helps to provide a distinct offer and provide a degree of resilience.
- 2.54 The visitor economy also plays a key role in supporting the function of the main centres across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and the centres therefore serve both the resident and tourist populations. This is reflected in their offer, which is 'experiential' in nature and includes window-shopping, browsing and generally enjoying the environment that the centre offers. This is particularly evident in Henley-on-Thames.
- 2.55 Abingdon, Didcot and Wantage are also relatively well served by large format foodstores developments meeting both main and top-up food shopping needs, and they are able to attract residents from across a relatively large catchment area. Given the rural character of much of the catchment, it is inevitable that some residents will need to travel to access main food shopping, but there may be opportunities to increase grocery provision in other locations. Subject to securing appropriate sites, increased grocery provision may have some benefit in reducing the need to travel and creating more sustainable shopping patterns.
- 2.56 In this regard, a number of grocery operators remain acquisitional. We note that Lidl's website<sup>14</sup> identifies that it has outstanding requirements for Abingdon North, Botley, Didcot, Faringdon, Henley-on-Thames and Thame. It will be important to try to direct any such requirements to sustainable locations which have the potential to support linked trips to in-centre retailers and service providers.
- 2.57 Whilst we believe that further future growth in online retailing will most directly impact upon the performance of larger town and city centres, it will still be important for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's centres to provide a greater experiential offer in order to encourage visitors to travel and to stay for longer periods. Current regeneration projects – including the emerging Central Abingdon Regeneration Framework – will assist in revitalising town centres in the authority areas.
- 2.58 The independent and food and drink sectors will also be an important part of this revitalisation and differentiation. There will also be a need to actively manage centres and programme regular events, in order to attract visitors on a consistent basis.
- 2.59 There is a need for flexibility in centres, so they can adapt to future needs and accommodate a wider range of uses. This is particularly important following the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to help sustain the recovery of high streets and ensure that they are able to meet local needs in a sustainable manner. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's centres are not principally sustained through an influx of office workers, and any longer-term trend

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<sup>14</sup> Consulted on 30 August 2023.

to working from home may provide some potential for residents to use nearby centres during the week and, in particular, at lunchtime.

2.60 In this regard, as we go on to explore in greater detail in this report, we recommend that the authorities ensure that policies are sufficiently flexible to allow for a wide range of town centre uses beyond retail, and that consideration is given to repurposing surplus stock to accommodate residential, leisure and community uses.



## 3. Planning Policy Context

- 3.1 In order to shape the direction of this Study, it is helpful to understand relevant retail and town centre planning policy at a national and local level. As such, we first summarise national planning policy of relevance before considering retail and town centre development plan policy as set out in the adopted development plans of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. We also consider changes to the Use Classes Order and the application of permitted development rights to town centre uses.

### Revised National Planning Policy Framework

- 3.2 The most recent iteration of the National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF') was published in July 2021. The NPPF reflects the fact that the traditional role of town centres has been somewhat undermined by structural changes in the retail sector, and that there may be a need to plan for a more diverse range of uses going forward. As such, the NPPF advocates a more flexible policy framework to support the future vitality and viability of town centres.
- 3.3 NPPF policies are considered on a thematic basis below.

#### Plan-Making

- 3.4 Paragraph 20 of the NPPF indicates that development plans should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and quality of development, including policies to deliver retail, leisure and other commercial development. Paragraph 31 states that the preparation and review of all policies should be underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence. This should be proportionate and take into account relevant market signals.

#### Building a Strong, Competitive Economy

- 3.5 Paragraph 81 of the NPPF indicates that planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand, and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development.

#### Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres

- 3.6 Paragraph 86 specifically relates to planning for town centres. It states that:

'Planning policies should:

- a. define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability – by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters;
- b. define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas, and make clear the range of uses permitted in such locations, as part of a positive strategy for the future of each centre;
- c. retain and enhance existing markets and, where appropriate, re-introduce or create new ones;
- d. allocate a range of suitable sites in town centres to meet the scale and type of development likely to be needed, looking at least ten years ahead. Meeting anticipated needs for retail, leisure, office and other main town centre uses over this period should not be compromised by limited site availability, so town centre boundaries should be kept under review where necessary;
- e. where suitable and viable town centre sites are not available for main town centre uses, allocate appropriate edge of centre sites that are well connected to the town centre. If sufficient edge of centre sites cannot be identified, policies should explain how identified needs can be met in other accessible locations that are well connected to the town centre; and

- f. recognise that residential development often plays an important role in ensuring the vitality of centres and encourage residential development on appropriate sites.'

- 3.7 The requirement to plan to meet needs across a minimum ten-year period represents a change from the previous NPPF which required town centre needs to be met in full across the entire plan period.
- 3.8 In addition, it is notable that the NPPF Annex 2 Glossary fails to make any reference to the designation of primary and secondary frontages. Page 32 of the Government Response to the Draft Revised National Planning Policy Framework Consultation indicates that, whilst the revised NPPF has removed the expectation in national planning policy that such frontages must be defined, this does not necessarily preclude authorities from doing so where their use can be justified. However, it is evident that the general intention is to provide for more flexibility through a less prescriptive approach to land use.
- 3.9 Paragraph 90 of the NPPF states that it is appropriate to identify thresholds for the scale of edge of centre and out of centre retail and leisure development that should be the subject of an impact assessment. Any such threshold policy applies only to the impact test. All planning applications for main town centre uses that are not in an existing centre and not in accordance with an up-to-date development plan will generally be the subject of the sequential test.

### **Promoting Healthy and Safe Communities**

- 3.10 Paragraph 93 seeks to support the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services communities need. The guidance states that planning policies and decisions should:
- plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaced, community facilities (such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship), and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments;
  - take into account and support the delivery of local strategies to improve health, social and cultural well-being for all sections of the community;
  - guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs;
  - ensure that established shops, facilities and services are able to develop and modernise, and are retained for the benefit of the community; and
  - ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services.

### **Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres Planning Practice Guidance**

- 3.11 The Town Centres and Retail Planning Practice Guidance ('the Town Centres PPG') was published in July 2019 and thereafter updated in September 2020. It provides additional direction in respect of how retail and town centre planning policy should be applied in respect of plan-making and decision-taking. The Town Centres PPG affirms the Government's aspiration to support town centres in order to generate employment, promote beneficial competition and create attractive, diverse places where people want to live, work and visit.
- 3.12 Paragraph 004 of the Town Centres PPG indicates that a local planning authority's strategy for their town centres should include:
- The realistic role, function and hierarchy of town centres over the plan period. Given the uncertainty in forecasting long-term retail trends and consumer behaviour, this assessment may need to focus on a limited

period (such as the next five years) but will also need to take the lifetime of the plan into account and be regularly reviewed.

- The vision for the future of each town centre, including the most appropriate mix of uses to enhance overall vitality and viability.
- The ability of the town centre to accommodate the scale of assessed need for main town centre uses, and associated need for expansion, consolidation, restructuring or to enable new development or the redevelopment of under-utilised space.
- How existing land can be used more effectively – for example, the scope to group particular uses such as retail, restaurant and leisure activities into hubs or for converting airspace above shops.
- Opportunities for improvements to the accessibility and wider quality of town centre locations, including improvements to transport links in and around town centres, and enhancement of the public realm.
- What complementary strategies are necessary or appropriate to enhance the town centre and help deliver the vision for its future, and how these can be planned and delivered. For example, this may include consideration of how parking charges and enforcement can be made proportionate.
- The role that different stakeholders can play in delivering the vision. If appropriate, it can help establish the level of cross-boundary/strategic working or information sharing required between both public and private sector groups.
- Appropriate policies to address environmental issues facing town centres, including opportunities to conserve and enhance the historic environment.

3.13 This particular Study seeks to provide a high-level authority-wide retail and leisure strategy, which will provide an overall context to the determination of planning applications for such uses and will support the Councils' future development plan policy. The Study will also help underpin any future town centre-specific strategies or masterplans.

3.14 Paragraph 006 of the Town Centres PPG identifies a series of key indicators of relevance in assessing the health of a centre over time. The indicators allow the role, performance, and function of centres to be monitored and are considered in greater detail at Section 5 of this report (which specifically addresses the vitality and viability of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's principal centres).

### Use Classes Order

3.15 Significant changes to the Use Classes Order have been enacted through the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 1 September 2020.

3.16 The amendments include the revocation of Parts A and D, and the introduction of three new Use Classes, these being Classes E, F1 and F2. The Government's objective is that the changes will support the revival of the high street and allow for greater flexibility in changing uses within town centres without the need for planning permission.

3.17 In addition to the three new Use Classes, the changes also result in some changes in respect of uses classified as sui generis. In practical terms, the changes comprise:

- **Use Class E** – Commercial, business and service uses include: shops or retail; cafes or restaurants; financial services; professional services; any service appropriate to provide in a commercial, business or service locality; indoor sports, recreation or fitness; medical or health services; crèche, day nursery or day centre; and, offices.

- **Use Class F1** – Learning and non-residential institutions include any non-residential use for the: provision of education; display of works of art; museum; public library or public reading room; public hall or exhibition hall; for or in connection with public worship or religious instruction; or, as a law court.
- **Use Class F2** – Local community uses include: a shop selling mostly essential goods, including food, no larger than 280 sq.m and where there is no other such facility within 1,000 metres radius of the shop’s location. A hall or meeting place for the local community, an area or place for outdoor sport or recreation and an indoor or outdoor swimming pool or skating rink.
- **Sui Generis** – Use within this Class now include a public house, wine bar or drinking establishment; a drinking establishment with expanded food provision; as a hot food takeaway for the sale of hot food where consumption of that food is mostly undertaken off the premises; live music venue; cinema; concert hall; bingo hall; or, dance hall.

3.18 The introduction of Class E is significant and places a wide range of uses including retail, food, financial services, gyms, healthcare, nurseries, offices, and light industry into a single use class. Unless restrictive planning conditions extinguish the provisions of Class E, the ability to significantly change the commercial use of premises without planning permission allows centres to evolve in a flexible manner.

3.19 However, the provisions of the Use Classes Order are not linked to any spatial considerations. As such, the expanded Use Class E applies equally to both town centres and out of centre locations, and there may be unintended consequences in providing for additional flexibility across Class E outside of town centres. Accordingly, it may be necessary for the Council to apply restrictive conditions to certain forms of development in order to restrict the authorised use to that which has been justified in the application submission. This will help ensure that unacceptable impacts do not arise from future Class E development.

### **Town Centre Use Permitted Development Rights**

3.20 An amendment was made to the General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (the ‘GPDO’) in March 2021. This allows for the change of use from Class E properties to residential from August 2021 (extending a right that had previously been restricted to office uses). This permitted development right is subject to maximum size requirements, the property having been in use as Class E for two years, and the property having been vacant for three months. In addition to this, ‘prior approval’ for the change of use must be sought from the planning authority. Restrictions on this right apply in conservation areas and for nurseries, as well as in areas that are covered by an Article 4 direction.

## **Local Planning Policy Context**

### **Adopted Development Plan – South Oxfordshire**

3.21 The statutory development plan for South Oxfordshire is the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, which was adopted in December 2020.

3.22 Policy TC1 relates to Retail and Services Growth, and states that provision is to be made in the plan period of 26,640 sq.m of comparison goods floorspace and 4,500 sq.m of convenience goods floorspace.

3.23 Policy TC2 relates to the Town Centre Hierarchy in South Oxfordshire and identifies that Didcot and Henley-on-Thames are defined as ‘major town centres’ and sit atop the retail hierarchy. These centres are followed by Thame

and Wallingford, which are defined as ‘town centres’, and then by 12 local centres<sup>15</sup>. Policy TC2 confirms that the Council will apply a ‘town centre first’ approach in respect of main town centre uses, in accordance with the hierarchy of centres set out in the policy. Development proposals for uses within Class E will be permitted within the town centre boundaries.

3.24 Where planning permission is required any retail, leisure and office development proposed outside these centres must be subject to an impact assessment, appropriate to the use, where the proposed gross floorspace is greater than the local threshold of 500 sq.m.

3.25 For local centres, development proposals will be permitted where they:

- provide retail and leisure uses within the centres through infill development and small-scale redevelopment;
- provide small-scale retail or leisure development that contributes to the vitality and viability of the villages whilst not undermining the retail roles of the towns: or,
- seek to improve access and movement for all users.

3.26 Policy TC3 identifies that Didcot town centre will be the focus for comparison goods floorspace requirements over the course of the plan period. In Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford there is no qualitative need for additional comparison goods floorspace during the plan period. Applications for new comparison goods floorspace in these town centres should be treated on their individual merits. Applications for comparison retail located outside of town centres will be required to demonstrate compliance with the sequential test and the locally set retail impact threshold. Furthermore, Policy TC4, which relates to convenience floorspace provision in the market towns<sup>16</sup> states that each of these should make provision for a single format foodstore with at least 1,500 sq.m net sales floorspace.

3.27 Policy TC5 relates to Primary Shopping Areas. The policy indicates that, where planning permission within the primary shopping area is required, proposals resulting in the loss of a Class E use at ground floor must demonstrate that:

- the unit has been proactively and appropriately marketed for at least 12 months and it has been demonstrated that there is no longer a realistic prospect of the unit being used for Class E uses in the foreseeable future;
- the proposal meets the needs of residents within the local neighbourhood; and,
- the proposal will not have an adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole.

3.28 Proposals for main town centre uses outside primary shopping areas will be required to demonstrate compliance with the sequential and impact tests where they exceed the applicable floorspace threshold.

### **Adopted Development Plan – Vale of White Horse**

3.29 The statutory development plan for Vale of White Horse comprises the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Parts 1 and 2, which were respectively adopted in December 2016 and October 2019.

3.30 Core Policy 3 outlines the Settlement Hierarchy in the authority area and identifies that the three market towns of Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage sit at the top of the hierarchy. These are followed by the two local service

<sup>15</sup> The 12 local centres are Berinsfield, Benson, Chalgrove, Chinnor, Cholsey, Crowmarsh Gifford, Goring-on-Thames, Nettlebed, Sonning Common, Watlington, Wheatley and Woodcote.

<sup>16</sup> The three market towns are Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford.

centres of Botley and Grove. Below these, there are 20 larger villages<sup>17</sup> and 29 smaller villages<sup>18</sup>.

3.31 Core Policy 32 relates to Retail Development and Other Main Town Centre Uses, and states that the market towns and local service centres are the preferred locations for larger scale development or redevelopment for retailing and other main town centre uses.

3.32 Core Policy 32 goes on to state that, for new retail proposals, consideration should first be given to areas designated as primary and secondary shopping frontages, and the redevelopment sites at the Charter area of Abingdon-on-Thames and the Botley Central Area. Consideration will then be given to locations that are best linked to the town centres. Proposals for new retail development or changes of use to retail or other main town centre uses will be supported where:

- they are for development primarily intended to serve the day-to-day needs of the local community, within the larger and smaller villages, and in the local shopping centres located within Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage;
- they are ancillary and proportionate food, drink and convenience retailing within and primarily servicing the users of designated employment areas; and,
- they are for offices in employment locations where office use is identified elsewhere in this plan to be appropriate.

3.33 Proposals for retail or other main town centre uses that are on the edge of or outside the town or local shopping centres will only be supported if it is demonstrated that the proposal accords with both the sequential approach to site selection and, where the proposal exceeds the local floorspace thresholds set out below, an impact assessment confirms that there are no likely significant adverse impacts on the vitality and viability of nearby centres.

3.34 Core Policy 32 also sets out local floorspace thresholds for the purpose of impact assessment. These are as follows:

- 1,000 sq.m gross retail floorspace for development likely to have an impact on Abingdon-on-Thames or Wantage town centres, and
- 500 sq.m gross retail floorspace elsewhere.

### **Emerging Development Plan**

3.35 South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Councils consulted on 'Joint Local Plan Issues' to inform the preparation of the new Joint Local Plan in May and June 2022. Once adopted, the Joint Local Plan will replace the existing adopted local plans for each District. The Joint Local Plan will set out policies by which planning applications will be determined, and allocate land for housing, employment, and other uses.

3.36 The Council's Local Development Scheme ('LDS'), approved in September 2023, anticipates a round of consultation on Preferred Options in January/February 2024, followed by consultation on a Pre-Submission Plan in

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<sup>17</sup> The 20 larger villages are Blewbury, Cumnor, Drayton, East Challow, East Hanney, East Hendred, Harwell, Harwell Campus, Kennington, Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, Marcham, Milton, Radley, Shrivenham, Stanford-in-the-Vale, Steventon, Sutton Courtenay, Uffington, Watchfield and Wootton.

<sup>18</sup> The 29 smaller villages are Appleford, Appleton, Ardington, Ashbury, Buckland, Childrey, Chilton, Coleshill, Dry Sandford, Farmoor, Frilford, Great Coxwell, Kingston Lisle, Letcombe Regis, Little Coxwell, Littleworth, Longcot, Longworth, Milton Heights, North Hinksey, Rowstock, Shellingford, Shippon, South Hinksey, Sunningwell, Upton and West Hendred, West Hanney and Wytham.

October/November 2024. The LDS anticipates submission to the Secretary of State for Examination in April 2025, and that the new Joint Local Plan will be adopted in December 2025.

### Neighbourhood Plans in South Oxfordshire

3.37 Within South Oxfordshire, there are a total of 26 ‘made’ Neighbourhood Development Plans, and a further 18 Neighbourhood Development Plans currently in preparation. In respect of the main town centres, Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford have made Neighbourhood Plans. In respect of town centre proposals, the following policies from these three made Plans are considered to be of some relevance:

- Henley-on-Thames – Neighbourhood Plan Policy TCE1 states that proposals for new retail, leisure, hotel and office development should be located within the defined town centre boundary. Development proposals on unallocated sites outside the defined town centre will be subject to a sequential test and, for proposals comprising 2,500sqm or more net additional floorspace, an impact assessment.
- Thame – Neighbourhood Plan Policy WS1 states that within Thame town centre, permission will be granted for new town centre uses. Neighbourhood Plan Policy WS2 states that in order to maintain the shopping function of the primary retail frontages the introduction of new non-retail uses such as banks and building societies, cafes, restaurants will be restricted at ground floor level to a maximum of 35% of the sum total of the length of primary retail frontages (as defined by Figure 8.1 of the Neighbourhood Plan).
- Wallingford - Neighbourhood Plan Policy TC1 relates to the primary shopping area, and states that proposals that result in the loss of Class E uses at ground floor level within the primary shopping area should demonstrate that they do not undermine the vitality and viability of the town centre or reduce an active frontage at ground floor level, the new use meets and evidenced community need, and that there is no market interest in the premises concerned for Class E uses following one year of active and effective marketing. Neighbourhood Plan Policy TC4 states that proposals for the provision of new visitor accommodation and tourism facilities will be supported.

### Neighbourhood Plans in Vale of White Horse

3.38 Within Vale of White Horse, there are a total of 15 ‘made’ Neighbourhood Development Plans, and a further eight Neighbourhood Development Plans currently in preparation. In respect of the main town centres, only Faringdon has a made Plan. In respect of town centre proposals, the following policies from the Faringdon Neighbourhood Plan are considered to be of some relevance:

- Faringdon – Neighbourhood Plan Policy 4.4A states that any net loss of retail space in the defined town centre will not be permitted other than where the site has been: marketed for such a use for a period of one year with no viable offers received; or, a replacement premises of equivalent size, function and accessibility is to be provided in the town centre in exchange so that there is no net loss; or, the loss of the retail use allows the implementation of other policies or proposals in the Neighbourhood Plan.

3.39 Neighbourhood Plans for Abingdon and Wantage are currently being prepared.

## 4. Market Research – Healthchecks

### Introduction

- 4.1 Paragraph 86 of the NPPF indicates that planning policies should promote the long-term vitality and viability of town centres by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries. The same paragraph also states that town centres should accommodate a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and provide for development that reflects a centre’s distinctive character.
- 4.2 Paragraph 006 of the Town Centres PPG identifies a range of indicators that should be assessed over time in order to establish the health of a town centre. The indicators include the following:
- diversity of uses;
  - proportion of vacant street level property;
  - retailer representation and intentions to change representation;
  - pedestrian flows;
  - accessibility;
  - perception of safety and occurrence of crime;
  - the state of town centre environmental quality;
  - the balance between independent and national multiple retailers; and
  - the extent to which there is an evening and night-time economy.
- 4.3 New healthcheck assessments have been undertaken for the major town centres (Didcot and Henley-on-Thames) and town centres (Thame and Wallingford) in South Oxfordshire, and the market towns (Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage) and local service centres (Botley and Grove) in Vale of White Horse, as identified in the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 and the Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Parts 1 and 2) respectively. The detailed healthcheck assessments are provided at Appendices 3 (for South Oxfordshire) and 4 (for Vale of White Horse). We provide a summary of the key conclusions from our healthcheck assessments below.
- 4.4 The assessments are based on site visits which were undertaken in October 2022. These assessments should be taken as a ‘snapshot’ of the performance of each centre at a moment in time. We envisage that the high rate of inflation and other economic pressures at this time may impact on future operator representation and the healthcheck assessments should be viewed in this context.

### South Oxfordshire’s Principal Centres

- 4.5 The composition of each of the principal centres in South Oxfordshire is set out at Table 4.1 below. As the table highlights, each of the four centres benefit from a vacancy rate in respect of commercial stock that is below the UK national average of 13.8%.



**Table 4.1: South Oxfordshire’s Principal Centres Unit Composition at October 2022**

	Total Units	Comparison	Convenience	Financial	Leisure	Retail Service	Vacant
Didcot	179	30.7%	8.4%	8.9%	23.5%	16.8%	11.7%
Henley-on-Thames	252	34.1%	7.5%	13.5%	23.8%	12.7%	8.3%
Thame	136	32.5%	10.3%	16.2%	15.4%	19.9%	5.9%
Wallingford	130	33.8%	6.2%	10.8%	23.8%	17.7%	7.7%
<b>National Average</b>	-	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>8.8%</b>	<b>25.2%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>13.8%</b>

Source: Composition of principal centres derived from Nexus Planning survey of October 2022; Experian Goad national averages at September 2022

4.6 We provide a summary of the vitality and viability of South Oxfordshire’s centres below.

### Didcot Town Centre

4.7 Along with Henley-on-Thames, Didcot town centre is situated at the top of the retail hierarchy in the South Oxfordshire authority area. Anchored by the Orchard Centre, Didcot accommodates a robust range of national multiple retailers, including Next, Sainsbury’s and TK Maxx, as well as key leisure operators such as Cineworld. The retail and service offer in Didcot is therefore considered to be strong, and easily capable of serving the needs of the local community. The town centre also has a strong cultural offer, underpinned by the Cornerstone Art Centre. There is also a library, located at the western end of Broadway. The retail offer in the town centre has changed considerably since 2013, particularly through the opening of the Orchard Centre extension in March 2018.

4.8 The convenience goods offer in Didcot is anchored by the Sainsbury’s superstore at Central Drive, which operates alongside a range of other operators including Co-op, Iceland and Premier. In addition, Aldi, Asda and Tesco foodstore are located outside of the town centre. The Aldi foodstore is situated a short distance to the east of the town centre at Broadway.

4.9 The wider town has been subject to considerable development in recent years – including significant residential development at Great Western Park – and is expected to grow further in the future. The town centre also sits close to key employers, such as the Culham Science Centre and Milton Park. Didcot is therefore a key centre, serving the needs of a growing community.

4.10 Our survey recorded a total of 21 vacant units, which equates to 11.7% of all units in the town centre. This figure represents an increase on the 9.5% vacancy rate in respect of units recorded at 2013 and comes despite the redevelopment of the town centre through the introduction of the Orchard Centre in 2018. Whilst vacant units are generally distributed throughout the town centre, there is a particular concentration of vacancies along Broadway in the eastern part of the centre. Some of these units would benefit from some investment. Nevertheless, the vacancy rate in the town centre remains lower than the current national average, in respect of both the proportion of vacant units and floorspace.

4.11 Notwithstanding the increase in vacant units since 2013, the vacancy rate remains lower than the current national average and as such is not considered to represent significant cause for concern at this time. Given Didcot’s varied offer, it is considered to be a largely vital and viable centre.

### Henley-on-Thames Town Centre

4.12 Henley-on-Thames is the second centre at the top of the retail hierarchy in South Oxfordshire. The town is anchored by a diverse range of operators, which provide for the needs of both the local and a more specialist population, which includes tourist visitors. The town is anchored by a Waitrose foodstore on Bell Street, which

trades alongside a reasonably strong range of additional food and drink operators. The town centre is historic in nature, which provides both an attractive and pleasant retail environment, but also results in there being a limited amount of modern, purpose built retail floorspace. The majority of operators are independents.

- 4.13 The national multiple comparison goods offer in the town centre includes Farrow & Ball, Mint Velvet, Mountain Warehouse, Robert Dyas and Whistles. The comparison goods offer is relatively diverse and includes antique shops, art galleries, charity shops, clothing shops, gift shops, book shops, and carpet and flooring shops.
- 4.14 Although less prevalent in respect of both the stock of retail floorspace and proportion of units (compared to Didcot), the convenience goods offer in Henley-on-Thames plays a key role in driving footfall into the town centre, particularly for local residents.
- 4.15 Henley-on-Thames accommodates a diverse range of events throughout the year, including Henley Festival (which focuses on music, art and food), the Literary Festival, and the Royal Regatta. The town therefore has a strong offer which is able to draw visitors from outside the area. Some of the traders in the town centre will clearly be able to benefit from the additional custom these events bring.
- 4.16 In addition to hosting large events, the centre also accommodates the Kenton Theatre and the independent Regal Picturehouse cinema. Kenton Theatre has a good programme of events, with a performance on most weeks. The cinema has multiple screenings (across its three screens) on a daily basis. There is a library, which is located at Ravenscroft Road in the northern part of the town centre.
- 4.17 Our survey identified that 8.3% of units are vacant. Vacant units are distributed relatively evenly throughout the town centre and, as a consequence, no one part of Henley-on-Thames feels dominated by vacancies. Vacant units are therefore not considered to represent cause for concern at the present time.
- 4.18 Henley has a strong comparison goods and leisure service offer, and there was a good level of activity observed in the town at the time of our visit. The town centre vacancy rate that has remained relatively stable since 2013 and we therefore find it to be a highly vital and viable centre.

### **Thame Town Centre**

- 4.19 Thame town centre is located in the far north-west of the South Oxfordshire authority area, close to the border with Buckinghamshire. Whilst the town is therefore somewhat geographically isolated from other centres in the authority area, the centre is well integrated into the wider road and public transport network, which allows a relatively high degree of accessibility from the surrounding area.
- 4.20 The town centre itself is concentrated along High Street and Cornmarket and is considered to be an attractive and characterful destination. The retail offer in the town comprises a diverse range of independent operators, as well as key national multiples including Boots and retail banks. The town accommodates a strong, engaged range of traders who are proactive in driving change in Thame. The centre's offer is anchored by a Waitrose foodstore (which is situated to the rear of the main town centre at the end of Greyhound Walk) and the Co-op and Sainsbury's stores on High Street. However, the vibrancy of the town centre is considered reflective of the strong range of independent operators located within Thame.
- 4.21 In addition to the more traditional retail provision, the Thame Charter Market is held at the Upper High Street car park every Tuesday between 9am and 3pm, which offers a range of produce, gifts, homeware, clothes and a number of other items. A Local Produce Market is also held on the second Tuesday of each month.

- 4.22 Whilst the centre's hospitality sector is relatively limited – comprising four cafes, four restaurants, three bars and pubs, and a hotel – the Players Theatre also helps broaden the centre's offer and supports evening activity. Thame has a modern library, which is centrally located on North Street.
- 4.23 There are seven vacant units located within Thame town centre. These units account for 5.9% of all units, a figure broadly similar to that recorded at 2013, but a significantly lower proportion of floorspace compared to the current national average.
- 4.24 Whilst the vacant units are generally distributed throughout the town centre, a concentration of three vacant units is evident at Swan Walk. Notwithstanding this, by virtue of the significant quantum of footfall, high occupancy rates and diverse retail and service offer in Thame, the town centre is considered to be highly vital and viable.

### **Wallingford Town Centre**

- 4.25 Wallingford is a historic and charming market town, focused around the Market Place and High Street. The town centre itself is situated to the east of the River Thames, and the town is relatively centrally located in South Oxfordshire. By virtue of the town's relatively easy accessibility to Didcot to the west and Henley to the east, the town's offer is distinctly geared towards serving the needs of the local community, as opposed to a wider catchment area.
- 4.26 The town's retail offer is anchored by a Waitrose foodstore (which commenced trading in 2005), but also includes a diverse range of retail and service operators that provide a particularly strong food and drink offer. The centre's convenience goods offer is further augmented by a Lidl foodstore to the west of the town centre in Hithercroft Road. Operators are largely independent in nature, and their offer often complements the historic and characterful nature of the town centre. The centre is also generally very well maintained, and this adds further to the appearance and quality of the centre's retail environment.
- 4.27 A weekly Charter Market is held in the town centre, alongside farmers markets and many more themed markets throughout the year. The Charter Market is held weekly on a Friday, and accommodates a range of traders selling plants, food, gifts and more.
- 4.28 Leisure service operators include eight cafes, five restaurants, and five bars and public houses. The food and drink offer in the centre is almost wholly comprised of independents. Wallingford's evening offer is significantly enhanced by the Corn Exchange, which is a multi-purpose venue which acts as a theatre, cinema, comedy and music venue. The venue seats 176 people and is able to act as an important anchor for the evening economy. The cultural offer of the centre is augmented by Wallingford library which is located on High Street.
- 4.29 Our survey recorded 10 vacant units in Wallingford, which represent 7.7% of all units in the town centre. This figure represents a lower proportion of vacant units than the current national average, and a lower proportion than that recorded in Wallingford in 2013. Whilst there are some concentrations of vacant units in the town centre, these are not considered to significantly impact upon the performance of the town centre and, as such, Wallingford is considered to be a vital and viable town centre.

### **Vale of White Horse's Principal Centres**

- 4.30 The composition of each of the principal centres in Vale of White Horse is set out at Table 4.1 below. With the exception of Botley, each of the centres benefit from a vacancy rate in respect of commercial stock that is below the UK national average of 13.8%. However, it should be noted that the vacancy rate in Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage is only just less than the current national average figure.

**Table 4.2: Vale of White Horse’s Principal Centres Unit Composition at October 2022**

	Total Units	Comparison	Convenience	Financial	Leisure	Retail Service	Vacant
Abingdon	198	23.2%	5.6%	13.1%	24.2%	21.2%	12.6%
Faringdon	59	20.3%	8.5%	8.5%	30.5%	18.6%	13.6%
Wantage	166	31.3%	6.0%	9.0%	18.7%	21.7%	13.3%
Botley	27	7.4%	22.2%	11.1%	14.8%	18.5%	25.9%
Grove	28	14.3%	17.9%	3.6%	25.0%	32.1%	7.1%
<b>National Average</b>	-	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>8.8%</b>	<b>25.2%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>13.8%</b>

Source: Composition of principal centres derived from Nexus Planning survey of October 2022; Experian Goad national averages at September 2022

4.31 We provide a brief summary of each of the principal centres in Vale of White Horse below. Detailed healthcheck assessments are provided at Appendix 4.

### Abingdon Town Centre

4.32 Located on the eastern boundary of Vale of White Horse, and just to the south of Oxford, Abingdon town centre is a key centre for residents in both authority areas. The town centre is considered to be an attractive and characterful retail destination, providing a pleasant shopping experience in a setting characterised by a number of historic and period buildings. Areas of public realm are also considered to be of a high standard, and generally well-maintained. The centre’s proximity to the River Thames lends a positive aspect to the wider town.

4.33 Centred around Bury Street and High Street, Abingdon town centre provides a range of service and retail operators to serve the needs of the local community, including key national multiples such as Boots and New Look, as well as retail banks and food and drink operators. In the east of the town centre there is a Waitrose supermarket in Abbey Close. The centre’s wider appeal is boosted by a Monday Charter Market which is held in the Market Place.

4.34 Since 2012, there has been a significant reduction in the overall quantum of comparison goods units in the town centre, with the proportion of comparison goods units falling from 36.3% to 23.2%. Notable closures have included Beales, M&Co and Peacocks, with such closures broadly reflecting wider trends observed in high streets nationally during this period. There are 48 leisure service operators, which account for 24.2% of all units. This proportion represents a significant increase on that recorded at 2012, when the figure was 16.2%. This suggests that some of the decrease in comparison goods operators noted above has been reflected by a growth in the proportion of leisure service operators in Abingdon.

4.35 Our survey identified that leisure service operators include 13 cafes, 13 restaurants, and 11 bars and public houses. Whilst some national multiples such as Ask, Costa and Pizza Express have representation in the town, the majority of food and beverage operators in Abingdon are independents. The leisure service offer also incorporates more specialist operators including the Oracle snooker club and the Abbey Cinema. The centre also has a library albeit this is ‘tucked away’ on a side street in the northern part of the town centre.

4.36 At the time of our visit, 12.6% of units in the town centre were vacant. Whilst this figure is slightly lower than the current national average, a reduced vacancy rate would improve Abingdon’s vitality. There is a particular concentration of vacant units at the Abbey Centre, around the junction of Bury Street and the pedestrian cut-through to Bath Street including the former Peacocks store, which has been closed for several years now. Abingdon’s vitality and viability is considered to be moderate, and it will be important to repurpose vacant premises (potentially through introducing a greater range of modern hospitality and leisure operators) in order to underpin the future vitality and viability of the centre.

4.37 The town centre's future health is supported by the Central Abingdon Regeneration Framework ('CARF'), which was published in February 2023. The CARF sets out options for how parts of the town centre could be redeveloped, including three key sites owned by Vale of White Horse Council: The Charter, Abbey House, and The Upper Reaches. It establishes aspirations for positive change (encouraging sustainable modes of transport) and promotes improved retail and recreation with direct access to the River Thames.

### **Faringdon Town Centre**

4.38 Situated in the far west of the Vale of White Horse authority area, Faringdon is a relatively small and historic market town focused around Market Place. The town itself is largely a commuter town, situated between Oxford and Swindon. The Market Place accommodates a weekly market (held on Tuesdays), with other markets, such as a Farmers' Market and a Saturday Market also being held in the town. The town also hosts an annual festival in July, Folly Fest, which focuses on music and community arts. This, along with the centre's Civil War history and period buildings, including the Folly, drive a sizeable quantum of tourist activity.

4.39 Faringdon is dominated by heritage buildings, and consequently lacks a significant number of units which are of a format and size that would appeal to national multiple retailers. As such, the majority of retailers are independents. Notwithstanding this, national multiples with a presence in Faringdon include Boots Pharmacy, McColl's and Costa. There are also a number of supermarkets in the wider town, including Aldi, Tesco and Waitrose. To the west of the town centre on Gloucester Road are a range of community facilities, including Faringdon library and a medical centre.

4.40 There is a good range of food and drink establishments within town centre, including food and drink operators. Stakeholders mentioned the key role played by these operators in driving activity into the town centre, particularly during the evening. In total, the centre accommodates four bars and pubs, four cafes and one restaurant.

4.41 There is a much less significant range of convenience and comparison operators, with the convenience goods offer in the town primarily focused at out of centre locations.

4.42 At the time of our visit, a total of eight vacant units were recorded in the town centre. These units equate to 13.6% of the total number of units in Faringdon. Whilst the vacancy rate represents some cause for concern, investment observed on-site and planned in the town centre for vacant units (including the former Red Lion Public House and the former Budgens store) indicates that there remains confidence in the town centre for retail uses. Whilst current planning applications are residential-led, they include an element of retail floorspace and will, if implemented, reduce the overall proportion of vacant floorspace in the town centre. Accordingly, Faringdon is considered to be a largely vital and viable centre.

### **Wantage Town Centre**

4.43 Centrally located within the Vale of White Horse authority area, Wantage is a key retail and service centre for residents. This is reflected in the centre's diverse retail offer, which includes big-box retail national multiple operators at Kings Park Shopping Centre as well as a more 'traditional' town centre around Market Place. Kings Park Shopping Centre is somewhat removed from the traditional core of Wantage, but it is clear that the Shopping Centre plays a key role in driving activity and footfall into the town centre.

4.44 The historic market town is considered to be an attractive retail destination, particularly around Market Place where there are a number of architecturally attractive properties. The centre is well maintained, and whilst the historic nature of the town centre generally limits the quantum of modern, purpose built floorspace in the town centre, the proximity of Kings Park helps to diversify and strengthen the town's retail offer.

- 4.45 By virtue of Kings Park Shopping Centre, Wantage is anchored by comparison goods operators. Whilst the proportion of comparison goods units has decreased since 2012, the proportion (of both units and floorspace) remains greater than the current national average. Overall, the retail and leisure offer is quite modest given the increasing number of young families moving to the town. However, it is noted that there are a few family-friendly food and drink operators, such as Wildwood at Market Place. Leisure service operators include seven restaurants, six bars and public houses, and five cafes. The centre's evening economy is further supported by the Beacon Centre. This venue is located in the southern part of the centre and provides a key facility, offering stand-up comedy, live music, theatre productions, guest speakers, film screenings and pantomime. The wider offer of the centre is augmented by Wantage library, which is located at Stirlings Road, just within its eastern boundary.
- 4.46 The vacancy rate, in respect of units, at 2022 reflects a reduced proportion of vacant units to that recorded at 2012, at 13.3% (lower than the current national average) compared to 16.7%. As such, whilst not currently cause for concern, the vacancy rate should be monitored to ensure that it does not deteriorate further. Despite forthcoming announced closures, the centre is considered to remain broadly vital and viable at this time.

### **Botley Local Service Centre**

- 4.47 Botley is situated approximately two kilometres to the west of Oxford city centre, and in practice functions as part of the Oxford urban area. The centre is subject to a still ongoing redevelopment of the West Way Square in Botley. This programme of works has resulted in the redevelopment of a dated 1960s shopping precinct for a modern mixed-use scheme which includes student accommodation, a hotel and a significant quantum of retail floorspace. Whilst a proportion of this space remains vacant, a number of key operators, including Tesco Express, Iceland and Co-op Foodstore, have taken space in the centre.
- 4.48 Botley centre has benefitted from ongoing redevelopment, creating a modern, clean public realm which lends a positive impression in respect of the overall environmental quality of the centre. This public realm provides for a modern pedestrianised retail environment, which assists the overall standard of accessibility and in respect of the perception of safety in travelling around Botley.
- 4.49 By virtue of the existing residential population in Botley, and the student population within the centre, there is a significant community which looks to Botley centre to meet day-to-day needs. This is evidenced by a strong range of convenience goods operators, alongside a range of key service and comparison operators that meet localised needs, such as Lloyds Pharmacy. There is a very limited hospitality provision, this comprising the Premier Inn hotel and an independent coffee shop which closes during the afternoon. In addition to commercial uses, the centre also accommodates Botley library.
- 4.50 At the time of our visit, vacant units accounted for 25.9% of all units in the centre, and 25.7% of the total stock of retail floorspace.
- 4.51 It is important to recognise that these units are primarily located within the new West Way Square area and are advertised as being 'to let'. Accordingly, it is anticipated that the vacancy rate may reduce over time as this scheme becomes further established and as a critical mass of operators is established.
- 4.52 Whilst the centre has a pleasant, attractive public realm and a strong range of operators, there is clearly a need to secure tenants for the vacant units in the centre. Notwithstanding this, the centre is considered to be largely vital and viable at this time, by virtue of the student population within the centre, the centre's offer and the significant investment that is ongoing in Botley.

### **Grove Local Service Centre**

- 4.53 Grove local service centre is split into two distinct and geographically separate areas; one around Grovelands Shopping Centre (which is anchored by Co-op), and a second around Millbrook Square (anchored by Tesco Express). Grove itself is a relatively new settlement, having developed in the post-war years to become a significant residential community to the north of Wantage. The two commercial areas together serve an important (but very localised) role in providing for the day-to-day needs of the local community.
- 4.54 The two areas of Grove have a number of characteristics common to moderately-sized retail precincts. However, both are relatively distinctive, with Millbrook Square being a more-open centre, focused around a surface level car park. This contrasts with Grovelands Shopping Centre, which generally 'turns its back' on the surrounding residential areas. By virtue of its character, offer and less central location, there are significantly lower levels of pedestrian activity at Grovelands compared to Millbrook Square.
- 4.55 Grove is lacking in any wider, cultural offer and is the only centre reviewed which does not have a library. However, this is unsurprising given its small scale and proximity to Wantage.
- 4.56 Our survey recorded two vacant units in Grove, both of which are located within the Grovelands Shopping Centre. The offer at Grovelands Shopping Centre is relatively limited and Co-op is clearly the centre's key anchor. The ongoing operation of a convenience store in this location is considered to be of importance in ensuring the long-term viability of Grovelands Shopping Centre. Given the lack of activity and vacant units, we currently consider that the health of Grovelands is fragile. In contrast, Millbrook Square accommodates a good number of the uses we would expect to see in a smaller service centre and we believe it to be vital and viable.

## 5. Market Research – Shopping Patterns

### Market Share Analysis: Household Survey Results

- 5.1 The NEMS household survey identifies where residents travel to undertake a range of shopping and leisure activities. The summary of results provided in this section focusses on the market share of shopping trips secured by retail venues for various types of shopping. In July and August 2022, a survey of 1,405 households was undertaken by NEMS across the defined Study Area in order to ascertain where residents go to undertake a range of shopping and leisure activities. The Study Area reflects the area where residents look to facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to help meet their retail and leisure needs.
- 5.2 In defining the Study Area, Nexus revisited the Study Areas adopted in the South Oxfordshire Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (2016) and the Vale of White Horse Retail and Town Centres Study (2013). The two previous Studies covered a total of 12 and six zones respectively. For the purposes of this new Town Centres and Retail Study, Nexus has identified a consolidated Study Area which corresponds to the principal catchment area for facilities in each of the two local authority areas.
- 5.3 The defined Study Area has been broken down into 13 separate zones based on postcode sectors. The 13 zones are considered representative of geographic areas that may accommodate broadly similar patterns of shopping behaviour. The below Table 5.1 identifies the postcode sectors which define each of the zones. A plan defining the geographic extent of the Study Area and the below zones is provided at Appendix 1.

**Table 5.1: Study Area Zones by Postcode Sector**

Survey Zone	Area Covered	Postcode Sectors
1	Abingdon – Centre	OX14 1, OX14 5
2	Abingdon – East	OX14 2, OX14 3, OX14 4
3	Botley and Oxford West	OX13 5, OX13 6, OX1 5, OX2 9
4	Faringdon	SN6 7, SN6 8, SN7 7, SN7 8
5	Wantage	OX11 0, OX12 0, OX12 7, OX12 8, OX12 9, RG17 8, RG20 6, RG20 7
6	Didcot	OX11 6, OX11 7, OX11 8, OX11 9
7	Wallingford	OX10 0, OX10 6, OX10 8, OX10 9, RG8 0, RG8 7, RG8 8, RG8 9
8	Outer Reading	RG4 6, RG5 4, RG9 3, RG10 0, RG10 8, RG10 9, SL6 3, SL6 5, SL6 6
9	Henley-on-Thames	RG9 1, RG9 2
10	Rural South East	RG4 7, RG4 9, RG9 5, RG9 6, RG9 4, SL7 2
11	Watlington, Princes Risborough	OX9 7, OX49 5, HP14 3, HP14 4, HP27 0, HP27 9, OX39 4
12	Rural North East	OX3 9, OX10 7, OX44 7, OX44 9, OX33 1
13	Thame	HP17 8, HP18 0, HP18 9, OX9 2, OX9 3

- 5.4 In reviewing the Study Area, it is important to recognise that the vast majority of convenience goods expenditure generated within the area will be claimed by local foodstores. This is because shoppers look to source convenience goods close to home. Comparison goods shopping is more likely to result in longer trips to source goods at larger



centres. As such, it is to be expected that some comparison goods shopping trips 'leak' outside of the Study Area to a range of larger centres (such as Oxford, Reading and Swindon). Significant comparison goods shopping trips are also directed to out of centre retail venues within and immediate surrounding the authority areas.

- 5.5 It is also important to recognise that much of the expenditure which is generated in peripheral zones (in particular Zones 8, 10, 11 and 13) will be claimed by centres and retail destinations which lie outside South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. However, the zones have been drafted to ensure that most expenditure that originates in neighbouring authority areas but is spent in the Study authority areas is identified and accounted for. As such, this Study does not assume that all of the expenditure across the Study Area is available to facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Instead, assumptions in respect of available expenditure are made with reference to the zonal market shares identified by the household survey.
- 5.6 The household survey is reproduced as part of Appendix 2 of this Study. In retail terms, the principal purpose of the survey is to establish:
- patterns of convenience goods spending, based on the location of:
    - the shop or shops respondents last visited and visited 'the time before last' to undertake their main food shop; and
    - the shop or shops respondents last visited and visited 'the time before last' to undertake their top-up food shop.
  - patterns of comparison goods spending, based on the location of the respondent's last shopping trip to purchase the following types of comparison goods:
    - clothing and footwear;
    - books, CDs, DVDs and stationery;
    - small household goods, such as home furnishings, clocks, jewellery, glass and china;
    - toys, games, bicycles and recreational goods;
    - chemist goods, including health and beauty items;
    - electrical goods, such as televisions, washing machines and computers;
    - DIY and gardening goods; and
    - furniture, carpets and floor coverings.
- 5.7 The analysis which follows considers market share for the above sub-sectors. Our assessment is based on the market share of *expenditure* to particular 'bricks and mortar' retail destinations. Full details of our methodology in estimating the turnover of retail destinations are provided in the following Section 6 of this report.

## Convenience Goods Analysis

### Convenience Retention Rates

- 5.8 Our analysis begins by looking at the level of retention of convenience goods shopping trips on a zonal basis (i.e. the proportion of expenditure originating within a given zone which is claimed by retailers located within that zone). In this regard, we are able to establish whether residents are having to travel to meet their convenience shopping needs, or if they are typically able to meet their needs in close proximity to where they live. It is accepted that some respondents will live towards the boundary of their respective zones and some trips may therefore be able to be undertaken to existing zones in a sustainable manner.
- 5.9 Table 5.2 indicates that in terms of main food shopping, the highest retention rates are within Zones 6 (96.1%), 1 (68.0%), 4 (66.0%) and 5 (59.6%). In each case, the zones with the higher main food shopping retention rates,

contain large format foodstores, attracting high proportions of trips from their local catchment area. Of those zones with lower main food retention rates, a number are largely rural in nature and others are characterised by shoppers choosing larger format facilities in adjacent zones which are still relatively close to home.

5.10 Zone 3 has a very low retention rate in respect of main food shopping expenditure. Whilst the redeveloped Botley local service centre supports improved grocery retailing facilities in Zone 3, the zone does not support a main food shopping destination and residents instead generally travel to Abingdon or Oxford to undertake such shopping. Both settlements are located directly adjacent to the boundary of Zone 3 and, in the context of this zone being somewhat remote and not accommodating a large town centre, the identified shopping patterns are not unexpected.

5.11 Looking at top-up food shopping trips, the retention rates are typically higher on a zonal basis, with the highest being recorded in Zone 6 (87.8%), followed by Zone 7 (86.4%) and Zone 4 (85.6%). Retention rates for top-up shopping are usually significantly higher than those recorded for main food shopping, due to shoppers accessing smaller, local convenience stores to undertake basket shops and purchase items such as bread, milk, and so on.

**Table 5.2: Convenience Expenditure Retention by Zone at 2022**

Zone	Main Food Shopping Trips Retention (%)	Top-Up Food Shopping Trips Retention (%)
1	68.0%	65.0%
2	21.8%	47.5%
3	5.6%	45.8%
4	66.0%	85.6%
5	59.6%	77.6%
6	96.1%	87.8%
7	47.7%	86.4%
8	17.2%	43.4%
9	37.0%	68.8%
10	25.9%	45.3%
11	41.4%	74.2%
12	23.7%	55.9%
13	32.4%	58.8%
<b>Total Study Area</b>	<b>58.3%</b>	<b>64.0%</b>

Source: Table 4 of Appendix 5

### Convenience Goods Expenditure Shopping Patterns

5.12 Table 5.3 below provides the top ten destinations in the Study Area based on the level of convenience expenditure. The table indicates that the Tesco Extra on Marcham Road in Abingdon is the single most dominant main food shopping destination, attracting a total of 6.6% of the main food expenditure from across the Study Area. This is followed by the Sainsbury's at Limborough Road in Wantage (which attracts 3.9% of expenditure), and then by the Sainsbury's at Central Drive in Didcot (which also secures 3.9%).

**Table 5.3: Total Convenience Expenditure Summary (Top Ten Destinations)**

Destinations	2023 Market Share (£m)	2023 Market Share (%)
Tesco Extra, Marcham Road, Abingdon, OX14 1TU	83.3	6.6%
Sainsbury's, Central Drive, Didcot, OX11 7ND	48.8	3.9%
Sainsbury's, Limborough Road, Wantage, OX12 9AJ	48.8	3.9%
Waitrose, St. Martins Street, Wallingford, OX10 0EF	41.6	3.3%
Tesco Superstore, Wallingford Road, North Moreton, Didcot, OX11 9BZ	41.5	3.3%
Waitrose, Greyhound Lane, Thame OX9 3ZD	39.7	3.1%
Tesco Superstore, Reading Road, Henley-on-Thames RG9 4HA	38.2	3.0%
Aldi, Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8ET	37.0	2.9%
Aldi, Henry Blake Way, Faringdon, SN7 7GQ	34.9	2.8%
Waitrose, Abbey Close, Abingdon, OX14 3HL	30.7	2.4%

Source: Table 4 of Appendix 5

5.13 Other stores identified as trading well are the Waitrose foodstore on St. Martins Street in Wallingford, and the Tesco foodstore on Wallingford Road in Didcot. It is beneficial that the four most dominant foodstores are each located within different settlements and that three of them (in Wantage, Didcot and Wallingford) are located within the respective town centre itself.

5.14 Table 5.3 also indicates that discount foodstores across the two authority areas are trading strongly, most particularly the Aldi stores at Broadway in Didcot and at Henry Blake Way in Faringdon.

5.15 Important foodstores outside the Study Area include: Sainsbury's at Heyford Hill in Oxford; Sainsbury's at Providence Place in Maidenhead; Tesco Extra at Broadfields Retail Park in Aylesbury; Tesco Extra at Napier Road in Reading; and Tesco at Oxford Retail Park. All of these stores are located just beyond the Study Area boundary and are accessible to nearby residents residing within.

### Convenience Goods Expenditure Retention and Leakage

5.16 Table 5.4 below provides the overall market share for destinations in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and then for the Study Area as a whole. The table also provides details of the proportion of convenience goods expenditure lost to destinations outside of the Study Area.

5.17 We can see from Table 5.4 that the total proportion of convenience expenditure retained within the two authority areas is 59.9%, or £759.0m of the available expenditure generated by residents. This increases to 69.4% when including all of the destinations within the Study Area, but outside of the authority area.

5.18 Table 5.4 also indicates that a total of 30.6%, or £387.7m of expenditure generated by residents in the Study Area is spent at destinations outside of the Study Area.

**Table 5.4: Convenience Goods Expenditure Retention and Leakage**

Destinations	2023 Study Area Residents' Expenditure (£m)	2023 Market Share (%)
Vale of White Horse Authority Area Sub-Total	321.6	25.4%
South Oxfordshire Authority Area Sub-Total	437.5	34.5%
Combined South and Vale Sub-Total	759.0	59.9%
All Other Destinations in Study Area	120.5	9.5%
<b>All Destinations Inside Study Area</b>	<b>879.5</b>	<b>69.4%</b>
<b>All Destinations Outside Study Area</b>	<b>387.7</b>	<b>30.6%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,265.1</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Table 4 of Appendix 5

## Comparison Goods Analysis

- 5.19 Table 5.5 below provides the principal comparison destinations within and outside of the Study Area. The table identifies that the single most popular destination for residents in the Study Area is Didcot town centre, which attracts a total of 7.3% of available comparison expenditure, or £117.6m of available Study Area comparison goods expenditure at 2023. This is followed by Abingdon town centre which attracts 4.2%, or £67.5m. In addition, Wantage town centre, Thame town centre and Wallingford town centre attract a market share of 2.7%, 2.6% and 2.5% respectively.
- 5.20 Looking outside of the combined South and Vale area, Reading town centre is the most visited destination, securing 7.9% of residents' expenditure within the Study Area. Other destinations that attract more than 4.0% of available comparison goods expenditure include Oxford city centre (7.8%), High Wycombe town centre (6.6%) and Botley Road Retail Park (4.5%).

**Table 5.5: Total Comparison Expenditure Summary – Principal Destinations (Over 2.0% of Comparison Expenditure)**

Destinations	2023 Study Area Residents' Expenditure (£m)	2023 Market Share (%)
<b>Destinations Inside South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse</b>		
Didcot Town Centre	117.6	7.3%
Abingdon Town Centre	67.5	4.2%
Wantage Town Centre	43.1	2.7%
Thame Town Centre	41.9	2.6%
Wallingford Town Centre	40.7	2.5%
<b>Destinations Outside South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse</b>		
Reading Town Centre	128.8	7.9%
Oxford City Centre	125.8	7.8%
High Wycombe Town Centre	107.0	6.6%
Botley Road Retail Park, Oxford	73.2	4.5%
Maidenhead Town Centre	40.9	2.5%
Aylesbury Town Centre	35.8	2.4%
Reading Gate Retail Park, Reading	37.4	2.3%

Source: Table 4 of Appendix 5

5.21 In terms of residents in Zones 1, 2 and 3, both Abingdon town centre and Oxford city centre function as important comparison goods destinations. Abingdon town centre attracts the greatest market share in Zones 1 and 2, and Oxford city centre does the same in Zones 3 and 12. These zones are located closest to Abingdon and Oxford.

5.22 It is evident that the authorities' centres do not draw trade from particularly extensive catchment areas. However, this is to be expected given their relatively moderate size and the residents' ability to access higher order centres just beyond the Study Area boundary.

5.23 The relatively localised penetration in terms of town centre trade draw is evidenced in the market shares of Didcot and Wallingford. Didcot town centre attracts a 51.0% market share of expenditure from Zone 6 (within which it is located), and Wallingford attracts a market share of 21.7% within Zone 7 but attracts relatively few comparison goods shopping trips from elsewhere (with the exception of Zone 12 it does not secure a greater than 0.3% share of comparison goods expenditure in any other zone).

5.24 Whilst located outside of the Study Area, Oxford city centre and Reading town centre secure a significant proportion of comparison goods expenditure which originates inside. However, it should be noted that Zones 2, 3 and 12 lie adjacent to Oxford, and that Zones 7, 8 and 10 lie adjacent to Reading. The popularity of these centres in large part reflects the way in which the Study Area has been drawn.

5.25 The below Table 5.6 identifies the overall comparison goods retention and leakage rates within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Table 5.6 indicates that 35.7% (or £578.2m) of available comparison goods expenditure generated by residents in the Study Area is retained within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. However, a total of £966.4m of comparison goods expenditure 'leaks' to destinations outside of the Study Area.

5.26 The level of comparison goods leakage from the Study Area is highest in Zones 8, 10, 11 and 13, with the greatest proportions of expenditure leaking outside of the Study Area being from Zone 8 (83.5% of comparison goods expenditure being claimed by destinations outside), followed by Zone 13 residents (75.1%). The lowest level of leakage is evident in Zone 6, with just 16.0% of comparison goods expenditure in this zone being claimed by

destinations outside the Study Area. These shopping patterns again broadly reflect the geography of the Study Area and the fact that higher order centres are in proximity to some peripheral zones.

**Table 5.6: Comparison Goods Expenditure Retention and Leakage**

Destinations	2023 Study Area Residents' Expenditure (£m)	2023 Market Share (%)
Vale of White Horse Authority Area Sub-Total	228.5	14.1%
South Oxfordshire Authority Area Sub-Total	349.7	21.6%
Combined South and Vale Area Sub-Total	578.2	35.7%
All Other Destinations in Study Area	76.8	4.7%
<b>All Destinations Inside Study Area</b>	<b>569.7</b>	<b>31.4%</b>
<b>All Destinations Outside Study Area</b>	<b>966.4</b>	<b>59.6%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,621.4</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Table 25 of Appendix 5

### Clothing and Footwear

5.27 In reviewing the comparison shopping patterns within the Study Area, the analysis focuses on the eight separate categories of goods which fall within the 'non-bulky' and 'bulky' comparison goods sectors.

5.28 However, given the importance of the clothing and footwear sector to the high street and the level of expenditure which is spent on such goods (approximately 21% of residents' total comparison expenditure), we focus firstly on the clothing and footwear shopping patterns, followed by a summary of the other seven categories below.

5.29 Clothing and footwear retailing has traditionally been the bedrock of town centres' retail offer and it can therefore be a useful barometer of the popularity of high streets. Comparison goods purchases are generally made less often than convenience purchases, and residents are often willing to travel greater distances to meet their comparison shopping needs. As such, levels of zonal retention are often lower than those which are established by convenience goods.

5.30 Table 5.7 below sets out the proportion of clothing and footwear Study Area expenditure claimed by the key town centres of Abingdon and Didcot, together with other destinations (which include 'smaller' town centres and out of centre facilities). We note that only in Zone 6 do more than half of residents choose destinations within the Study Area to meet their clothing and footwear shopping needs. The dominant destination in this zone is Didcot town centre, which attracts a market share of 71.5% of clothing and footwear expenditure. Across the Study Area as a whole, Didcot town centre secures a market share of 12.4% of all clothing and footwear expenditure. Other zones within which facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse attract a considerable market share include Zones 2, 5, 6 and 7 where 53.6%, 42.1%, 81.8% and 46.1% of clothing and footwear expenditure is claimed by retailers located within the combined South and Vale area.

5.31 Overall, retailers in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse claim 28.7% of Study Area clothing and footwear expenditure.

**Table 5.7: Clothing and Footwear Shopping Market Share Analysis by Zone (%)**

Destination	Total	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Zone 7	Zone 8	Zone 9	Zone 10	Zone 11	Zone 12	Zone 13
Abingdon town centre	2.6	11.3	20.4	7.4	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Didcot town centre	12.4	10.7	17.8	4.1	0.0	18.9	71.5	19.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.9	0.0

Other, within Study Area	15.4	13.9	25.5	10.8	34.7	15.4	8.7	8.4	21.5	15.4	13.9	25.5	10.8	34.7
Other, outside Study Area	69.7	64.0	46.4	84.1	69.7	57.9	18.2	53.9	89.2	65.3	84.6	91.3	88.7	78.5

Source: Table 10 of Appendix 5

5.32 The below Table 5.8 identifies the proportion of Study Area clothing and footwear expenditure which is directed to London and Oxford city centres, and to Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Maidenhead and Reading town centres. The table demonstrates that Oxford as a destination for clothing and footwear shopping has relatively good penetration across much of the Study Area.

5.33 As would be expected, Oxford’s market share is greatest in those zones located closest to the City, namely Zones 1, 2, 3 and 12, with its influence receding in the more distant Zones 8, 9 and 10. In Zone 3 (which includes Botley) well over half of all clothing and footwear expenditure is directed to Oxford. In total across the Study Area, 18% of clothing and footwear expenditure is attracted to Oxford.

5.34 For other centres, such as Aylesbury, Maidenhead and Reading town centres, the spatial distribution of their market shares and catchment is more concentrated in the parts of the Study Area closest to each centre. For instance, for Zones 11 and 13, 13.1% and 16.2% respectively of all clothing and footwear expenditure is directed to Aylesbury town centre, whereas in Zones 9 and 10, 41.0% and 52.1% of all such expenditure is claimed by Reading town centre.

**Table 5.8: Other Centres Outside Study Area Clothing and Footwear Shopping Market Share Analysis by Zone (%)**

Destination	Total	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Zone 7	Zone 8	Zone 9	Zone 10	Zone 11	Zone 12	Zone 13
Aylesbury town centre	2.9	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.1	0.0	16.2
High Wycombe town centre	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.6	1.7	7.3	53.3	0.0	6.1
London	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	0.0	0.0	6.6	0.0	0.0	7.7	0.0	4.4
Maidenhead town centre	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.1	5.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Oxford city centre	18.1	34.4	25.3	52.6	18.9	20.7	14.2	21.2	0.0	3.4	1.4	6.9	39.0	13.7
Reading town centre	9.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.0	25.1	19.6	41.0	52.1	0.0	1.4	0.0

Source: Table 10 of Appendix 5

### Books, CDs, and DVDs

5.35 Across the Study Area as a whole, Didcot town centre attracts 12.9% of books, CDs and DVDs expenditure, followed by Henley-on-Thames which secures 8.0% of this expenditure and by Wallingford town centre, which secures 7.8%. Looking outside the Study Area, Oxford city centre attracts 11.8% of all books, CDs and DVDs expenditure, followed by Reading town centre with a 6.9% market share. In total, 52.5% of books, CDs and DVDs expenditure is claimed by shops located in either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse.

5.36 Looking in more detail at the shopping patterns within the zones located principally within each District, 39.8% and 48.9% of books, CDs and DVDs expenditure arising in Zones 1 and 2 respectively is directed towards Abingdon town centre. In Zones 5 and 6, Didcot town centre secures a respective market share of 30.1% and 69.2% of this type of expenditure. In Zone 5, Wantage town centre attracts a market share of 42.7% of all this expenditure and, in Zone 4, 30.8% of such expenditure is directed towards Faringdon town centre.

### Small Household Goods

5.37 Turning to small household goods expenditure, we note that the most popular destination across the two Districts is Didcot town centre, which attracts 5.1% of expenditure, followed by Abingdon town centre, which attracts 4.1% of such expenditure and then by Wantage town centre (3.2%). Outside of the Study Area, key destinations include High Wycombe town centre, which attracts 10.1% of all small household goods expenditure originating within the Study Area, followed by Reading town centre (9.2%), and Oxford city centre (7.0%). The total proportion of small household goods expenditure attracted collectively to retail destinations in either District is 30.2%.

5.38 In respect small household goods market share, it is interesting to note that in Zones 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13, the most visited destination is located outside of either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse. In Zones 1, 3 and 4, Oxford city centre is the most visited destination (securing a respective market share of 20.5%, 19.6% and 9.4% of expenditure across these zones). In Zones 7, 8 and 10, Reading town centre is the most popular location to purchase small household goods, with High Wycombe being the most visited centre in Zones 11 and 13. Only in Zones 2, 5, 6 and 9 is the single most popular destination located within either authority area.

### Recreational Goods

5.39 Looking at the market share of recreational goods (which includes toys, games, bicycles and so on) across the Study Area as a whole, the most popular destination is Didcot town centre (which claims 11.6% of such expenditure), followed by Abingdon town centre (5.4%). A total market share of 40.0% of Study Area recreational goods expenditure is claimed by retailers located in either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse authority areas.

5.40 For Zones 1, 2 and 3 it is evident that the most popular destination for residents is Abingdon town centre, which respectively attracts 38.4%, 28.1% and 21.9% of such expenditure originating within these zones. For Zones 5 and 6, Didcot is the principal destination for purchasing recreational goods. Its market share is highest in Zone 6 (where it secures 54.8% of all such expenditure), followed then by Zone 5 (19.1% of expenditure).

### Chemist and Beauty Goods

5.41 Turning to the final non-bulky comparison category of chemist and beauty goods, the most popular destination across the Study Area as a whole is Abingdon town centre (which secures a market share of 9.1% of all such expenditure), followed by Didcot town centre (8.0%).

5.42 In total, 58.9% of Study Area chemist and beauty expenditure is claimed by retailers located within either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse. Moreover, within Zones 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 9, the retention rate of such expenditure across both authority areas is in excess of 80%, which reflects the localised catchment area for purchasing such goods. Only in Zones 8, 10, 11 and 13 does the majority of such expenditure 'leak' to destinations outside either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse. Once more, it is important to recognise that these zones are in proximity to higher order centres and that identified shopping patterns reflect this.

5.43 The top destination for purchasing chemist and beauty goods in Zones 1 and 2 is Abingdon town centre, which secures a share of 67.8% and 55.7% of such expenditure. For residents in Zone 6, Didcot town centre is the most popular destination, securing 63.9% of chemist and beauty goods expenditure. In Zone 4, the principal destination for purchasing chemist goods is Wantage town centre, with a market share of 54.0%.



## Electrical Goods

- 5.44 The household survey results demonstrate that the most popular destination across the Study Area as a whole for electrical goods is Didcot town centre (8.7%) followed by The Orchard Centre in Didcot (7.5%). Outside of the Study Area, key destinations include Botley Road Retail Park (12.9%) and High Wycombe town centre (12.2%).
- 5.45 In total, retail facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse collectively secure 31.5% of all electrical goods expenditure generated within the Study Area. This reflects not only the scale of the authorities' centres but also the limited retail park provision in the area.

## DIY and Gardening Goods

- 5.46 The B&Q at Nuffield Way in Abingdon is the principal destination for DIY and gardening shopping trips across the Study Area and attracts a total of 10.5% of all DIY trips originating within the Study Area. The second most popular destinations are the Fairacres Retail Park and Didcot town centre which both attract 4.1% of all such expenditure. In total, 49.7% of DIY expenditure generated by Study Area residents is claimed by destinations within either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse.
- 5.47 The store with the greatest penetration across a local area is the aforementioned Abingdon B&Q, which secures 50.7% of DIY and gardening expenditure generated in Zone 1, 43.3% in Zone 2, and 20.5% in Zone 3.

## Furniture Goods

- 5.48 Finally, turning to shopping patterns for furniture goods, the most popular destination for residents across the Study Area is Fairacres Retail Park, which attracts 12.0% of such expenditure generated in the Study Area, followed by Abingdon town centre, which attracts 7.6% of trips.
- 5.49 In total, 31.5% of Study Area furniture goods expenditure is claimed by retailers within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.
- 5.50 Other well-visited destinations in the Study Area include Hadden Hill Retail Park in Didcot (which secures 3.0% of expenditure) and Didcot town centre (2.3%).

## Comparison Goods Summary

- 5.51 We set out the overall authority area market share by zone for each of the eight comparison goods sub-sectors in Table 5.9 below.

**Table 5.9: Combined South and Vale Area Comparison Retention Rates by Category and Zone**

Destination	Total	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Zone 7	Zone 8	Zone 9	Zone 10	Zone 11	Zone 12	Zone 13
Clothing and footwear	26.4	31.4	47.1	15.0	23.1	29.2	73.5	47.0	14.3	38.1	8.4	0.8	21.2	10.2
Books etc.	52.5	62.1	75.6	28.6	43.3	88.4	88.2	87.7	17.3	87.1	25.6	31.1	50.3	35.0
Household	30.2	53.6	61.3	21.8	27.0	43.6	70.6	38.2	5.7	52.2	1.6	8.9	46.4	9.4
Toys, recreational goods etc.	40.0	56.9	70.6	34.7	20.2	60.9	89.3	44.7	9.0	47.7	12.8	29.4	25.7	12.7
Chemist	58.9	91.0	94.2	60.0	66.6	91.0	99.6	77.7	10.6	98.5	53.2	15.1	48.0	46.5
Electrical	31.5	50.8	51.6	21.5	10.1	67.3	88.7	48.8	0.0	37.9	0.0	7.6	24.0	11.6
DIY	49.7	96.2	93.7	53.7	40.3	81.4	97.1	80.3	7.2	46.1	23.3	18.1	50.5	15.7
Furniture	28.7	36.0	53.6	15.9	30.3	42.1	81.8	46.1	8.6	34.7	7.0	5.5	11.4	15.4

Source: Table 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24 of Appendix 5

## Summary

5.52 The household survey results are provided in full at Appendix 2. In respect of convenience goods, the findings that are of greatest relevance to the future retail strategy in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are as follows:

- Overall, the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse convenience destinations meet both main and top up food shopping requirements for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse residents in a satisfactory manner, with the market share of destinations in the authority areas securing a rate of trips commensurate with their population's proportion of the overall Study Area.
- For Zones 1, 2, 5, 6 and 9 more than nine in every ten pounds spent on main food and top-up shopping trips is claimed by stores within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Only in zones 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13, does the convenience goods market share for both main food shopping and top-up shopping expenditure fall below 50%.

5.53 In terms of comparison goods, our assessment has identified that:

- The large majority of residents in Zones 2, 5, 6, 7 and 9 are able to meet their comparison goods needs within the two authority areas (principally at Abingdon and Didcot town centres).
- The overall clothing and footwear market share claimed by facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse represents 28.7% of the total expenditure market share in the Study Area.
- Oxford city centre and Reading town centre draw a relatively high proportion of clothing and footwear trips away from the authority areas. The highest proportions of expenditure leaking outside of the Study Area being from Zone 11 at 91.3%, followed by Zone 8 residents at 84.1%. The lowest level is from Zone 6 residents at 18.2%.

5.54 The Study Area has been drawn so as to identify expenditure committed by residents of neighbouring authority areas that is claimed by destinations within the combined South and Vale area. This is necessary to comprehensively identify the overall trading performance of existing retail floorspace within the combined South and Vale area.

5.55 However, it is to be expected that a large proportion of the expenditure which originates in peripheral zones is claimed by retailers located outside South and Vale. In this context, we consider that the identified survey results appropriately reflect the geography of the Study Area and that where expenditure 'leaks' to destinations outside this is still generally reflective of logical and sustainable travel patterns.

## 6. Population and Expenditure

### Study Area and Survey

- 6.1 In July and August 2022, a survey of 1,405 households was undertaken by NEMS within the defined Study Area to ascertain where residents go to undertake a range of shopping and leisure activities. The Study Area reflects the area where residents look (at least some of the time) to facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to meet their retail and leisure needs. A plan of the Study Area is provided as Appendix 1.
- 6.2 Across each of the 13 zones, a minimum of 100 surveys have been undertaken, with the remaining additional 100 surveys apportioned evenly across the five most populous zones<sup>19</sup>.
- 6.3 The zones were used as the basis for the NEMS household survey, which informed the assessment of shopping patterns as set out at Section 5 of this report. The survey results also underpin the quantitative retail capacity assessment which follows at Section 7. To identify the expenditure claimed by retail destinations, it is necessary to estimate the population and future convenience and comparison goods expenditure apparent in the Study Area.

### Study Area Population

- 6.4 The population within each postcode sector and each zone at 2023 has been calculated using Experian Micromarketer G3 data (2021 estimate, which was issued in February 2023). We have confirmed with Council Officers that Experian's projections are very broadly consistent with the level of growth which is being planned for across the South and Vale area. There may be a need to update the findings of this assessment when additional work has been undertaken to confirm the authorities' population growth trajectory and the distribution of housing commitments. Table 6.1 below sets out Experian's population projections for each zone in the Study Area for reporting years 2023, 2028, 2033, 2038 and 2041.

**Table 6.1: Estimated Study Area Population by Survey Zone**

Zone	2023	2028	2033	2038	2041
1	20,813	21,822	22,566	23,187	23,580
2	26,147	27,445	28,336	29,113	29,541
3	34,157	35,711	36,812	37,701	38,184
4	32,918	34,416	35,624	36,637	37,242
5	44,681	46,495	47,835	48,962	49,646
6	37,140	37,973	38,506	39,115	39,555
7	43,725	44,010	44,171	44,168	44,249
8	71,801	73,023	73,833	74,635	75,150
9	12,273	12,353	12,349	12,379	12,399
10	31,526	31,458	31,406	31,375	31,387
11	46,414	46,119	45,716	45,428	45,453
12	32,236	32,352	32,458	32,546	32,648
13	44,737	46,200	47,306	48,268	48,825
<b>Total</b>	<b>478,568</b>	<b>489,377</b>	<b>496,918</b>	<b>503,514</b>	<b>507,859</b>

Source: Table 1 of Appendix 5

- 6.5 Based on Experian's population projections, we estimate that the Study Area population will increase from 478,568 persons at 2023 to 507,859 persons at 2041. This equates to an increase of 29,291 persons (or 6.1%) over the 18-year period. The Study Area extends beyond the South and Vale area, and the population figures therefore exceed the population of the two authority areas.

<sup>19</sup> These being Zones 5, 7, 8, 11 and 13.

## Retail Expenditure

- 6.6 In order to calculate per capita convenience and comparison goods expenditure, we have utilised Experian Micromarketer G3 data, which provides detailed information on local consumer expenditure that takes into consideration the socio-economic characteristics of the local population. The base year for the Experian expenditure data is 2021. Our methodology takes account of the fact that some special forms of trading expenditure<sup>20</sup> is not available to support retail floorspace, and then allows for increases in per capita expenditure growth on an annual basis.
- 6.7 Figure 5 of Appendix 3 of ERPBN20 provides forecasts in respect of the proportion of convenience and comparison goods expenditure that will be committed through special forms of trading both now and in the future. We have 'stripped out' any survey responses which relate to expenditure committed via special forms of trading and have instead made an allowance derived from Experian's recommendations (which we consider to be the most appropriate means by which to account for such expenditure).
- 6.8 We set out Experian's expenditure growth estimates at Table 6.2, which is provided below. It should be noted that Experian only provides growth forecasts to 2040, and, in practice, we extrapolate the annual growth rates at 2040 to provide an estimate for the subsequent year of 2041.
- 6.9 In considering special forms of trading, many products which are ordered online are actually sourced from a store's shelves or stockroom in practice (this is particularly the case with convenience goods). As such, expenditure committed in this manner acts to sustain shops and can be considered 'available' to support floorspace within the Study Area. Accordingly, in order not to overstate the influence of special forms of trading on retailers, our methodology utilises Experian's 'adjusted' allowance for special forms of trading (which is provided at Figure 5 of ERPBN20). This allowance indicates that 5.8% of convenience goods expenditure and 28.7% of comparison goods expenditure is 'lost' from shops at base year 2021 through special forms of trading purchases.
- 6.10 Having made an allowance for special forms of trading, we then take account of projected changes in expenditure in accordance with the recommendations provided by Figure 6 of Appendix 3 of ERPBN20. Experian provides overall growth rates and 'adjusted' rates, which account for any additional increases in expenditure lost to special forms of trading. The latest growth rates suggest that growth in comparison goods expenditure should pick up in the short term as confidence in the economy returns, with this increase following a significant impact to comparison goods expenditure arising from the situation around Covid-19 in 2020.
- 6.11 For convenience goods, Experian forecasts very limited per capita expenditure growth across the entire period to 2036. The position is even more pessimistic when account is taken of future growth in special forms of trading, with Experian's forecasts suggesting that the growth in convenience goods expenditure available to actual stores will not exceed 0.1% per annum across the entire period 2022 to 2041. Overall, it is evident that per capita convenience goods expenditure is not forecast to increase in the period to 2041.
- 6.12 The position in respect of comparison goods expenditure is more positive. Experian forecasts that per capita comparison goods expenditure growth will take place over the period to 2041, but, with the exception of growth of 5.6% in 2021, will not exceed 2.7% per annum in the period from 2022 to 2041. Experian's forecast suggests that there will be relatively healthy growth in comparison goods even after accounting for expenditure lost to special forms of trading.

**Table 6.2: Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20 Convenience and Comparison Goods Annual Per Capita Growth Rates**

<sup>20</sup> Identified as comprising sales via the internet, mail order, stalls and markets, door-to-door and telephone sales (i.e. all non-store sales).

Year	Convenience Goods	Convenience Goods 'Adjusted SFT'	Comparison Goods	Comparison Goods 'Adjusted SFT'
2021	-4.7	-2.3	5.6	6.0
2022	-6.9	-6.8	3.3	2.0
2023	-1.5	-2.2	-0.6	-1.0
2024	-1.7	-0.7	-1.3	-0.8
2025	-1.1	-0.3	-0.2	0.3
2026	-0.9	-0.2	1.1	1.6
2027	-0.7	-0.1	1.8	2.2
2028	-0.6	-0.1	2.0	2.4
2029	-0.5	0.0	2.2	2.5
2030	-0.4	0.0	2.3	2.6
2031	-0.3	0.0	2.3	2.6
2032	-0.3	0.0	2.4	2.7
2033	-0.2	0.1	2.4	2.7
2034	-0.2	0.1	2.5	2.7
2035	-0.2	0.1	2.6	2.8
2036	-0.1	0.1	2.6	2.8
2037	-0.1	0.1	2.7	2.8
2038	-0.1	0.1	2.7	2.8
2039	-0.1	0.1	2.7	2.8
2040	-0.1	0.1	2.7	2.8

Source: Figure 6 of Appendix 3, Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20 (January 2023)

6.13 This Study utilises the most up to date Experian expenditure data and growth forecasts. However, longer term growth forecasts (beyond the next ten years) should be treated with caution given the inherent uncertainties associated with predicting the performance of the economy over time (particularly in the current economic, health and political climates). As such, assessments of this nature should be reviewed on a regular basis in order to ensure that forecasts over the medium and longer term reflect changing circumstances.

6.14 In this regard, we also note that paragraph 86 of the NPPF requires local planning authorities to allocate sites to meet likely town centre needs '**...looking at least ten years ahead**', which differs from the previous requirement to meet needs across the entire plan period. We believe that this change directly reflects current economic conditions and changes in the retail sector in recent years. By applying Experian's recommendations in respect of special forms of trading and expenditure growth, we are able to produce expenditure estimates for each survey zone and the Study Area as a whole at 2023, 2028, 2033, 2038, and 2041. As identified above, longer term forecasts may be less reliable and it may be prudent for the Joint Local Plan to reflect the NPPF reference to meeting needs across a ten year timeframe.

## Convenience Goods Expenditure

6.15 Taking into account the Study Area resident population and the available per capita convenience goods expenditure, we estimate that £1,267.1m<sup>21</sup> of convenience goods expenditure originates within the Study Area at 2023. The below Table 6.3 indicates that available Study Area convenience goods expenditure is forecast to increase to £1,332.6m at 2041.

**Table 6.3: Total Available Study Area Convenience Goods Expenditure**

2023 (£m)	2028 (£m)	2033 (£m)	2038 (£m)	2041 (£m)
1,267.1	1,277.3	1,297.9	1,321.4	1,332.6

Note: In 2021 Prices

6.16 Table 6.4 indicates that this represents an increase of £65.5m (or 5.2%) across the Study Area between 2023 and 2041. Given the static growth in per capita expenditure, this increase can be attributed to growth in the Study Area's population.

**Table 6.4: Growth in Available Study Area Convenience Goods Expenditure**

Growth 2023-28 (£m)	Growth 2023-33 (£m)	Growth 2023-38 (£m)	Growth 2023-41 (£m)
10.1	30.8	54.3	65.5

Note: In 2021 Prices

6.17 We have assumed that around 75% of available convenience goods expenditure would take the form of main food shopping and that around 25% would take the form of top-up shopping (which relates to smaller purchases, often including staple items such as milk and bread)<sup>22</sup>.

6.18 By applying this ratio, we estimate that main food shopping trips account for £950.4m of Study Area convenience goods expenditure at 2023, and top-up shopping trips account for £316.8m.

## Comparison Goods Expenditure

6.19 For comparison goods, Table 6.5 sets out our estimate that the resident population of the Study Area will generate £1,621.4m of comparison goods expenditure at 2023. Available comparison goods expenditure is then forecast to grow to £2,578.6m at 2041.

**Table 6.5: Total Available Study Area Comparison Goods Expenditure**

2023 (£m)	2028 (£m)	2033 (£m)	2038 (£m)	2041 (£m)
1,621.4	1,753.4	2,025.7	2,353.6	2,578.6

Note: In 2021 Prices

6.20 The identified increase in comparison goods expenditure growth is substantial, but it represents a level of annual growth that is more circumspect than that which has been achieved in the past. This is due to both a reduction in the overall level of growth when compared to that achieved in the early part of this millennium and as a consequence of further forecast increases in expenditure committed via special forms of trading (most obviously, internet shopping).

6.21 As the below Table 6.6 identifies, our assessment estimates that there will be an increase of £957.1m (59.0%) in respect of Study Area comparison goods expenditure between 2023 and 2041.

<sup>21</sup> In 2021 prices, as is every subsequent monetary reference.

<sup>22</sup> This is a standard split applied in undertaking this exercise.

**Table 6.6: Growth in Available Study Area Comparison Goods Expenditure**

Growth 2023-28 (£m)	Growth 2023-33 (£m)	Growth 2023-38 (£m)	Growth 2023-41 (£m)
132.0	404.3	732.2	957.1

Note: In 2021 Prices

6.22 We sub-divide comparison goods expenditure into eight categories, these being: ‘DIY’, ‘Electrical’ and ‘Furniture’ (collectively referred to as bulky goods); and, ‘Clothing and Footwear’, ‘Books, CDs and DVDs’, ‘Health, Beauty and Chemist Goods’, ‘Small Household Goods’, and ‘Toys, Games, Bicycles and Recreational Goods’ (collectively referred to as non-bulky goods). The proportion of expenditure directed to each sub-category is estimated by Experian on a zonal basis. Experian’s estimates are reflected in the detailed expenditure tables set out at Table 7b of Appendix 5 of this report.

6.23 In considering expenditure growth, it should be noted that not all growth arising within the Study Area is available to support additional floorspace in the South and Vale area. Instead, account needs to be taken of: the market share of expenditure secured by retailers within the combined South and Vale area (and the fact that some needs are successfully met outside the two Districts); the claim made by existing retailers on expenditure growth (the future efficiency of retail floorspace); and, the expenditure that will be claimed by committed retail developments. These issues are addressed in the assessment of retail capacity provided in the following Section 7 of this report.

## 7. Assessment of Retail Capacity

- 7.1 Our retail capacity tables set out our step-by-step approach to estimating the expenditure surplus which is available to support additional retail floorspace and are provided at Appendix 5. A summary of our methodology, together with our findings, is provided below.

### General Approach to Estimating Quantitative Capacity

- 7.2 Retail capacity modelling follows the basic principle that: Available Expenditure *minus* Expected Turnover of Existing and Committed Floorspace *equals* Expenditure Surplus or Deficit. An identified quantitative expenditure surplus indicates that there may be capacity to support additional retail floorspace (subject to there being no unacceptable impacts arising as a consequence of the increased provision). We summarise the key considerations relating to each component of the equation below.

#### Available Expenditure

- 7.3 As we set out in Section 6 of this report, expenditure generated within each Study Area zone is calculated by multiplying the population at a given reporting year by the estimated per capita expenditure. The available expenditure takes into consideration:
- estimated population growth;
  - forecast increases in per capita expenditure; and
  - forecast increases in special forms of trading.
- 7.4 The expenditure available to retailers within the South and Vale area is calculated with reference to the market share of convenience and comparison goods expenditure secured by retailers located within the two authority areas.

#### Expected Turnover of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's Retail Floorspace

- 7.5 The expected turnover relates to the level of expenditure claimed by existing retailers (and by retail commitments benefitting from an extant planning permission) in order to trade viably. For convenience goods retailers, the expected 'benchmark' turnover of existing convenience goods facilities can be calculated with reference to company average sales densities and the net convenience goods sales areas of stores.
- 7.6 However, for this Study, and in light of the unique local circumstances (set out below), Nexus has advised Council Officers on an alternative approach, in that the expected turnover of convenience goods floorspace should not be identified with reference to company average benchmark turnovers. The use of this type of benchmarking would provide for 'overtrading' identified at base year 2023 (i.e. turnover which is above and beyond expected benchmark level) to be made immediately available to support new entrants into the grocery market.
- 7.7 In the South and Vale area it is evident that foodstores are generally located centrally and that they often have an important role in underpinning the vitality and viability of centres<sup>23</sup>. As we go on to identify later in this section, many of these in-centre foodstores trade strongly and we believe that it is advantageous for this to remain the case to underpin the health of defined centres (in accordance with planning policy objectives).

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<sup>23</sup> One exception to this is Faringdon where Aldi, Tesco and Waitrose are located outside the centre (and the centre itself has a limited retail function).



- 7.8 The advantages associated with this approach (in terms of attracting activity, supporting linked trips, and underpinning the viability of in-centre grocery retailers) are substantial. The particular importance of convenience goods retailers to South and Vale's centres is evident with reference to Experian Goad data. Taken collectively, 17.2% of commercial floorspace within South and Vale's principal centres is dedicated to convenience goods use, which compares to 9.3% nationally. It is considered important not to undermine the role and function of this in-centre grocery offer.
- 7.9 Given the above, we adopt the approach that both convenience and comparison goods floorspace is trading 'in equilibrium' at base year 2023 (i.e. our survey-derived turnover estimate effectively acts as the benchmark). The expected turnover of existing floorspace then increases for future reporting years in accordance with the changes in floorspace sales efficiency set out in ERPBN20.

### Surplus/Deficit

- 7.10 The expenditure surplus (or deficit) for future reporting years is calculated by subtracting the turnover of existing and committed floorspace from the available expenditure in the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas. A surplus figure effectively represents an under-provision of retail facilities within the Districts (which may indicate that additional floorspace could be supported), whereas a deficit would suggest a quantitative over-provision of retail floorspace.
- 7.11 Although a surplus is presented as a monetary figure, it can be converted to a floorspace requirement through the application of an appropriate sales density. In this regard, the floorspace requirement will vary according to operator and the likely sales density they could achieve. For example, in the case of comparison goods, non-bulky goods retailers tend to achieve higher sales densities than bulky goods retailers. However, within the bulky goods sector itself there is significant variation, with electrical retailers typically having higher sales densities than DIY or furniture retailers.
- 7.12 The turnover of destinations is generally considered with reference to retailers' net sales areas and all of the following floorspace figures are presented on this basis. Our assessment considers convenience and comparison goods needs for the combined South and Vale area, but then also subdivides the identified requirement in order to provide figures for South Oxfordshire and for Vale of White Horse separately.

### Consideration of Inflow

- 7.13 We have also given consideration as to whether there would be any convenience and comparison goods turnover derived as inflow from outside the Study Area. Inflow relates to expenditure which originates outside the Study Area (both from residents of neighbouring areas and from visitors from further afield).
- 7.14 The defined Study Area covers an extensive area and we therefore believe that only a limited amount of trade will be drawn in practice from outside to support retailers within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. This is particularly the case for convenience goods, which are generally sourced close to home.
- 7.15 Accordingly, for convenience goods, we anticipate that larger foodstores<sup>24</sup> in Abingdon, Faringdon and Thame may be able to benefit from an inflow rate equating to 2% of their turnover. Given the greater role of tourism in Henley-on-Thames, we estimate that foodstores in this town may benefit from an inflow rate equating to 5% of their turnover. We do not believe that small stores (serving localised top-up grocery shopping needs) will be able to benefit from any material level of inflow. Other settlements (such as Didcot) are considered less likely to attract

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<sup>24</sup> With a convenience goods net sales area of more than 750 sq.m.

custom from outside the Study Area as a consequence of their role or more central location (further away from neighbouring authority areas). Other settlements therefore have a nil convenience goods inflow allowance. Confirmation in respect of allowances made to account for convenience goods expenditure inflow is provided by Table 5 of Appendix 5.

- 7.16 For comparison goods, we have reviewed the inflow allowance attributable to centres with reference to their role and function. We have assumed that the larger Abingdon, Faringdon and Thame town centres could secure around 2% of their turnover from outside the Study Area<sup>25</sup>. This will arise from visits from people that reside just outside of the Study Area and from workers and tourists travelling from further afield. For Henley-on-Thames, we have assumed that 5% of its turnover would be generated as inflow from outside the Study Area, due to its location on the periphery of the Study Area and range of events held in the centre and therefore its ability to attract a higher proportion of inflow. For small centres and other comparison goods destinations with a generally localised role, we have assumed a nil inflow allowance. Confirmation in respect of allowances made to account for comparison goods expenditure inflow is provided by Table 25 of Appendix 5.
- 7.17 These respective inflow allowances are applied to the quantitative assessment turnovers to provide for an estimate in respect of the level of inflow claimed from outside the current Study Area.
- 7.18 Table 6a and Table 26a of Appendix 5 respectively demonstrate that around £6.7m of convenience goods expenditure and £8.5m of comparison goods expenditure is claimed as inflow by retailers within the two authority areas. We account for future inflow on the basis that it will continue to account for the same proportion of overall convenience and comparison goods expenditure going forward.

### **Future Quantitative Convenience Goods Capacity**

- 7.19 In identifying the requirement for additional convenience goods floorspace, the estimated turnover of the existing collective provision (with reference to the shopping patterns established by the household survey) is compared to its benchmark turnover (which is assumed to be the same figure at the base year of 2023, but thereafter changes to account for Experian's forecast in respect of the sales efficiency of convenience goods floorspace).
- 7.20 As Table 7.1 demonstrates, convenience goods floorspace across the South and Vale area has a survey-derived turnover of £759.0m, which increases to £767.6 when inflow is taken into account. Due to expected short term increases in the productivity of existing floorspace, we estimate that the benchmark turnover of South and Vale convenience goods floorspace will be greater than its survey-derived turnover at reporting years 2028 and 2033. By 2038, this position is reversed and a limited expenditure surplus of £7.4m is evident, which increases to £14.2m at 2041.

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<sup>25</sup> Once again, no inflow is assumed for Didcot given its very central location within the Study Area which limits the potential to attract expenditure from outside of the Study Area.

**Table 7.1: Quantitative Capacity for Additional Convenience Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas**

Year	Benchmark Turnover (£m)	Available Expenditure (£m)	Inflow (£m)	Surplus Expenditure (£m)
2023	767.6	759.0	8.6	0.0
2028	792.3	765.1	8.7	-18.5
2033	793.1	777.5	8.8	-6.8
2038	793.1	791.5	9.0	7.4
2041	793.1	798.3	9.2	14.2

Notes: Assumes constant market share (59.9%) of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities within either the South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse authority area; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Figure 4b of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20; in 2021 prices

7.21 Table 7.2 summarises current extant planning permissions which provide for additional convenience goods floorspace. In calculating the turnover of the identified commitments, we have extracted the floorspace information from the relevant planning application documents and applied professional judgement where necessary to determine whether proposals are likely to incorporate an element of convenience goods sales floorspace once built out.

7.22 We estimate that there is circa 5,469 sq.m of consented convenience goods sales floorspace. Based on typical convenience goods sales densities, this equates to a likely convenience goods turnover of around £55.8m at 2023.

**Table 7.2 Committed Convenience Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas**

Location	Planning Application Reference	Net Conv Sales (sq.m)	Conv Sales Density (£ per sq.m)	Estimated Turnover at 2023 (£m)
Land to the West of Wootton Road, Abingdon*	P21/V0024/FUL	1,052	11,000	11.6
Unit B, Fairacres Retail Park, Marcham Road, Abingdon*	P21/V0453/FUL	1,078	10,985	11.8
Land at Grove Road, Grove*	P22/V0286/FUL	874	8,739	7.7
Land at former Didcot A Power Station, Purchas Road, Didcot#	P19/V1472/FUL	1,275	10,000	12.8
Land to the north east of Didcot#	P15/S2902/O	1,190	10,000	11.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>5,469</b>		<b>55.8</b>

Source: Table 6c of Appendix 5

Notes: Net sales area and estimated sales density reflect operator (or likely operator); whilst the Lidl at Unit B, Fairacres Retail Park is now trading it was not at the time of the household survey and is therefore treated as a commitment; \* denotes that commitment is located within Vale of White Horse; # denotes that commitment is in South Oxfordshire; in 2021 prices

7.23 In this context, the below Table 7.3 sets out identified convenience goods capacity across the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse area once relevant commitments have been accounted for. The quantum of committed floorspace is substantial and there is no requirement for additional convenience goods floorspace across the combined South and Vale area in the period to 2041. In practice, a negative capacity figure is evident which equates to between -3,100 sq.m and -4,300 sq.m of floorspace at 2041. Whilst a negative figure can sometimes equate to an oversupply of floorspace in a given sector, in this instance it is important to reiterate that convenience goods floorspace across the South and Vale area generally trades strongly and the above figure should not be construed as an oversupply of convenience goods floorspace.

**Table 7.3: Quantitative Capacity for Convenience Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas after Commitments**

Year	Surplus (£m)	Commitments (£m)	Residual (£m)	Floorspace Requirement	
				Minimum (sq.m)	Maximum (sq.m)
2023	0.0	55.8	-55.8	-4,100	-5,700
2028	-18.5	57.6	-76.1	-5,500	-7,500
2033	-6.8	57.6	-64.4	-4,600	-6,400
2038	7.4	57.6	-50.2	-3,600	-4,900
2041	14.2	57.6	-43.4	-3,100	-4,300

Source: Table 6d of Appendix 5

Notes: Assumes constant market share (59.9%) of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities within either the South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse authority area; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Figure 4a of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20; minimum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £13,441 per sq.m at 2023 (which equates to the average sales density of the 'big four' foodstore operators); maximum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £9,818 per sq.m at 2023 (which equates to average sales density of Aldi and Lidl); in 2021 prices

### Future Quantitative Convenience Goods Capacity in Each Authority Area

7.24 Table 7.4 below sets out the position in respect of convenience goods expenditure capacity in the respective South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas.

7.25 As might be expected (given the position across the combined South and Vale area), there is no positive requirement for additional convenience goods floorspace across either authority area in the period to 2041. Table 7.4 identifies that, after commitments are accounted for, there is a negative capacity requirement at 2041 equating to between -300 sq.m and -400 sq.m of floorspace in South Oxfordshire and between -2,800 sq.m and -3,900 sq.m in Vale of White Horse.

**Table 7.4: Quantitative Capacity for Convenience Goods Floorspace in Each Authority Area after Commitments**

Year	Surplus (£m)	Commitments (£m)	Residual (£m)	Floorspace Requirement	
				Minimum (sq.m)	Maximum (sq.m)
<b>South Oxfordshire</b>					
2023	0.0	11.9	-11.9	-900	-1,200
2028	-10.7	12.3	-23.0	-1,700	-2,300
2033	-3.9	12.3	-16.2	-1,200	-1,600
2038	4.3	12.3	-8.0	-600	-800
2041	8.2	12.3	-4.1	-300	-400
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>					
2023	0.0	43.9	-43.9	-3,300	-4,500
2028	-7.9	45.3	-53.1	-3,800	-5,200
2033	-2.9	45.3	-48.2	-3,500	-4,800
2038	3.1	45.3	-42.2	-3,000	-4,200
2041	6.0	45.3	-39.3	-2,800	-3,900

Notes: Assumes constant market share of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities in each respective Authority Area, at 34.5% in South Oxfordshire and 25.4% in Vale of White Horse; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Table 4a of

Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20; minimum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £13,441 per sq.m at 2023 (which equates to the average sales density of the 'big four' foodstore operators); maximum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £9,818 per sq.m at 2023 (which equates to average sales density of Aldi and Lidl); maximum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £8,000 per sq.m at 2023 (which equates to lower end of typical discount operator performance); in 2021 prices

## Future Quantitative Comparison Goods Capacity

7.26 For comparison goods, we again assume that floorspace is 'in equilibrium' at the start of an assessment (i.e. its turnover is in line with expectations, and that the sector has evolved to meet local/regional needs).

7.27 Our assessment estimates that the comparison goods turnover of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas is £583.1m at 2023. Once inflow is taken into account, we estimate that there will be a nil comparison goods surplus at 2023. Thereafter, a modest surplus of £1.9m is identified at 2028, increasing to £12.4m at 2033, £24.3m at 2038, and £34.2m at 2041.

**Table 7.5: Quantitative Capacity for Comparison Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas**

Year	Benchmark Turnover (£m)	Available Expenditure (£m)	Inflow (£m)	Surplus Expenditure (£m)
2023	583.1	578.2	4.9	0.0
2028	628.7	625.3	5.3	1.9
2033	716.1	722.4	6.1	12.4
2038	822.2	839.4	7.1	24.3
2041	893.2	919.6	7.8	34.2

Source: Table 26a of Appendix 5

Notes: Assumes constant market share (35.7%) of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities either the South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse authority area; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Figure 4b of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20; in 2021 prices

7.28 Once more, the above assessment does not take into consideration existing commitments and the claim they make on capacity. Table 7.6 summarises current extant planning permissions that provide for additional comparison goods floorspace.

**Table 7.6 Committed Comparison Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas**

Location	Planning Application Reference	Net Comp Sales (sq.m)	Comp Sales Density (£ per sq.m)	Estimate Turnover at 2022 (£m)
Land at former Didcot A Power Station, Purchas Road, Didcot	P19/V1472/FUL	9,200	4000	36.8
Land to the north east of Didcot	P15/S2902/O	560	4000	2.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>9,760</b>		<b>39.0</b>

Source: Table 6c of Appendix 5

Notes: Net sales area and estimated sales density reflect operator (or likely operator); in 2021 prices

7.29 As the below Table 7.6 identifies, the allowance made in respect of the turnover of commitments is significant and acts to extinguish any requirement for additional comparison goods to 2041 across the combined South and Vale area.

**Table 7.7: Quantitative Capacity for Comparison Goods Floorspace in the Two Authority Areas After Commitments**

Year	Surplus (£m)	Commitments (£m)	Residual (£m)	Floorspace Requirement	
				Minimum (sq.m)	Maximum (sq.m)
2023	0.0	39.0	-39.0	-6,500	-11,200
2028	1.9	42.1	-40.1	-6,200	-10,600
2033	12.4	47.9	-35.6	-4,800	-8,300
2038	24.3	55.0	-30.8	-3,600	-6,200
2041	34.2	59.8	-25.6	-2,800	-4,800

Source: Table 26d of Appendix 5

Notes: Assumes constant market share (35.7%) of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Table 4a of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 19; minimum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £6,000 per sq.m at 2023; maximum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £3,500 per sq.m at 2023; in 2021 prices

### Future Quantitative Comparison Goods Capacity in Each Authority Area

7.30 Table 7.8 below sets out the residual comparison expenditure capacity apparent in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse respectively.

7.31 As is evident from Table 7.8, no quantitative need for additional comparison goods floorspace is identified within Vale of White Horse across the plan period to 2041. However, in South Oxfordshire from 2033 we identify limited capacity equating to between 600 sq.m and 1,100 sq.m of additional comparison floorspace, which increases to between 1,900 sq.m and 3,200 sq.m of floorspace at 2041.

**Table 7.8: Quantitative Capacity for Comparison Goods Floorspace in Each Authority Area after Commitments**

Year	Surplus (£m)	Commitments (£m)	Residual (£m)	Floorspace Requirement	
				Minimum (sq.m)	Maximum (sq.m)
<b>South Oxfordshire</b>					
2023	0.0	2.2	-2.2	-400	-600
2028	1.2	2.4	-1.2	-200	-300
2033	7.5	2.8	4.7	600	1,100
2038	14.7	3.2	11.5	1,400	2,300
2041	20.7	3.4	17.3	1,900	3,200
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>					
2023	0.0	36.8	-36.8	-6,100	-10,500
2028	0.8	39.7	-38.9	-6,000	-10,300
2033	4.9	45.2	-40.3	-5,500	-9,400
2038	9.6	51.9	-42.3	-5,000	-8,600
2041	13.5	56.4	-42.9	-4,700	-8,000

Notes: Assumes constant market share of Study Area expenditure claimed by facilities in each respective Authority Area, at 14.3% in South Oxfordshire and 15.1% in Vale of White Horse; allows for changes in benchmark turnover sales efficiency in accordance with Figure 4a of Experian Retail Planner Briefing Note 20; minimum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £6,000 per sq.m at 2023; maximum floorspace requirement based on an assumed sales density of £3,500 per sq.m at 2023; in 2021 prices

7.32 We provide further commentary in respect of comparison goods capacity in the concluding Section 9 of this report.

## Convenience and Comparison Qualitative Requirements

7.33 It is useful to compare the estimated turnover of foodstores at 2023 with their expected benchmark trading performance. The benchmark turnover of foodstores is calculated with reference to GlobalData Convenience and Comparison Goods Sales Densities of Major Grocers and Mintel Retail Rankings data<sup>26</sup>. Full details of our methodology in this regard and the associated inputs are set out at Table 5 of Appendix 5.

7.34 The trading performance of principal foodstores is identified by the below Table 7.9.

**Table 7.9 Performance of Convenience Goods Floorspace at Principal Foodstores at 2023**

Zone	Store	Benchmark Turnover (£m)	Survey Derived Turnover (£m)	Performance Relative to Benchmark (£m)
1	Tesco Extra, Marcham Road, Abingdon, OX14 1TU	50.3	85.0	34.7
1	Lidl, Marcham Road, Abingdon, OX14 1TP	7.5	13.7	6.2
2	Waitrose, Abbey Close, Abingdon, OX14 3HL	26.3	31.3	5.0
4	Aldi, Henry Blake Way, Faringdon, SN7 7GQ	9.9	35.6	25.6
4	Tesco, Park Road, Faringdon, SN7 7BP	11.4	26.7	15.4
5	Sainsbury's, Limborough Road, Wantage, OX12 9AJ	28.3	48.8	20.5
5	Waitrose, Wallingford Street, Wantage, OX12 8BD	16.0	17.0	1.0
6	Sainsbury's, Central Drive, Didcot, OX11 7ND	35.6	48.8	13.3
6	Tesco Superstore, Wallingford Road, North Moreton, Didcot	24.9	41.5	16.5
6	Aldi, Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8ET	9.3	37.0	27.7
7	Waitrose, St. Martins Street, Wallingford, OX10 0EF	27.4	41.6	14.2
7	Lidl, Lupton Road, Wallingford, OX10 9BS	9.2	30.2	21.0
9	Waitrose, Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames RG9 2BA	20.8	30.9	10.1
10	Tesco Superstore, Reading Road, Henley-on-Thames RG9 4HA	24.1	40.2	16.0
12	Asda, London Road, Wheatley, Oxford OX33 1YZ	27.3	27.4	0.1
13	Waitrose, Greyhound Lane, Thame OX9 3ZD	25.0	40.5	15.5
13	Co-op, High Street, Thame, OX9 2BU	11.1	1.2	-9.9

Source: Table 5 of Appendix 5

Notes: The above summary table provides details of the trading performance of foodstores with a net convenience goods sales area of 850 sq.m or above; in 2021 prices

7.35 Our assessment estimates that, after inflow is accounted for, convenience goods retail facilities in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse turn over £767.6m at 2023, which is substantially higher than their expected benchmark turnover of £547.6m. In examining the performance of specific stores, it is evident that Aldi's discount supermarkets are performing particularly strongly and that the performance of food superstores<sup>27</sup> is also generally good<sup>28</sup>.

7.36 There are a total of seven food superstores across the authority area, which collectively have an estimated convenience goods turnover of £333.3m at 2023, which is higher than their anticipated benchmark turnover of £218.0m. Our assessment identifies that all of the seven large food superstores 'overtrade', with the highest levels of overtrading being felt at the Tesco Extra at Marcham Road in Abingdon and Sainsbury's at Limborough Road in Wantage. The collective level of overtrading at these large superstores is notably high (particularly given current economic conditions which mean that shoppers are increasingly switching to shop at discount foodstores).

<sup>26</sup> These datasets provide independent analysis of key grocery retailers' declared turnover and the overall floorspace in their portfolio in order to calculate national average sales densities.

<sup>27</sup> Defined as having a net sales area of more than 2,500 sq.m.

<sup>28</sup> In this regard it should be noted that, whilst household survey respondents have in the past perhaps been slightly reluctant to acknowledge that they undertake their main food shop at a discounter, this no longer appears to be the case. In addition, our methodology apportions convenience goods expenditure to foodstore destinations according to their identified market share. The methodology does not take into consideration that similar items are generally cheaper in Aldi and Lidl than in one of the 'big four' operators' stores. As such, the performance of discount operators is probably overstated and the performance of the 'big four' operators is probably understated.

- 7.37 The food superstore with the strongest performance is the Tesco Extra on Marcham Road in Abingdon, which has an estimated convenience goods benchmark turnover of £50.3m at 2023 and an estimated survey-derived turnover of £85.0m. We therefore estimate that the Tesco Extra store is overtrading by around £34.7m. The weakest performing food superstore when compared to its expected benchmark average is the Asda at London Road in Wheatley, which has an anticipated benchmark turnover of £27.3m and a survey-derived turnover of £27.4m. This store is therefore essentially trading around its expected benchmark level.
- 7.38 As set out above, when considered cumulatively across the Study Area, convenience goods destinations overtrade significantly relative to their anticipated benchmark performance. Whilst some of this overtrading is attributable to the largest superstores, it is also evident that discount operators in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse generally perform strongly. As Table 7.9 identifies, the Aldi foodstores in Didcot and Faringdon, and the Lidl in Wallingford, all trade significantly above benchmark level.
- 7.39 The identified position in respect of overtrading indicates that there may be some qualitative benefit in increasing the provision of convenience facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to provide residents with additional options.
- 7.40 We note that most operators are represented across the authority areas with Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose all occupying large format stores, and the likes of Co-op, Sainsbury's and Tesco trading from smaller local convenience store formats. Whilst there may be opportunity for some such retailers to bring forward additional stores in areas likely to be the subject of significant residential growth, it is in the discount foodstore sector where there is likely to be significant operator interest.
- 7.41 In this regard, current discount foodstore provision is relatively modest, with Aldi having representation in Didcot and Faringdon and Lidl having representation in Abingdon and Wallingford. Furthermore, as noted in Section 2 of this report, Lidl has a number of current requirements to expand its portfolio, with Abingdon North, Botley, Didcot, Faringdon, Henley-on-Thames and Thame being of interest.
- 7.42 Providing for a new foodstore in a sustainable location could assist in 'levelling out' some of the identified overtrading and provide for additional consumer choice within the authority area. We note that each of the seven principal centres<sup>29</sup> exhibits some degree of convenience goods overtrading and that each may be able to accommodate appropriately scaled additional convenience goods provision (subject to this being delivered in a sustainable location and there being no unacceptable town centre impacts).
- 7.43 The greatest level of convenience goods overtrading is apparent in Abingdon, Didcot, Faringdon and Wallingford, and these centres therefore provide the greatest opportunity in terms of providing additional customer choice. We note that planning permission has been granted for two discount foodstores in Abingdon and Grove (the latter will also help meet needs arising in Wantage), and that two extant permissions exist for foodstores in Didcot. However, the identified level of overtrading is above and beyond this level of committed provision and operator interest is therefore likely to remain strong.
- 7.44 Any proposals for additional convenience goods floorspace should be considered on their own merits in accordance with the relevant planning policy tests. Most particularly, planning applications which seek to provide additional food retail provision should be considered having regard to potential *sequentially preferable* alternative sites, and with reference to the magnitude of impacts arising at any defined centre. The potential qualitative

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<sup>29</sup> Didcot, Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford in South Oxfordshire, and Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage in Vale of White Horse.



benefits associated with any improvement in customer choice can also be afforded some weight in the decision-making process.

- 7.45 Turning to comparison goods, the principal centres of Abingdon and Didcot have a generally strong comparison goods offer which is able to meet a range of needs arising across the Study Area. However, the offer apparent within these centres (and in smaller centres) is impacted by the role of higher order destinations just beyond the Study Area (principally Oxford and Reading). Given the level of leakage outside the Study Area, there may be a future opportunity to improve provision to 'claw back' some of this expenditure.
- 7.46 In this regard, we note the work being undertaken by key stakeholders with interests in Abingdon town centre in order to improve the retail provision within the centre and diversify its overall offer (through the emerging Central Abingdon Regeneration Framework, which identifies an overarching vision and provides a structure to allow parties to work together to improve the centre). This could potentially help Abingdon's market share to increase going forward. Elsewhere, the regeneration of key buildings and public areas in centres such as Wantage and Wallingford could also help in drawing trade back into centres. Notwithstanding these opportunities, we do not envisage that a significant 'step change' will occur in respect of the retention of comparison goods expenditure within the defined Study Area.

## 8. Assessment of Leisure Capacity

### Commercial Leisure: Bingo, Cinemas, Ten Pin Bowling and Casinos

- 8.1 Our approach to the assessment of commercial leisure needs necessarily departs from our retail methodology, in part because it is difficult to source some of the required information to undertake a similar exercise for the leisure sector<sup>30</sup>. In addition, the commercial leisure sector is different to the retail sector; large-scale leisure uses are relatively limited in number and customers often expect to travel at least some distance in order to access them. As such, we believe it is sensible to consider the general appropriateness of provision on a Study Area basis, with reference to the typical number of persons required to support particular uses.
- 8.2 Our assessment considers the typical population required to support bingo halls, casinos, cinema screens and ten pin bowling alleys, and is based around three key stages.
- 8.3 We firstly calculate the expected Study Area and local authority population for the relevant reporting years (2023, 2028, 2033, 2038 and 2041).
- 8.4 We then calculate the number of persons required to support a bingo hall, casino, cinema screen and bowling alley nationally, across the UK. We have identified the current level of provision across the UK with reference to the following sources:
- Mintel’s Casinos and Bingo UK report (March 2019), which identifies that there are 350 bingo halls and 145 casinos across the UK;
  - the UK Cinema Association website<sup>31</sup> which identifies that there are 4,637 cinema screens across the UK; and
  - Mintel’s Ten Pin Bowling UK report (May 2017), which identifies that there are 5,242 bowling lanes across the UK.
- 8.5 We then apply the respective ratio to the Study Area population and to the population of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas in order to gauge the benchmark level of provision based in the position across the UK.
- 8.6 We supplement our assessment with an overview of current patterns of commercial leisure trips throughout the Study Area (as identified by the NEMS household survey of July 2022) in order to help identify any qualitative deficiencies in provision.

### Bingo

- 8.7 Mintel’s March 2019 Casinos and Bingo UK report identifies that there are 350 bingo halls across the UK, which equates to a bingo hall for every 193,840 persons or thereabouts<sup>32</sup>. Accordingly, we estimate that the Study Area could theoretically support around 2.5 bingo halls at 2023, increasing to around 2.6 bingo halls at 2041.
- 8.8 We estimate that the population of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse is around 61.7% of that of the Study Area as a whole at 2023. Therefore, on a pro rata basis, we calculate a need for around 1.5 bingo halls in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse at 2023, a figure which increases only slightly to 1.7 halls at 2041.

<sup>30</sup> Experian does not forecast improvements in sales efficiency for leisure operators, which is a critical element in translating a monetary surplus into a floorspace requirement.

<sup>31</sup> [www.cinemauk.org.uk](http://www.cinemauk.org.uk), consulted on 31 May 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Based on 2020-Based Population Projections by the Office for National Statistics which identify a UK population of 67,844,000 persons at 2023.

8.9 At present, there is a single bingo hall in either authority area, this being the Coronte Bingo on Broadway in Didcot.

8.10 Unsurprisingly, the results from the household survey indicate that the most frequently visited bingo hall is Coronte Bingo (which was the destination for 52.1% of previous visits), followed by Buzz Bingo on Worting Road in Basingstoke (with an 8.4% market share) and Buzz Bingo on Ozone Leisure Park at Grenoble Road in Oxford (1.7%). It should also be noted that respondents also reported visiting more ‘ad-hoc’ facilities to play bingo, including occasional games at village and community halls. Others may also play online.

8.11 Table 8.1 identifies bingo hall capacity across the Study Area and within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse over the period to 2041.

**Table 8.1: Bingo Hall Capacity in Study Area and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**

Year	Study Area Population	Typical Population Required to Support Hall	Potential Number of Halls Supported in the Study Area	Proportion of Study Area Population in the Two Authority Areas (%)	Potential Number of Halls Supported in the Two Authority Areas	Outstanding Potential Capacity in the Two Authority Areas
2023	478,568	193,840	2.5	61.7%	1.5	0.5
2028	489,377	193,840	2.5	62.2%	1.6	0.6
2033	496,918	193,840	2.6	62.6%	1.6	0.6
2038	503,514	193,840	2.6	62.9%	1.6	0.6
2041	507,859	193,840	2.6	63.0%	1.7	0.7

Note: Typical population to support bingo hall calculated with reference to the Mintel Casinos and Bingo UK 2019 report and to the ONS 2023 population forecasts for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

8.12 Limited quantitative capacity is identified for additional bingo facilities within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White. At 2023, this need equates to 0.5 bingo halls, increasing to 0.7 bingo halls at 2041. However, it is important to recognise that existing facilities in Basingstoke and Oxford help serve the needs of the Study Area.

8.13 Furthermore, in considering the potential need for additional bingo facilities, it should also be noted that the sector was significantly affected by the ban on smoking in enclosed workplaces which came into force in 2007 following the enactment of the Health Act 2006. Subsequent to the Act being enforced, new bingo hall openings have been rare, and we consider it highly unlikely that there will be any proposals to provide additional facilities in the Study Area in the foreseeable future.

## Cinemas

8.14 The UK Cinema Association website estimates that there are 4,637 cinema screens in the UK<sup>33</sup>, which equates to one screen for every 14,631 persons or thereabouts. On this basis, we estimate that the Study Area population could support around 32.7 cinema screens at 2023, increasing to around 34.7 screens at 2041.

8.15 Once more, we estimate that the population of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse is around 61.7% of that of the Study Area at 2023. On a pro rata basis, this equates to a need for around 20.2 screens in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse at 2023, increasing to around 21.9 screens at 2041.

8.16 There are a limited range of cinema operators in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, including five screens at Cineworld on Station Road in Didcot, three screens at Regal Picturehouse on Boroma Way in Henley-on-Thames, and single screens at the Abbey Cinema in Abingdon, Faringdon Regent Cinema in Faringdon, and the Corn Exchange in Wallingford. Accordingly, we estimate that there is a potential requirement for around nine additional

<sup>33</sup> At 2022.

screens in the two authority areas at 2023, increasing to 11 screens at 2041 with reference to national average levels of provision.

- 8.17 Although this would suggest that there is an existing under-supply of cinema screens in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, it should be noted that just beyond the boundary of the authority areas are a number of cinemas, including Empire on Drakes Way in Swindon, Vue on Riverside Road in Reading and Vue at Ozone Leisure Park in Oxford. These cinemas, along with other operators in close proximity to South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, provide a further 81 screens. It is clear from the household survey that such cinemas are well used by Study Area residents. It should also be noted that, as is often the case in less urban areas, film screenings also take place in community centres, church halls and other venues across the South and Vale area. This also helps meet some local needs.
- 8.18 In this context, we do not believe that there is a pressing requirement for additional cinema facilities in the South and Vale area. However, any such operators with an interest in the area will be able to make submissions as part of the Joint Local Plan consultation process to set out their requirements and future aspirations.
- 8.19 In practice, the greatest potential for further facilities may exist in the centres of Abingdon, Didcot and Henley-on-Thames, noting that ‘boutique’ cinema operators, such as Everyman, are increasingly interested in smaller town centres, particularly when they are able to offer an attractive environment to support an evening economy offer. The ‘boutique’ model usually comprises three or four cinema screens together with a string food and drink offer. Such cinemas can also act as a catalyst for other leisure operators to consider locating within a centre.

**Table 8.2: Cinema Screen Capacity in Study Area and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**

Year	Study Area Population	Typical Population Required to Support Cinema Screen	Potential Number of Cinema Screens Supported by Study Area	Proportion of Study Area Population in the Two Authority Areas (%)	Potential Number of Cinema Screens Supported in the Two Authority Areas	Outstanding Potential Capacity in the Two Authority Areas
2023	478,568	14,631	32.7	61.7%	20.2	9.2
2028	489,377	14,631	33.4	62.2%	20.8	9.8
2033	496,918	14,631	34.0	62.6%	21.3	10.3
2038	503,514	14,631	34.4	62.9%	21.7	10.7
2041	507,859	14,631	34.7	63.0%	21.9	10.9

Note: Typical population to support a cinema screen calculated with reference to data provided by the UK Cinema Association website and to the ONS 2023 population forecasts for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

- 8.20 Again, looking at the results of the household survey, the most visited cinema destinations within the Study Area are the Cineworld on Station Road in Didcot (the destination for 9.2% of all respondents’ last visit), the Regal Picturehouse in Henley-on-Thames (6.1%), and The Abbey Cinema in Abingdon (5.4%).
- 8.21 Looking further afield, a total of 70.3% of respondents are visiting destinations located outside of the authority areas, with the most visited destinations being Vue at Ozone Leisure Park in Oxford (17.5% of all respondents’ last visit) and Cineworld on Denmark Street in High Wycombe (6.6% of all respondents, albeit all such visits originate within Zones 11 and 13 which are largely located outside of the South and Vale area). Trips to such cinemas are considered to be generally reflective of sustainable travel patterns and reflect the Study Area boundary and many respondents’ relative proximity to neighbouring higher order centres.

## Ten Pin Bowling

- 8.22 Mintel’s Ten Pin Bowling UK 2017 report identifies that there are 5,242 ten pin bowling lanes across the UK, which equates to a bowling lane for every 12,942 persons or thereabouts.
- 8.23 Accordingly, we estimate that the Study Area could support around 37.0 bowling lanes at 2023, increasing to around 39.2 lanes at 2041. Given that the estimated population of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse is around 61.7% of that of the Study Area at 2023, we estimate that there is capacity to support around 22.8 bowling lanes in the two authority areas at 2022, increasing to 24.7 lanes at 2041.
- 8.24 We note that there are no existing ten-pin bowling operators within either South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. As such, as set out above, we identify a theoretical requirement for 22.8 lanes at 2023, which increases to 24.7 lanes at 2041.
- 8.25 However, once again, it is necessary to put this into context with reference to the location of neighbouring bowling destinations just outside of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. These facilities, which include Tenpin Swindon on Whitehill Way in Swindon and Hollywood Bowl at Ozone Leisure Park in Oxford, provide a substantial number of bowling lanes. These facilities are currently meeting demand which arises within the South and Vale area.
- 8.26 This is evidenced by the household survey, which shows that all bowling trips originating in the Study Area are directed towards bowling lanes outside of the authority area. The most visited destination located outside the study area is the Hollywood Bowl at Ozone Leisure Park in Oxford (61.6% of all respondents), followed by Tenpin Swindon on Whitehill Way at Shaw Ridge Leisure Park in Swindon.
- 8.27 Whilst very few new ten-pin bowling alleys were built in the early part of this century, the market has picked up in recent years. This upturn in the sector has been partly assisted by a more modern type of offer, which is typically ‘in centre’ and aimed at those going out in the evening as well as families. As such, modern bowling alleys often incorporate other forms of leisure activity, most notably through a strong food and drink offer. This is the case with Spinners in Reading and is also the trading model of other operators such as Lane 7 and Roxy Ball Room.

**Table 8.3: Ten Pin Bowling Lane Capacity in Study Area and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**

Year	Study Area Population	Typical Population Required to Support Bowling Lane	Potential Number of Bowling Lanes Supported by Study Area	Proportion of Study Area Population in the Two Authority Areas (%)	Potential Number of Bowling Lanes Supported in the Two Authority Areas	Outstanding Potential Capacity in the Two Authority Areas
2023	478,568	12,942	37.0	61.7%	22.8	22.8
2028	489,377	12,942	37.8	62.2%	23.5	23.5
2033	496,918	12,942	38.4	62.6%	24.0	24.0
2038	503,514	12,942	38.9	62.9%	24.5	24.5
2041	507,859	12,942	39.2	63.0%	24.7	24.7

Note: Typical population to support ten pin bowling alley calculated with reference to the Mintel Ten Pin Bowling UK 2017 report and to the ONS 2023 population forecasts for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

## Casinos

- 8.28 Mintel’s Casinos and Bingo UK 2018 report identifies that there are 145 casinos across the UK, which equates to a casino for every 467,890 persons or thereabouts. Accordingly, we estimate that the Study Area could support around 1.0 casino at 2022, a figure which would barely change throughout the Study period. Given that the estimated population of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse is around 61.7% of that of the Study Area at

2023, we identify a quantitative requirement for around 0.6 casinos at 2022, increasing only slightly to 0.7 casinos at 2041.

- 8.29 Given the relatively limited demand to support casino provision in the authority areas (and the location of higher order centres just outside the area), it is unsurprising that there are no casinos within either South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. The nearest provision comprises Admiral Casino in High Wycombe and Genting Casino in Reading. We do not envisage significant operator interest in providing new casinos across the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse area.

**Table 8.4: Casino Capacity in Study Area and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**

Year	Study Area Population	Typical Population Required to Support a Casino	Potential Number of Casinos Supported by Study Area	Proportion of Study Area Population in the Two Authority Areas (%)	Potential Number of Casinos Supported in the Two Authority Areas	Outstanding Potential Capacity in the Two Authority Areas
2023	478,568	467,890	1.0	61.7%	0.6	0.6
2028	489,377	467,890	1.0	62.2%	0.7	0.7
2033	496,918	467,890	1.1	62.6%	0.7	0.7
2038	503,514	467,890	1.1	62.9%	0.7	0.7
2041	507,859	467,890	1.1	63.0%	0.7	0.7

Note: Typical population to support casino calculated with reference to the Mintel Casinos and Bingo UK 2018 report and to the ONS 2023 population forecasts for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

## Food and Drink Uses

- 8.30 Food and drink uses are not typically the subject of a quantitative assessment due to the difficulties in forecasting future growth in the sector over time (and an absence of data relating to how existing operators may need to increase their trading efficiency in the future in order to remain profitable).
- 8.31 In addition, most new food and drink uses are relatively small-scale and can be readily accommodated within a centre (through the reoccupation or refurbishment of existing premises) without the need for any planning policy-led intervention.
- 8.32 As such, our consideration of the current food and drink offer within the authority areas is a qualitative assessment, based on the strength of the current offer and the opportunities that may exist to attract further operators in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

## Pubs, Bars and Nightclubs

- 8.33 Table 8.5 identifies the destinations last travelled to by Study Area residents to visit pubs, bars and nightclubs. In this regard, the most visited destination in the Study Area is Abingdon town centre, which was the location for 11.9% of most recent visits originating from within the Study Area. The second most popular destination is Oxford city centre (identified by 6.9% of respondents as the destination for their last visit to a pub, bar or nightclub), followed then by Wallingford town centre (identified by 6.7% of respondents).
- 8.34 A common theme across the Study Area is that market share is highly concentrated within the zone in which residents are located. For example, Faringdon's market share of pub, bar and nightclub trips in Zone 4 (within which it is located) is 42.9%, but the destination has limited penetration across other zones. This pattern is also repeated for Abingdon, Didcot, Henley-on-Thames, Thame, Wallingford and Wantage. Each town's catchment as a pub, bar and nightclub destination is tightly focused geographically.

8.35 It should also be noted that, within the zones which most closely relate to the South and Vale area (i.e. Zones 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10), a high proportion of pub, bar and nightclub trips are directed to destinations within the two authority areas. This is reflective of such trips being generally undertaken close to home with convenient travel being a key consideration. A notable number of trips are directed to Oxford (which secures a market share of 6.9% of such trips originating from the Study Area) and London (3.8%). However, this is inevitable given the scale of these centres and the experience they provide as a result. Trips to such centres are not considered symptomatic of any general deficiency in respect of the offer in the two authority areas.

**Table 8.5: Market Share of Trips to Pubs, Bars and Nightclubs**

Zone	Venue	Total	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
2	Abingdon Town Centre	11.9%	64.7%	60.6%	44.7%	0.0%	1.8%	7.9%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%
4	Faringdon Town Centre	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	42.9%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Highworth	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	14.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
5	Wantage Town Centre	4.8%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	0.9%	51.9%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.9%	0.0%
6	Didcot Town Centre	5.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.5%	52.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%
7	Wallingford Town Centre	6.7%	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	44.6%	0.0%	6.8%	2.7%	3.9%	16.4%	0.8%
9	Henley-on-Thames	5.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.7%	14.1%	81.6%	30.0%	0.8%	1.0%	0.0%
11	Chinnor	2.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	24.1%	0.0%	3.0%
	Princes Risborough	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	22.9%	0.0%	3.7%
13	Haddenham	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.1%
	Thame	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.7%	4.9%	36.1%
Outside Study Area	Oxford City Centre	6.9%	17.9%	8.5%	21.3%	2.0%	4.3%	15.2%	8.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	13.3%	3.7%
	London	3.8%	0.0%	1.4%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.2%	0.0%	1.3%	4.4%	0.0%	5.2%
	Marlow	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	13.0%	5.4%	0.0%	1.5%

Note: Market share derived from 2022 NEMS household survey 'weighted and filtered' results; table includes all destinations inside and outside the Study Area that secure either the highest or second-highest market share in any of the 13 zones

### Cafés and Restaurants

8.36 In respect of trips to cafés and restaurants, Abingdon town centre is once more the most popular destination, securing 11.5% of Study Area respondents' most recent visit to such attractions. The second most visited destination across the Study Area is Henley-on-Thames, which secures a market share of 9.4% of such trips, followed then by Oxford city centre (8.5%).

8.37 The below Table 8.6 identifies that Abingdon's market share is highly concentrated within Zones 1, 2 and 3 (which are well related to Abingdon). Within these zones, Abingdon respectively secures 69.4%, 60.7% and 37.7% of trips to cafes and restaurants. Across the remaining 10 zones, Abingdon's market share is relatively limited. This indicates that the town's appeal as a restaurant destination is relatively focused.

**Table 8.6: Market Share of Trips to Cafés and Restaurants**

Zone	Venue	Total	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
2	Abingdon Town Centre	11.5 %	69.4 %	60.7 %	37.7 %	0.0%	3.7%	8.3%	0.0%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	3.3%
4	Farington Town Centre	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	24.2 %	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Highworth	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	14.5 %	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
5	Wantage Town Centre	4.6%	0.6%	0.0%	0.7%	1.9%	49.0 %	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%
6	Didcot Town Centre	7.7%	4.6%	10.2 %	4.3%	0.0%	10.2 %	63.9 %	6.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	0.0%
7	Wallingford Town Centre	7.4%	0.0%	6.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	8.2%	50.1 %	0.6%	0.9%	4.0%	3.4%	13.5 %	0.6%
9	Henley-on-Thames	9.4%	2.8%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	22.9 %	88.5 %	42.6 %	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
11	Princes Risborough	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	28.9 %	0.0%	0.6%
13	Thame	5.7%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	19.5 %	0.9%	40.3 %
OSA	Aylesbury Town Centre	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%	0.0%	13.2 %
	London City Centre	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%	11.2 %	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	4.4%	0.0%	0.0%	6.6%
	Reading Town Centre	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	12.3 %	6.7%	0.0%	11.6 %	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Maidenhead Town Centre	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	21.9 %	1.9%	0.8%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	Oxford City Centre	8.5%	5.2%	12.1 %	31.6 %	1.0%	10.9 %	8.6%	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	36.3 %	3.0%

Note: Market share derived from 2022 NEMS household survey 'weighted and filtered' results; table includes all destinations inside and outside the Study Area that secure either the highest or second-highest market share in any of the 13 zones.

8.38 Turning to destinations outside the Study Area, Oxford city centre (which is the second most visited destination by respondents) is the most popular café and restaurant destination for residents of Zone 12 (securing 36.3% of the most recent trips arising in this zone). Oxford city centre is also the second most popular destination for café and restaurant trips originating within Zones 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6. Other destinations with a notable market share include Maidenhead town centre (securing an overall Study Area market share of 3.8%) and Reading town centre (3.4%), albeit this again reflects the geography of the Study Area and the fact that it includes parts of neighbouring authority areas.

8.39 In reviewing the market shares for visits to pubs, bars and nightclubs, and visits to cafés and restaurants, it is interesting to note that Henley-on-Thames town centre attracts a higher proportion of market share for trips to cafés and restaurants than it does in respect of pubs, bars and nightclubs. This perhaps reflects the character of the offer in the town and the affluent nature of the surrounding area which supports dining out.



## 9. Summary, Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

### Context

- 9.1 The principal purpose of the Study is to understand future retail and leisure needs, and to provide policy recommendations to assist South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with the preparation of the forthcoming Joint Local Plan.
- 9.2 The Joint Local Plan will set out the authorities' strategy in respect of delivering new future growth in respect of a range of new development, including housing, jobs, and main town centre uses. In order to ensure that commercial uses are delivered in sustainable locations, the Joint Local Plan will provide up to date policies in respect of town centre boundaries, the hierarchy of defined centres, and local impact thresholds for retail and leisure developments.

### Key Findings: Retail

#### Quantitative and Qualitative Capacity

- 9.3 As identified at Section 7, after account is taken of existing commitments, there is no identified surplus capacity to support additional convenience goods floorspace within the short, medium, and longer-term. Even by the end of the plan period at 2041, we estimate there is no capacity to support additional convenience goods floorspace across the South and Vale area. In actuality, given identified commitments, our assessment identifies that there is a negative convenience goods capacity requirement across the South and Vale area equivalent to between -3,100 sq.m and -4,300 sq.m of floorspace at 2041.
- 9.4 On an authority-wide basis, there is also no convenience goods requirement across either South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse across the entirety of the plan period.
- 9.5 Notwithstanding the above findings, convenience goods floorspace in the South and Vale area generally trades well and it is highly likely that both authority areas will be the subject of planning applications for additional convenience goods floorspace in the coming months and years. Given current commercial market interest, we anticipate that future planning applications may seek to deliver additional supermarkets, local convenience stores, and the extension of existing premises. There may also be some potential to re-use vacated comparison goods floorspace for convenience goods retail. We comment further on the recommended strategy in respect of future planning applications providing for additional convenience goods floorspace later in this section.
- 9.6 In respect of comparison goods, there is a nil requirement for additional floorspace to 2041 when the two authority areas are considered together, and account is taken of the future claim on expenditure attributable to commitments. However, when the South Oxfordshire area is considered in isolation, we identify capacity which could support between 600 sq.m and 1,100 sq.m of comparison goods floorspace at 2033, increasing to between 1,900 sq.m and 3,200 sq.m at 2041. The disparity in respect of future capacity in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse arises because the principal commitment accounted for is the planned redevelopment of Didcot Power Station. Taking account of the turnover of this commitment removes any positive requirement for floorspace in Vale of White Horse.
- 9.7 In practice, the estimated requirement up to 2041 in South Oxfordshire is relatively modest and not such that it would allow for the reoccupation of all vacant floorspace within the authority's centres. Clearly, the first priority will be to encourage the reuse, refurbishment or redevelopment of vacant floorspace within the authority area. Given the limited scale of the identified comparison goods requirement, there is no need to allocate additional

sites for comparison goods retail development over the plan period. In Vale of White Horse, our assessment identifies an effective over-supply of retail floorspace once identified commitments have been implemented (given that we have identified a negative comparison goods floorspace requirement for the District to 2041). This suggests a need to repurpose comparison goods units for other purposes (such as leisure uses or other suitable town centres uses).

9.8 Given the need to reoccupy and repurpose vacant units, careful consideration should be given to proposals for any further comparison goods floorspace which could impact on the vitality and viability of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse’s defined centres. The reuse and reoccupation of floorspace will both maximise the potential of existing land and buildings and help ensure that centres continue to be a focus for retail and commercial uses. This will support linked trips, reduce carbon emissions, and accord with sustainable development principles.

### Key Findings: Commercial Leisure

9.9 In terms of the leisure sector, we believe it to be unlikely that South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas will be the subject of strong developer interest in respect of additional bingo halls or casinos (these uses being of particular interest in respect of plan-making given the need for a substantial site to accommodate new provision).

9.10 Our capacity exercise has identified a quantitative need for additional cinema screens and ten pin bowling facilities within the authority areas. However, it is acknowledged that such operators generally seek to secure representation in higher order centres which benefit from strong evening economies and, in reality, residents will likely continue to visit facilities in Oxford, Reading and Swindon.

9.11 We do, however, believe that there may be some prospect of ‘boutique’ cinema operators being interested in the largest centres in the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authority areas. Such operators generally occupy sites of a comparatively modest size and can sometimes re-purpose existing units. Cinema operators are of particular value in driving footfall, underpinning the evening economy, and in attracting further food and beverage operators to a location. Given these benefits, it is important that large format leisure uses consider the opportunity provided by town centre sites in the first instance.

### Key Findings: Principal Centres

9.12 The Study has reviewed the vitality and viability of defined town and local service centres across the two authority areas. Our assessments have been undertaken with reference to the town centre healthcheck indicators set out at paragraph 006 of the Town Centres PPG.

9.13 We set out the overarching conclusions in respect of principal centres across the two authority areas below.

**Table 9.1: Overarching Town Centre Conclusions**

South Oxfordshire	
Didcot	Anchored by the Orchard Centre, Didcot town centre accommodates a good range of national multiple retailers, including Next, Sainsbury’s and TK Maxx, as well as key leisure operators such as Cineworld. The retail and service offer in Didcot is considered to be strong, and is able to meet the majority of needs arising in the area. The town centre also has a strong cultural offer, underpinned by the Cornerstone Art Centre. The retail offer in the town centre has changed considerably since 2013, particularly through the opening of the extension to the Orchard Centre which commenced trading in March 2018. Whilst there has been an increase in vacancies since 2013, the vacancy rate remains lower than the national average rate and is not a particular cause for concern. Accordingly, Didcot is considered to be a largely vital and viable centre.

Henley-on-Thames	Henley-on-Thames is anchored by a diverse range of operators, which provide for general needs and also cater for custom arising from tourist visitors. The town's convenience goods offer is anchored by a Waitrose foodstore on Bell Street. Henley-on-Thames also supports a reasonably strong range of food and drink operators. The offer of the centre is supplemented by a diverse and established events programme which means that visitors are drawn from outside the local catchment area. This function also clearly has benefit in terms of supporting retail and service providers in the centre. By virtue of the town's strong comparison goods and leisure service offer, it is evident that there is a good level of activity in the centre. The town centre vacancy rate has remained generally stable since 2013 and Henley-on-Thames is considered to be a highly vital and viable centre.
Thame	Thame town centre is located in the far north-west of the South Oxfordshire authority area, close to the border with Buckinghamshire. Thame is therefore somewhat geographically isolated from other centres in the authority area. Notwithstanding this, the retail offer in the town comprises a diverse range of independent operators, as well as key national multiples including Boots and retail banks. The centre's offer is anchored by the Waitrose foodstore (at Greyhound Walk, to the north of High Street) and by a smaller Sainsbury's (on High Street itself). Thame benefits from a good level of activity, high occupancy rates, and a diverse retail and service offer. It is similarly considered to be a highly vital and viable centre.
Wallingford	Wallingford is a historic and charming market town, focused around the Market Place and High Street. The town centre itself is situated to the east of the River Thames, and the town is relatively centrally located in South Oxfordshire. The town's catchment area is impacted by the presence of Didcot, which is located a short distance to the west. Wallingford town centre's offer is geared towards serving the needs of the local community, as opposed to a wider catchment area. In this regard, the Waitrose on St Martin's Street is of importance in meeting local grocery needs in a central and accessible location. The vacancy rate in the town centre is low and Wallingford is also considered to be a vital and viable centre.
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>	
Abingdon	Abingdon town centre is located in the eastern part of the Vale of White Horse authority area, close to the border with South Oxfordshire. As such, Abingdon is a key centre serving residents of both authority areas. Focused around Bury Street and High Street, the town centre supports a range of service and retail operators, including national multiples. Since 2012, there has been a significant reduction in the overall quantum of comparison goods units in the town centre, with the proportion of comparison goods units falling from 36.3% to 23.2%. Notable closures have included Beales, M&Co and Peacocks. Whilst the loss of comparison goods operators from the centre is to some degree symptomatic of wider trends, the contraction in the comparison sector in Abingdon is particularly notable. However, the decline in comparison goods provision in the centre has been mitigated by an increase in Abingdon's leisure service offer (which now includes 13 cafes, 13 restaurants, and 11 bars and public houses). It is considered that there is further scope for food and drink provision. At the time of our visit, 12.6% of units in the town centre were vacant, which is slightly lower than the current national average. There would be benefit in reducing the vacancy rate and Abingdon's vitality and viability is currently considered to be moderate.
Botley	Botley is situated approximately 2 kilometres to the west of Oxford city centre and, in practice, functions as part of the Oxford urban area. The centre is subject to ongoing redevelopment at West Way Square. Whilst the centre has a pleasant, attractive public realm and a strong range of operators, there is clearly a need to secure tenants for the additional units which have been delivered as part of the new development. It is inevitable that a development of this nature will take time to 'bed in'. In practice, this should be assisted by the significant student population which is now accommodated at West Way Square. The investment which has been delivered will be important in supporting the centre going forward. For the moment, it is considered a vital and viable centre, subject to new units securing appropriate operators.
Faringdon	Faringdon is a relatively small and historic market town focused around Market Place. Faringdon is characterised by heritage buildings and provides few modern units which are of a format and size that would appeal to national multiple retailers. Consequently, the majority of retailers are independents and national multiple grocery retailers (Aldi, Tesco and Waitrose) are all located out of centre. Whilst the recorded vacancy rate represents cause for concern, we note that there is developer interest in the area and that some key vacancies (including the Red Lion public house and the former Budgens store) are being brought back into active use (as part of retail and residential mixed-use schemes).
Grove	Grove local service centre is split into two distinct areas; one part being Grovelands Shopping Centre (which is anchored by a Co-op Foodstore), and the other Millbrook Square (anchored by Tesco Express). Our survey recorded two vacant units in Grove, both of which are located within the Grovelands Shopping Centre. Grovelands Shopping Centre is by far the quieter

	of the two locations and is generally reliant on its Co-op store to drive footfall and provide activity. We find that the vitality and viability of Grovelands Shopping Centre is rather fragile, but that Millbrook Square appears to trade well and is considered to be in good health.
Wantage	Centrally located within the Vale of White Horse authority area, Wantage is a key retail and service centre for residents. This is reflected in the centre’s diverse retail offer, which includes larger format national multiple operators at Kings Park Shopping Centre, as well as a more ‘traditional’ town centre offer around Market Place. Wantage is anchored by the Sainsbury’s superstore at King Park Shopping Centre and by its comparison goods offer. Whilst the proportion of comparison goods units has decreased since 2012, the proportion (of both units and floorspace) remains greater than national average level. The vacancy rate is approaching national average level and has increased in recent years. It should be monitored going forward with the aim of reducing it over the medium term. At the present time, Wantage town centre is considered to be relatively vital and viable.

## Future Town Centres and Retail Strategy

### Mix of Uses

9.14 We provide an overview of the mix of uses evident within centres below at Table 9.2. The two authorities’ principal centres are generally multi-functional, focused on day-to-day retail and service needs with a more extensive offer in the larger centres of Abingdon and Didcot. These centres retain a reasonably good range of comparison goods retailers, comprising both national multiples and local independents.

9.15 It is also notable that the centres of Henley, Thame, Wallingford and Wantage secure good representation from comparison goods retailers. These centres are generally assisted in this regard by their attractive character, which clearly helps attract both visitors and operators (Henley-on-Thames is a particularly good example of this in respect of the variety of its comparison goods offer). These centres are able to support some independent and specialist retailers which appreciably add to their identity and their overall offer.

9.16 Notwithstanding this, it is evident that the comparison goods function of centres has markedly reduced over the past decade. Whilst this is symptomatic of wider retailing trends, it will be particularly important to retain a critical mass of comparison goods retailers in the two authorities’ centres in order to maintain their ongoing function. Small to medium sized centres are particularly susceptible to the loss of comparison goods retailers as national multiples are increasingly serving the country from fewer stores (often relying on online to serve rural customers and secondary locations). It will be important to ensure that the retail offer of centres is not further diminished.

9.17 In planning policy terms, this can be assisted through policies to resist loss of town centre retail floorspace through changes of use<sup>34</sup>, and by the careful consideration of proposals for out of centre floorspace and the refusal of planning permission where unacceptable impacts would arise. There is a clear need for any retailer interest to be directed to in-centre locations (and the vacant premises lying therein) in the first instance.

**Table 9.2a: Mix of Uses Across Centres in South Oxfordshire**

Land Use	Didcot	Henley	Thame	Wallingford
Comparison	30.7%	34.1%	32.4%	33.8%
Convenience	8.4%	7.5%	10.3%	6.2%
Financial and Business	8.9%	13.5%	16.9%	10.8%
Leisure Service	23.5%	23.8%	15.4%	23.8%
Retail Service	16.8%	12.7%	19.9%	17.7%
Vacant	11.7%	8.3%	5.1%	7.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

<sup>34</sup> Albeit Use Class E allows significant flexibility between a variety of commercial uses with recourse to planning permission.

**Table 9.2b: Mix of Uses Across Centres in the Vale of White Horse**

Land Use	Abingdon	Faringdon	Wantage	Botley	Grove	Average Across All Nine Centres
Comparison	23.2%	20.3%	31.3%	22.2%	14.3%	29.7%
Convenience	5.6%	8.5%	6.0%	7.4%	17.9%	7.6%
Financial and Business	13.1%	8.5%	9.0%	11.1%	3.6%	11.7%
Leisure Service	24.2%	30.5%	18.7%	14.8%	25.0%	22.3%
Retail Service	21.2%	18.6%	21.7%	18.5%	32.1%	18.3%
Vacant	12.6%	13.6%	13.3%	25.9%	7.1%	10.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note: Composition of centres derived from Nexus Planning survey of June 2022

9.18 All principal centres in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse support a range of convenience goods retailers. For the most part, large format grocery retail has developed in proximity to the core of principal centres; this can play an important role in driving footfall and allowing other operators to benefit from linked trips. The exception to this is in Faringdon.

9.19 Faringdon’s convenience goods needs are principally served by the edge of centre Tesco, and the newer out of centre Aldi and Waitrose stores. We note that Faringdon has one of the higher vacancy rates of the centres surveyed and that it has a rather limited retail function generally. This demonstrates the negative effect that out of centre convenience retail can bring to the vitality of a market town. It reinforces the importance of applying town centre first policies for both Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Districts, and for investment in vacant units in Faringdon’s town centre.

9.20 Other settlements are increasingly subject to interest from grocery operators looking to provide further foodstore provision. This has recently been the case in Abingdon, Didcot and Grove. However, as we go on to explore in greater detail below, it will be important to ensure that further development is appropriately located in respect of the needs that it would serve and in respect of ensuring that no defined centre is the subject of a ‘significant adverse’ impact as a result of new entrants into the grocery market.

9.21 The provision of main food shopping destinations within and around defined centres is a key strength of centres across both authority areas and the benefit of retaining this should be given substantial weight when considering future convenience goods retail proposals.

9.22 In terms of service sectors, financial and business transactions have increasingly moved online and ‘bricks and mortar’ financial service provision has significantly reduced as a consequence. This trend will not be reversed. It will be important to ensure that premises previously put to such use are repurposed and brought back into active use. By way of example, former bank and building society premises can often be made into attractive bars and restaurants which are able to enhance a centre’s wider offer (including the evening economy).

9.23 Whilst the economic picture is currently challenging for hospitality operators, we consider that further potential exists to expand the leisure sector offer within the two authorities’ centres across the medium to longer term.

9.24 Regarding hospitality, we find that:

- the leisure service offer in Abingdon is sporadically located (with no particular concentration of such uses within the centre) and there may be potential to introduce further modern operators to the centre to enhance Abingdon’s reputation as a food and drink destination;

- Didcot already benefits from a good national multiple food and drink offer which is supported by the Cineworld cinema;
- Faringdon provides an attractive environment for eating and drinking, and has benefitted from new operators and concepts in recent years;
- Henley is a well-established leisure service venue, benefitting from both an attractive town centre and the riverside setting. It is likely to remain a very attractive setting to support further hospitality operators;
- Thame provides an attractive environment, but its food and drink offer seems rather limited. In this regard, we note that Thame supports just four cafes, four restaurants and three bars and public houses. As the above Table 9.2 identifies, the proportion of units dedicated to leisure service uses in Thame (15.4% of commercial units are in this use) is well below the average across the two authorities' centres (22.3%). There is clear potential to improve this and encourage new food and drink operators to open premises;
- Wallingford's food and drink offer is broadly in line with expectations, albeit there may be further potential to expand given the character of the centre and the presence of the Corn Exchange multi-purpose venue which helps drive footfall in the evening;
- Wantage's food and drink offer generally comprises traditional pubs and we believe that there is an opportunity to introduce more modern mid-market dining options, particularly given the level of residential growth in the area; and
- smaller centres such as Botley and Grove are more functional and, whilst opportunities to improve their leisure service provision should be taken, their potential is clearly more limited.

9.25 There is a significant differential in respect of the level of retail service provision apparent in centres. Henley has the least proportion of units dedicated to retail service uses (12.7%), with Grove having the greatest incidence (32.1%). This is reflective of retail services often being undertaken close to home (e.g. post offices, hairdressers, dry cleaning, and so on). Such services cannot generally be replicated online and they will continue to fulfil an important role in supporting centres. Additional retail service provision should be encouraged in all centres, particularly where vacancy rates are above average and vacant properties can be brought back into active use.

9.26 It is highly unlikely that there will be substantial comparison goods retail development coming forward within the local authority areas across the plan period. In practice, some such in-centre retailers may close. This is consistent with the overall position set out at Section 7 of this report, which identifies a negative overall requirement for comparison goods retail floorspace when account is taken of commitments. This could open up town centre space for convenience retailers, and for the growth of the leisure and retail service sectors. In particular, food and drink operators are a critical component of a modern town centre, and the future success of these operators is inextricably linked to centres' overall vitality. Improved local leisure provision will mean a reduced need to travel further afield to eat, drink and socialise. This reduces carbon emissions and accords with sustainable development principles (particularly as a rounded retail and service offer should encourage linked trips and reduce travel).

9.27 A critical element of a successful strategy relates to the need to ensure that centres retain their role as a focal point for convenience goods retailing, ideally through accommodating main food shopping destinations as part of their offer.

### **Meeting Retail Needs**

9.28 Convenience goods retailing in both authorities is generally located close to defined centres and typically has an important role in underpinning the vitality of centres. This Study does not identify any capacity which would support additional convenience goods floorspace in either authority area in the period to 2041.

- 9.29 In respect of the prospect of additional operator demand for new stores, we note that the two authorities' principal centres have generally grown in an organic manner around a marketplace or central square. Residential land values are typically strong and there is not an abundance of industrial land (which often provides redevelopment potential) in central locations. As such, there are limited opportunities for additional foodstores within or immediately adjacent to existing centre boundaries. Should further convenience goods retail proposals come forward on edge or out of centre sites, then these will need to be considered carefully with reference to the key retail sequential and impact tests.
- 9.30 The Councils have already identified a need for small-scale convenience goods provision as part of existing site allocations identified in the adopted development plans. Notwithstanding the overall position in respect of capacity, the delivery of local convenience goods provision serving the day-to-day needs of new residents will generally be appropriate to provide for sustainable shopping patterns.
- 9.31 In terms of comparison goods floorspace, the level of capacity identified relates to a modest requirement for additional floorspace in South Oxfordshire only. At 2041, this equates to a need for between 1,900 sq.m and 3,200 sq.m of floorspace. If this requirement transpires in practice, it should be met through the reoccupation of vacant premises. We do not anticipate a need to build out any further comparison goods floorspace over the plan period and recommend that any planning applications which support such a use are carefully considered in respect of their compliance with the sequential and impact town centre policy tests.

### **Meeting Commercial Leisure Needs**

- 9.32 Section 8 of this report identified capacity which could potentially support around 10 further cinema screens by 2041. This equates to around three modern small scale 'boutique' cinemas, which typically support around three or so screens at each location. The most logical locations for such development would be the higher order centres of Abingdon and Didcot, along with Henley-on-Thames given its strong existing leisure offer. However, each of these centres already benefits from modern cinema provision; namely the Abbey Cinema in Abingdon, Cineworld in Didcot, and the Regal Picturehouse in Didcot.
- 9.33 In practice, these centres may not be able to support additional provision if this effectively replicates the existing offer in the respective centre. Any additional provision should be centrally located. Whilst a small cinema has a less extensive site requirement than a discount foodstore, there are a very few opportunities to accommodate town centre cinema provision.
- 9.34 We consider it to be unlikely that there will be any other form of large format traditional commercial leisure provision. New ten pin bowling alleys are principally supported in higher order centres, which are able to physically accommodate the space for a bowling alley. Casino and bingo hall development is a relatively rare occurrence and we do not anticipate operator interest in the two authority areas.

### **Markets**

- 9.35 A key strength of many of the principal centres is their regular (and often historic) markets. Abingdon, Faringdon, Henley, Thame, Wallingford and Wantage hold regular markets on at least a weekly basis, and Botley and Didcot host more infrequent markets.
- 9.36 The markets are generally an integral part of the town's offer and create additional activity and interest on market day. The scale of each market has generally evolved over time in response to local demand, the scale of the catchment area and wider changes in shopping habits.

- 9.37 In our view, any future expansion in respect of the markets' offer would likely take one of two forms. Firstly, specialised food markets are increasingly popular. This both includes street trader events at weekends which utilise stalls and vans, and also covered food markets/foodhalls. In this regard, farmers' markets are already supported across the two authority areas at Abingdon, Botley, Didcot, Henley and Thame. There may be the potential to increase the frequency of these events (the farmers' market is only held on a monthly basis in some centres).
- 9.38 Foodhall concepts have become increasingly flexible to fit into different spaces and to respond to market circumstances, but most are based around the provision of a number of different traders served by an informal and communal seating area. We consider that towns the size of Abingdon and Didcot have the potential to support a foodhall concept, and that Henley's role as a visitor destination may also offer scope to support a foodhall.
- 9.39 The potential to accommodate such an offer in practice may be dependent on the availability of appropriate premises. Foodhalls can play an important role in repurposing premises and in modernising the hospitality offer of centres. We believe that the introduction of a foodhall concept in larger centres could have a positive benefit in helping to diversify the food and beverage offer, encouraging longer 'dwell times' and encouraging additional footfall and spending at existing destinations.
- 9.40 In addition, there may be further scope to support specialist occasional markets. One notable success in this regard is the Teenage Market, which provides an opportunity for young people to showcase their entrepreneurial talents, trial new business ideas and see creative products. The Teenage Market seeks to provide a community event which mixes retail with performance, to introduce a new generation of shoppers and visitors to market towns. Other relatively small market towns across the UK host a Teenage Market including Biggleswade, Buckingham, Horncastle, New Mills, Sleaford, Southwell, and Tavistock. The Council may wish to engage with the Teenage Market to understand whether such a concept could potentially be supported.

## Planning Policy Recommendations

### General Policy Approach

- 9.41 The adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 and Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 (Parts 1 and 2) promote a 'town centre first' policy approach which is broadly consistent with the general requirements of paragraphs 86 to 91 of the NPPF).
- 9.42 The Study identifies that the proportion of vacant floorspace in some centres, notably Abingdon, Botley, Didcot, Faringdon and Wantage is either in excess of, or approaching, the national average, and that there is a clear need to direct additional main town centre uses to these centres in particular. Whilst the majority of these centres are considered to be reasonably healthy, there will be a clear benefit in reducing the level of vacancies to improve centres' offer and visual attractiveness, and to support additional activity. Accordingly, it will be important to accommodate additional development within centres (or, failing that, in sustainable locations which are able to support linked trips to defined town centres).
- 9.43 In this regard, we note that paragraph 017 of the Town Centres PPG indicates that proposals for edge and out of centre retail and leisure developments should be considered with reference to the health of centres that would be impacted by development. Paragraph 017 states that:

**'A judgement as to whether the likely adverse impacts are significant can only be reached in light of local circumstances. For example, in areas where there are high levels of vacancy and limited retailer demand, even very modest trade diversion from a new development may lead to a significant adverse impact.'**



- 9.44 In this context, it will be important for the emerging plan to clearly set out the importance of the sequential and impact tests and explain the local circumstances which frame how they will be applied in practice. The sequential and impact tests will need to be applied in a robust manner in order to provide for the re-use of vacant units and to support centres which retain a strong retail function as well as a diverse range of other uses. Whilst non-retail uses will be an important component of the mix of land uses in principal centres moving forward, there is still a requirement to accommodate new retailers and secure additional retail floorspace within defined centres wherever possible in accordance with the requirements of the NPPF.
- 9.45 It will be important for the forthcoming plan to clearly identify that the larger defined centres should continue to be the focus for comparison goods retail and that such uses remain important in driving footfall.
- 9.46 Notwithstanding this, it is evident that fundamental changes in the retail sector – largely resulting from the shift to online retail, which has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic – have had a permanent impact on land use on the high street. As such it is critical that defined centres continue to diversify in order to provide (where possible) access to jobs, leisure, culture, services, open space and social connection.
- 9.47 In the context of the current vacancy rate and national planning policy requirements, we recommend that emerging plan policies are sufficiently flexible so as to allow for an appropriate range of town centre uses beyond retail, and reflect the need to repurpose historic, sometimes outdated retail stock in order to accommodate new residential, leisure and community uses. To this end, we note that paragraph 86 of the NPPF states that planning policies should:
- ‘...recognise that residential development often plays an important role in ensuring the vitality of centres and encourage residential development on appropriate sites.’**
- 9.48 A key priority, which is already being explored by stakeholders, is the reuse and repurposing of existing stock to support leisure, community, and residential uses. Such investment should increase activity in a centre and also provide for visual improvements through renewal and redevelopment.
- 9.49 As noted at Section 3 of this report, the emerging plan should also consider the effects of the expanded Use Class E and the consequences of the additional flexibility which Class E provides for outside of town centres. The authorities may wish to consider applying restrictive conditions to certain types of Class E development which are delivered outside of town centres to restrict the authorised use to that which has been justified in the planning application. This will help ensure that unacceptable impacts do not arise within town centre as a consequence of future Class E development.

## **Boundaries**

- 9.50 Paragraph 86 of the NPPF requires local plans to **‘define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas’**.
- 9.51 There is no longer a specific requirement to identify primary and secondary frontages. The Government has confirmed that the removal of the requirement to define primary and secondary frontages reflects the general need to be flexible in planning for the future of town centres due to the rapid changes taking place in the retail and leisure industries. Whilst the removal of the requirement does not preclude local planning authorities from identifying primary and secondary shopping frontages where supported by local circumstances, we do not believe that this is merited in this instance. There is a clear need to repurpose and reoccupy centres across both authority areas in the manner that Use Class E generally provides for. In this context, the separate designation of both primary and secondary frontages would serve no useful purpose. Instead we recommend a single defined ‘primary shopping area’.

9.52 Annex 2 of the NPPF indicates that a primary shopping area is the ‘**Defined area where retail development is concentrated**’.

9.53 Annex 2 also identifies that a town centre is the:

**‘Area defined on the local authority’s policies map, including the primary shopping area and areas predominantly occupied by main town centre uses within or adjacent to the primary shopping area. References to town centres or centres apply to city centres, town centres, district centres and local centres but exclude small parades of shops of purely neighbourhood significance. Unless they are identified as centres in the development plan, existing out-of-centre developments, comprising or including main town centre uses, do not constitute town centres.’**

9.54 Annex 2 further defines main town centres uses as:

**‘Retail development (including warehouse clubs and factory outlet centres); leisure, entertainment and more intensive sport and recreation uses (including cinemas, restaurants, drive-through restaurants, bars and pubs, nightclubs, casinos, health and fitness centres, indoor bowling centres and bingo halls); offices; and arts, culture and tourism development (including theatres, museums, galleries and concert halls, hotels and conference facilities).’**

9.55 In this context, it is important to note that, although there is the opportunity to define separate primary shopping area and town centre boundaries, there is no general requirement to do so unless the specific characteristics of the subject centre support such an approach. Government policy specifically encourages the diversification of centres. Whilst retail will (in most cases) be a key element of a town centre, the majority of lower-order centres are diverse and uses are typically distributed throughout the centre. Such centres may not have a particular concentration of retail uses at their core.

9.56 Furthermore, it is also important to recognise the purpose of defining both a primary shopping area and town centre boundary. In planning policy terms, distinguishing between the primary shopping area and town centre boundary is of principal merit in terms of identifying the area of relevance in applying the sequential and impact tests to retail development. The particular relevance of the primary shopping area to retail planning proposals is confirmed by Annex 2 of the NPPF.

9.57 In this context, we have reviewed the current boundaries of the defined town and local service centres and provide our commentary on a centre-by-centre basis below. The existing position relates to that set out by the respective authority’s adopted Policies Map.

**Table 9.3: Summary of Boundary Recommendations for Town Centres**

Centre	Recommendations	Summary
<b>South Oxfordshire</b>		
Didcot	Whilst the previously defined boundaries remain largely appropriate, we recommend that certain non-main town centre uses (such as the allotments on Broadway) be excluded from the town centre boundary. The existing primary shopping area reflects the main concentration of retail uses within the town centre and is considered to remain appropriate. No changes are proposed to the primary shopping area.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-main town centre uses. Primary shopping area boundary to remain as existing.
Henley-on-Thames	We recommend that the town centre boundary be amended to exclude non-main town centre uses, such as residential units on Kings Road, Radnor Close, Queen Street, Albert Road, and units to the east of the Stuart Turner premises on Kings Road. The existing primary shopping area reflects the main concentration of retail units in the town centre and no amendments are proposed.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-town centre uses. Primary shopping area boundary to remain as existing.

Thame	Again, we recommend the removal of non-main town centre uses, which mostly relates to residential properties on Bell Close, Southern Road, Hazelton Close, Dorchester Place, Nelson Street, and Wellington Street. The existing primary shopping area reflects the main concentration of retail units in the town centre and no amendments are proposed.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-main town centre uses. Primary shopping area boundary to remain as existing
Wallingford	It is proposed that the town centre boundary be revised to exclude non-main town centre uses, such as Bull Croft Park, Kinecroft Park, and areas of predominantly residential development on Goldsmith's Lane, Thames Street and Wood Street. The existing primary shopping area reflects the main concentration of retail units in the town centre and no amendments are proposed.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-main town centre uses. Primary shopping area boundary to remain as existing.
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>		
Abingdon	The existing town centre boundary is considered to be reflective of the general distribution of main town centre uses in Abingdon and remains appropriate. Given the scale of Abingdon, we recommend identification of a primary shopping area and a proposed boundary is provided at Appendix 6. This area reflects the principal concentration of retail units in Abingdon town centre.	Town centre boundary to remain as existing. Primary shopping area boundary drafted to reflect area where retail uses are concentrated.
Faringdon	We recommend that the centre boundary be amended to exclude non-main town centre uses, this principally relating to residential units along Marlborough Street. Again, we do not consider it necessary to identify a primary shopping centre given the scale of the centre.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-main town centre uses. No requirement to identify separate primary shopping area.
Wantage	The existing town centre boundary reflects the area where main town centres uses are concentrated and remains appropriate. No changes are proposed. Given the scale of Wantage, we recommend identification of a primary shopping area and a proposed boundary is provided at Appendix 6. This area reflects the principal concentration of retail units in Wantage town centre.	Town centre boundary to remain as existing. Primary shopping area boundary drafted to reflect area where retail uses are concentrated.
Botley	The existing town centre boundary generally reflects the area where main town centres uses are concentrated. A limited revision is proposed to exclude non-main town centre uses (residential properties) on West Way. Given the scale of Botley and the distribution of different uses across the centre, we do not recommend identifying a separate primary shopping area.	Town centre boundary to be amended to remove non-main town centre uses. No requirement to identify separate primary shopping area.
Grove	We have drafted separate centre boundaries for both of Grove's shopping precincts (Millbrook Square and Grovelands Shopping Centre). Both of these precincts are very small and there is no requirement for separate primary shopping areas.	Proposed centre boundaries provided at Appendix 6. No requirement to identify separate primary shopping areas.

#### Article 4 Directions and Implications

9.58 Government's general intention through the introduction of Use Class E was to create greater flexibility across centres and to allow them to accommodate a wider range of commercial uses. Changes of use within Class E do not comprise development and do not, therefore, require planning permission.

9.59 Further changes to permitted development rights in March 2021 (through an update to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015) have allowed for the change of use from Class E properties to residential, again without the need for planning permission (subject to certain criteria being satisfied). This change has raised concerns over the potential impact that allowing the loss of retail and service use, without any control through the planning system, could have on the commercial function of town centres.

- 9.60 Article 4 directions give power to local authorities to withdraw a specified permitted development right within a specified area. Paragraph 53 of the NPPF sets out how Article 4 directions should be used as a means of removing permitted development rights, and states that:
- in respect of changes from non-residential use to residential uses, they should be limited to situations where an Article 4 direction is necessary to avoid wholly unacceptable adverse impacts (this could include the loss of the essential core of a primary shopping area which would seriously undermine its vitality and viability, but would be very unlikely to extend to the whole of a town centre);
  - in other cases, be limited to situations where an Article 4 direction is necessary to protect local amenity or the well-being of the area; and
  - in all cases, be based on robust evidence and apply to the smallest geographical area possible.
- 9.61 The appropriate use of Article 4 directions is further clarified by paragraph 38 of the When is Permission Required? Planning Practice Guidance, which states that:
- ‘Article 4 directions should be applied in a measured and targeted way. They should be based on robust evidence, and apply to the smallest geographical area possible.’**
- 9.62 Suitable circumstances for the use of Article 4 directions include the protection of town centres, as confirmed by paragraph 53 of the Secretary of State’s Written Ministerial Statement of July 2021. It is clear that an Article 4 direction could be applied to a town centre where it would demonstrably support the ongoing vitality and viability of the centre through the retention of commercial uses in central locations.
- 9.63 Whilst the NPPF refers to the application of Article 4 directions to primary shopping areas, the use of such directions is not predicated on there being a primary shopping area designation. The Ministerial Statement confirms that Article 4 directions can cover any geographical area (albeit it is not expected that such areas will be broad or relate to an entire local authority area).
- 9.64 We are unaware of any substantial reduction in the commercial offer of any of the two authorities’ principal centres through the use of permitted development rights. It is also important to recognise that some centres have a vacancy rate which equates to more than 10% of the commercial stock of units and that it will be important to re-use commercial premises for other uses where they are in danger of lying vacant for a significant period.
- 9.65 In considering the use of Article 4 directions, the instruction provided by NPPF paragraph 53 is of some relevance. We do not believe that the authorities’ centres are currently threatened by wholly unacceptable impacts arising from the use of commercial to residential permitted development rights and we do not believe that there is any current threat to the ‘essential core’ of any primary shopping area we have visited. Retail and other commercial uses continue to dominate central parts of centres.
- 9.66 Notwithstanding this, we recommend that the Councils review the use of permitted development rights going forward in order to monitor whether any material change in the commercial nature of centres may occur. This could be achieved by recording prior notification applications which seek to secure development through permitted development rights. It will be important that the retail and commercial function of centres is not eroded and that ground floor uses generally remain in active use and are accessible to the public.

## Hierarchy

9.67 Paragraph 86 of the NPPF identifies that local planning authorities should define a network and hierarchy of town centres. However, very little detail is provided in this regard and, notably, neither the NPPF nor the Town Centres PPG differentiates between different types of town centre and the role each serves.

9.68 The most recent definitions provided by the Government were provided by Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth ('PPS4'), which was published in December 2009 (and was superseded by publication of the original iteration of the NPPF in March 2012). Whilst PPS4 should be considered on this basis (i.e. it is not up to date practice guidance), in the absence of any other definitions, it is of some relevance to the consideration of a retail centres hierarchy.

9.69 Annex B of PPS4 identified that:

**'City centres are the highest level of centre identified in development plans. In terms of hierarchies, they will often be a regional centre and will serve a wide catchment. The centre may be very large, embracing a wide range of activities and may be distinguished by areas which may perform different main functions. Planning for the future of such areas can be achieved successfully through the use of area action plans, with masterplans or development briefs for particular sites. In London the 'international' and 'metropolitan' centres identified in the Mayor's Spatial Development Strategy typically perform the role of city centres.**

**Town centres will usually be the second level of centres after city centres and, in many cases, they will be the principal centre or centres in a local authority's area. In rural areas they are likely to be market towns and other centres of similar size and role which function as important service centres, providing a range of facilities and services for extensive rural catchment areas. In planning the future of town centres, local planning authorities should consider the function of different parts of the centre and how these contribute to its overall vitality and viability. In London the 'major' and many of the 'district' centres identified in the Mayor's Spatial Development Strategy typically perform the role of town centres.**

**District centres will usually comprise groups of shops often containing at least one supermarket or superstore, and a range of non-retail services, such as banks, building societies and restaurants, as well as local public facilities such as a library.**

**Local centres include a range of small shops of a local nature, serving a small catchment. Typically, local centres might include, amongst other shops, a small supermarket, a newsagent, a sub-post office and a pharmacy. Other facilities could include a hot-food takeaway and launderette. In rural areas, large villages may perform the role of a local centre.**

**Small parades of shops of purely neighbourhood significance are not regarded as centres for the purposes of this policy statement.'**

9.70 South Oxfordshire Local Plan Policy TC2 sets out the current hierarchy of centres. At the top of the hierarchy in South Oxfordshire are the 'major town centres' of Didcot and Henley-on-Thames, followed by the 'town centres' of Thame and Wallingford. Below these there are 12 defined local centres.

9.71 In Vale of White Horse, Local Plan Core Policy 3 identifies the hierarchy of centres and confirms that there are three 'market towns', Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage. These are followed by two 'local service centres', Botley and Grove, and then the 20 larger villages and 29 smaller villages.

9.72 We set out our suggested hierarchy below in Table 9.4. Our principal proposed revision relates to the identification of a single 'principal' town centre in each authority area, i.e. Abingdon and Didcot.

9.73 Abingdon and Didcot town centres are considered to have a more significant retail offer. The household survey findings make it clear that the offer provided in these centres is significant and that they are able to meet a

relatively wide range of needs of residents in the authority areas. This designation reflects the different role of these two centres.

9.74 In respect of the other town centres in South Oxfordshire, namely Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford, we are of the view that these centres provide for a wide range of uses to meet the local populations' day to day needs, and that their status sit firmly within the second level of centres within the authority area. Convenience goods retail and service provision are generally of particular importance in these centres. This is also the case for Wantage town centre in Vale of White Horse. Faringdon is a smaller centre and the wider settlement accommodates a significant out of centre grocery foodstore offer. This impacts on its function to some degree. Notwithstanding this, we recommend that Faringdon retains its status as a town centre, partly in recognition that improved day-to-day retail and service provision within the centre should be welcome, subject to the availability of land and premises to deliver additional provision.

9.75 Both South Oxfordshire Policy TC2 and Vale of White Horse Core Policy 3 identify lower tier centres (local centres in South Oxfordshire, and larger and smaller villages in Vale of White Horse). We have not visited the lower tier centres in undertaking this Study and our recommended hierarchy structure retains these centres within the hierarchy in a manner that is comparable to existing. In practice, we are aware that the Councils have undertaken a Settlement Assessment which has considered the role, function and scale of lower order settlements, and how they are served by local retail and service provision. Based on this work, the Councils are currently considering whether Chinnor and/or Watlington merit Local Service Centre status. In particular, we recognise that Watlington has a good concentration of retail and service uses focused around High Street and Couching Street. This includes a good-sized Co-op Food convenience store on Couching Street. We understand that the Councils consider Watlington to be a strong candidate to be elevated to a Local Service Centre on this basis.

**Table 9.4: Recommended Centres Hierarchy Based on Four Tier Structure**

<b>Tier</b>	<b>South Oxfordshire Centres</b>	<b>Vale of White Horse Centres</b>
Principal Town Centres	Didcot	Abingdon
Town Centre	Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford	Wantage and Faringdon
Local Service Centres	-	Botley and Grove
Village and Local Centres	Berinsfield, Benson, Chalgrove, Chinnor, Cholsey, Crowmarsh Gifford, Goring-on-Thames, Nettlebed, Sonning Common, Watlington, Wheatley and Woodcote	Blewbury, Cumnor, Drayton, East Challow, East Hanney, East Hendred, Harwell, Harwell Campus, Kennington, Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, Marcham, Milton, Radley, Shrivenham, Stanford-in-the-Vale, Steventon, Sutton Courtenay, Uffington, Watchfield and Wootton

### Thresholds

9.76 Paragraph 90 of the NPPF indicates that it is appropriate to identify thresholds for the scale of edge of centre and out of centre retail and leisure development which should be the subject of impact assessment. Any such threshold policy applies to the impact test only (all planning applications for main town centre uses which are not in an existing centre and not in accordance with an up-to-date development plan should be the subject of the sequential test<sup>35</sup>).

<sup>35</sup> With the exception (in accordance with paragraph 89 of the NPPF) of small scale rural office proposals and other small scale rural development.

9.77 The purpose of applying an impact threshold within the development plan which deviates from the national threshold of 2,500 sq.m is to allow the Council to retain appropriate control in respect of the potential for development to impact on the future health of defined centres within the authority area. By applying a lower threshold, applications for developments which could potentially have a harmful effect on the overall vitality and viability of a defined centre, will need to be supported by a proportionate impact assessment which sets out the potential trade diversion impact assumptions.

9.78 Paragraph 16 of the Town Centres PPG provides specific guidance in relation to floorspace thresholds and states:

**'The impact test only applies to proposals exceeding 2,500 square metres gross of floorspace unless a different locally appropriate threshold is set by the local planning authority. In setting a locally appropriate threshold it will be important to consider the:**

- scale of proposals relative to town centres
- the existing viability and vitality of town centres
- cumulative effects of recent developments
- whether local town centres are vulnerable
- likely effects of development on any town centre strategy
- impact on any other planned investment.'

9.79 Using the above guidance, we set out below the justification to support our view that a lower threshold should be applied across the hierarchy of centres within the authority areas.

9.80 In considering the setting of a local impact threshold, it is relevant to give consideration to the type of development (relating to convenience and comparison goods retail uses, and leisure uses) which would, in practice, provide space for key operators who could act to 'anchor' a centre. Should one of these anchor units or operators leave a centre, it is more likely that there will be the potential for a significant adverse impact to arise.

9.81 Where there is genuine potential for an application proposal to divert a material level of expenditure away from a defined centre, or potentially remove a key tenant from that centre, there will likely be a requirement to consider the impacts arising from the proposal in detail.

9.82 In respect of lower order centres, the introduction of even a small convenience store nearby (of the type operated by Sainsbury's Local or Tesco Express) may have the potential to impact on the ongoing viability of key operators. Small convenience stores operated by national multiple grocers can generate a relatively substantial turnover. If this is diverted from existing retailers in defined centres, the impact on the overall vitality and viability through the loss of spend and footfall, could be of a significant adverse magnitude.

9.83 Therefore, in implementing a local threshold policy, it is considered more appropriate to apply a range of thresholds in accordance with the type of centre the proposed development is proximate to. The thresholds should not only apply to new floorspace, but also to changes of use and variations of condition to remove or amend restrictions on how units operate or trade in practice.

9.84 In Abingdon town centre, around 4% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 11.6% of total commercial floorspace and 12.6% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 12,070 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 38.2% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.85 In Didcot town centre, around 7% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 9.3% of total commercial floorspace and 11.7% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 22,860 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 55.7% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.86 In Henley town centre, around 4% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 7.3% of total commercial floorspace and 8.3% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 19,110 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 41.8% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.87 In Thame town centre, around 5% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 3.6% of total commercial floorspace and 5.1% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 11,160 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 49.2% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.88 In Wallingford town centre, around 5% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 5.7% of total commercial floorspace and 7.7% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 10,730 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 47.4% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.89 In Wantage town centre, around 6% of all units are greater than 500 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 11.4% of total commercial floorspace and 13.3% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 17,200 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 55.3% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.90 In Faringdon town centre, around 10% of all units are greater than 300 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 18.4% of total commercial floorspace and 13.6% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 2,280 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 24.0% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.91 In Botley local service centre, around 26% of all units are greater than 300 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 25.7% of total commercial floorspace and 125.9% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 2,368 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 44.4% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.92 In Grove local service centre, around 7% of all units are greater than 300 sq.m. The vacancy rate equates to 4.5% of total commercial floorspace and 7.1% of all units. In total, convenience and comparison goods uses account for 2,226 sq.m of floorspace, which equates to 57.0% of the total stock of retail floorspace.

9.93 In this context, we recommend that the impact threshold of relevance to the principal and other town centres<sup>36</sup> be set at 500 sq.m for both retail and leisure proposals. All of these centres have units of this scale, albeit in each case a 500 sq.m unit is able to accommodate a retailer which could well be of importance in respect of the ongoing vitality and viability of the centre.

9.94 We recommend that the 500 sq.m threshold should effectively act as default to be applied authority-wide, should a proposal not be subject to a lesser threshold of relevance to smaller centres.

9.95 In terms of policy recommendations relating to the impact policy threshold, this relates to the defined centre, which for the purposes of retail development comprises the primary shopping area (where applicable), and for all other main town centre uses comprises the town centre boundary.

9.96 The remaining two proposed local service centres<sup>37</sup> are generally anchored by a limited number of national multiple retailers (often small convenience goods stores). In most cases, these operators underpin the function of these centres, drawing in custom and encouraging linked trips to the other parts of the centre. Should the

<sup>36</sup> Namely Abingdon, Didcot, Faringdon, Henley, Thame, Wallingford and Wantage.

<sup>37</sup> Namely Botley and Grove.



viability of such stores be impacted, there is a real risk of the role of the wider centre being undermined. There are relatively few units substantially larger than 300 sq.m in either of these centres and the level of retail floorspace is considerably less than within the larger town centres. As such, to lose an occupier of this magnitude could have a significant adverse impact on the centre as a whole. Accordingly, in the local context we believe that 300 sq.m constitutes a significant unit in Botley and Grove.

- 9.97 We believe that the proposed lower thresholds for local service centres and lower-order centres in the hierarchy is appropriate as a consequence of their localised role and function, and the fact that the opening of a small format convenience store outside of these smaller centres is likely to directly compete with type of local needs provision typically found within such centres. We therefore believe it is reasonable for applicants proposing developments of 200 sq.m gross floorspace for local service centres and below, to demonstrate that their proposal will not have a significant adverse impact on smaller centres sharing part of the same catchment.
- 9.98 Where an application proposal is above the respective stated impact threshold, we would recommend that the applicant discusses and agrees the scope of the retail impact assessment with the Council prior to submission. The lower threshold of 200 sq.m for the smallest defined centres is considered appropriate due to potential for convenience stores of even a relatively small nature to substantially impact upon the performance of existing operators, due to the potential higher sales densities of such proposals. This would ensure that particular protection of these smaller centres is considered appropriately.
- 9.99 For the purpose of drafting future planning policy, it is important to qualify the area to which each local impact threshold will apply. We recommend that the lower impact thresholds of 200 sq.m and 300 sq.m would be applicable within 800 metres of the boundary of the relevant centre. In the case of village and local centres, we understand that no boundary is to be defined and that these centres will be identified by a central marker on the emerging Local Plan Policies Map.
- 9.100 The distance of 800 metres is broadly commensurate with the potential walk-in catchments of smaller centres and is identified by Guidelines for Providing for Journeys on Foot (The Institution of Highways & Transportation, 2000) as being the 'preferred maximum' acceptable walking distance to a centre. We consider it to be appropriate for the higher threshold of 500 sq.m to apply authority-wide (i.e. beyond 800 metres of these centres), due to the lesser likelihood of significant adverse impacts arising from retail and leisure development.
- 9.101 It is important to emphasise that, whilst the locally set threshold would require the submission of an impact assessment for all edge-of-centre and out-of-centre developments exceeding the thresholds, national guidance states that the impact test should be undertaken in a proportionate and locally appropriate way, commensurate to the scale of development proposed. The level of detail would typically be agreed with planning Officers during the pre-application process in order to avoid overly onerous requirements that may otherwise restrict and delay development opportunities from coming forward.
- 9.102 Based on the above, we are of the view that an impact assessment will be necessary to accompany proposals for retail and leisure uses (including those relating to mezzanine floorspace and the variation of restrictive conditions) which are not located within a defined centre where:
- the proposal provides a gross floorspace in excess of 500 sq.m gross; or
  - the proposal is located within 800 metres of a local service centre and is in excess of 300 sq.m gross; or
  - the proposal is located within 800 metres of a village or local centre and is in excess of 200 sq.m gross.

9.103 In our experience, it will only generally be development of a scale greater than these thresholds which could lead to a 'significant adverse' impact, which could merit the refusal of an application for town centre uses in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 91 of the NPPF. The setting of a 'tiered' threshold is consistently accepted by Inspector's at Local Plan Examination and, in our view, acts to appropriately ensure that only those proposals which could genuinely result in an unacceptable impact are the subject of an impact assessment.

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