

Rural framework for Oxfordshire 2007- 2010



FINAL DRAFT
July 2007

1 Why does Oxfordshire need a rural framework?

Economic, social and environmental pressures

1.1 Oxfordshire is a rural county - the least densely populated in the South East - with attractive countryside, towns and villages and including three extensive areas of outstanding natural beauty.

1.2 Oxfordshire's rural areas show generally low levels of deprivation and crime and similar educational achievement and health to the county as a whole. Rural people are comparatively well involved in their communities.

1.3 However there are social, economic and environmental pressures which have and will continue to affect and change life in rural communities in Oxfordshire. For example:

- the decline of retail and other services in villages and small towns – a consequence of the centralisation of services in larger towns - will worsen access to services by the growing number of older people, and could increase the isolation of vulnerable groups;
- plans to increase house building rates across the country and changes in the economics of farming and other employment sectors will affect the environment and rural and market town communities;
- climate change could have significant consequences for rural areas.

Changes to the delivery of rural policy and funding

1.4 The Haskins Review in 2003 and the Defra Rural Strategy 2004 led to a reorganisation of government agencies involved in rural policy and to major changes in government-funded programmes in rural areas.

1.5 In 2006, the Countryside Agency, the Rural Development Service and English Nature were replaced by the Commission for Rural Communities and Natural England.

1.6 At the same time responsibility for many rural funding programmes was devolved to regional bodies giving the South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA) a key role in delivering rural programmes across the South East including in rural Oxfordshire.

1.7 To provide a strategic approach to these new arrangements, organisations across the South East, including local authorities, regional agencies and the South East Rural Affairs Forum formed the South East Rural Partnership.

1.8 This partnership developed the South East Rural Delivery Framework 2006 – 2009, which pulls together priorities for the region. Oxfordshire is one of the sub-regional rural partnerships which forms part of the delivery model for the South East Rural Delivery Framework. (see Annex 2).

1.9 New funding streams include for example SEEDA's Access to Services Programme, and the European funded Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), which require joint partnership bids.

A shared framework

1.10 This background of change – both socio-economic and in government policy and funding – means that it is an appropriate time to take a close look at life in rural Oxfordshire. This has been done by developing a shared framework for the county identifying issues and priorities for the future.

1.11 The framework and accompanying rural evidence base have been developed to:

- Identify specific needs and circumstances of communities in rural areas, and establish a shared understanding of life in rural Oxfordshire
- Consider how to improve service delivery in rural Oxfordshire
- Help to improve access to sources of funding for rural areas by providing clear and accessible rural evidence.
- Strengthen Oxfordshire's ability to articulate rural concerns in the South East and nationally.

1.12 The resources in the evidence base and further development of the priorities and actions recommended in this framework will be for public, private and community and voluntary sector organisations, and for use by Oxfordshire's Local Strategic Partnerships and the Public Service Board.

1.13 The framework provides the context and broad priorities within which organisations in Oxfordshire can develop further actions or applications for funding to support rural communities. For this reason it is a framework rather than a strategy or action plan; there is follow-up work relating both to policy issues requiring clarification, and to implementation.

1.14 Monitoring and reviewing the framework will be the role of the newly formed Oxfordshire Rural Forum.

2 How this framework was developed

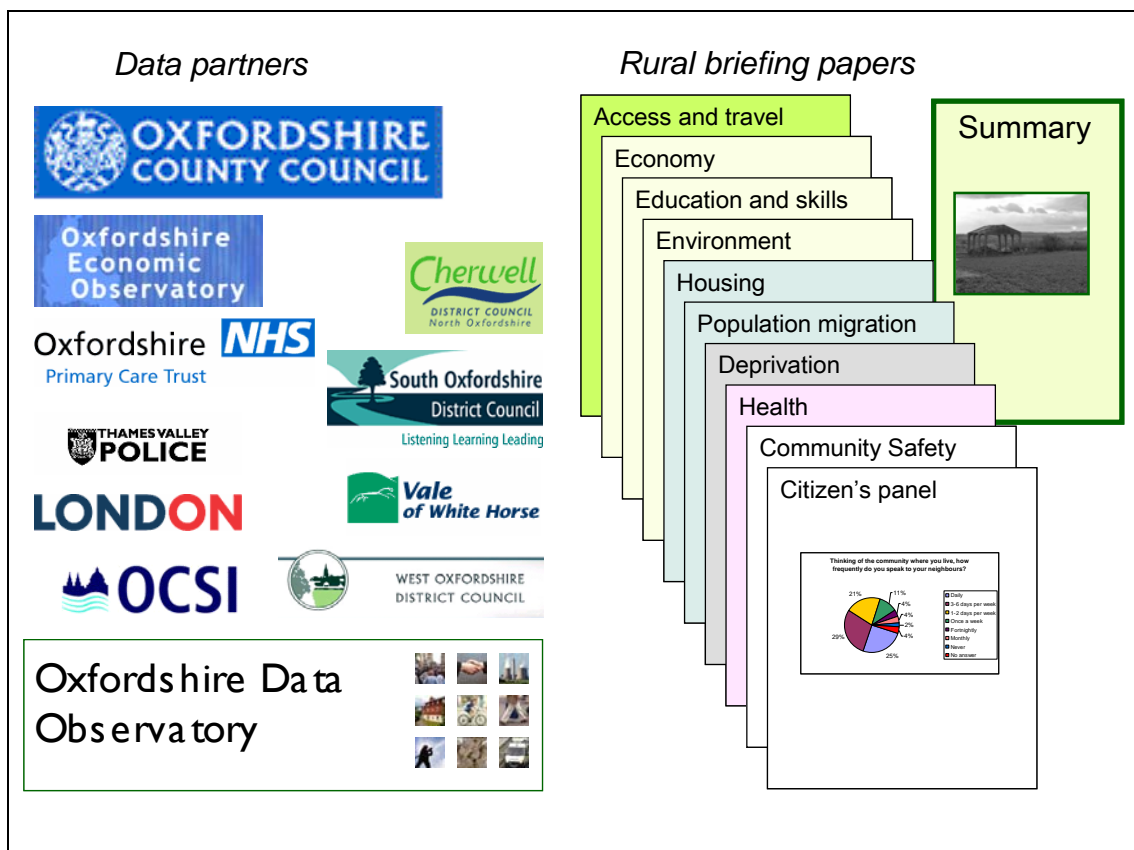
Gathering and review of evidence

2.1 The development of the Rural Framework began in mid -2006 with a comprehensive review of the available evidence, informed by local data experts and the Oxfordshire Data Observatory and in consultation with the regional observatory.

2.2 Under the direction of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum, the development of the evidence base for rural Oxfordshire resulted in ten briefing papers on:

- Access and travel
- Community Life
- Community Safety
- Economy
- Education and skills
- Environment
- Health
- Housing
- Population migration
- Poverty and deprivation

Figure 1 Oxfordshire’s rural evidence base – a collaborative research programme



Workshops to debate findings

2.3 Presentation of this rural evidence helped to start the discussion at a series of workshops held between November 2006 and March 2007. The first four workshops each focused on one specific topic and were attended by experts on that theme. The “thematic” workshops were:

1. Access to Services and Travel
2. Environment and the Economy
3. Housing
4. Community Life

2.4 These then informed two further overview workshops for:

- Councillors from Oxfordshire’s four rural district councils and Oxfordshire County Council
- The Oxfordshire Rural Forum – a “pulling it together” session to work on the priorities for the framework.

2.5 At these workshops around 130 people representing almost 40 organisations debated the evidence, identified gaps and suggested issues and priorities for Oxfordshire’s rural framework.

Developing the priorities for this framework

2.6 The results of the work on the evidence and the workshop discussions have been used to identify what is already happening, and to develop broad priorities for the framework under the guidance of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum Steering Group.

2.7 This is and will remain a working document and it is planned to continue to review and refine this framework in the light of new evidence and projects of relevance to rural Oxfordshire.

3 Links to other policies, plans, and partnerships

3.1 This rural framework is not intended to summarise or duplicate existing plans, but attempts to take account of the various plans and policies from national through regional to local level.

3.2 The following are of particular relevance to the Oxfordshire Rural Framework:

- Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006
- UK Biodiversity Action Plan
- South East Rural Delivery Framework 2006-2009
- South East Plan
- Regional Economic Strategy for South East England 2006-2016
- Market Towns Performance Plan
- Economic Development Strategy for Oxfordshire 2006-2016
- Oxfordshire Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Development Plan (Oxfordshire Voluntary Sector Development Partnership), 2006.
- Rural Social and Community Programme Business Case
- Oxfordshire's community-led parish plans.

3.3 The framework will provide a strategic context and "signpost" to evidence for inclusion in local development frameworks, market town plans, and parish and community plans. It is currently being used for input into new District rural strategies.

3.4 The evidence and framework will also be used:

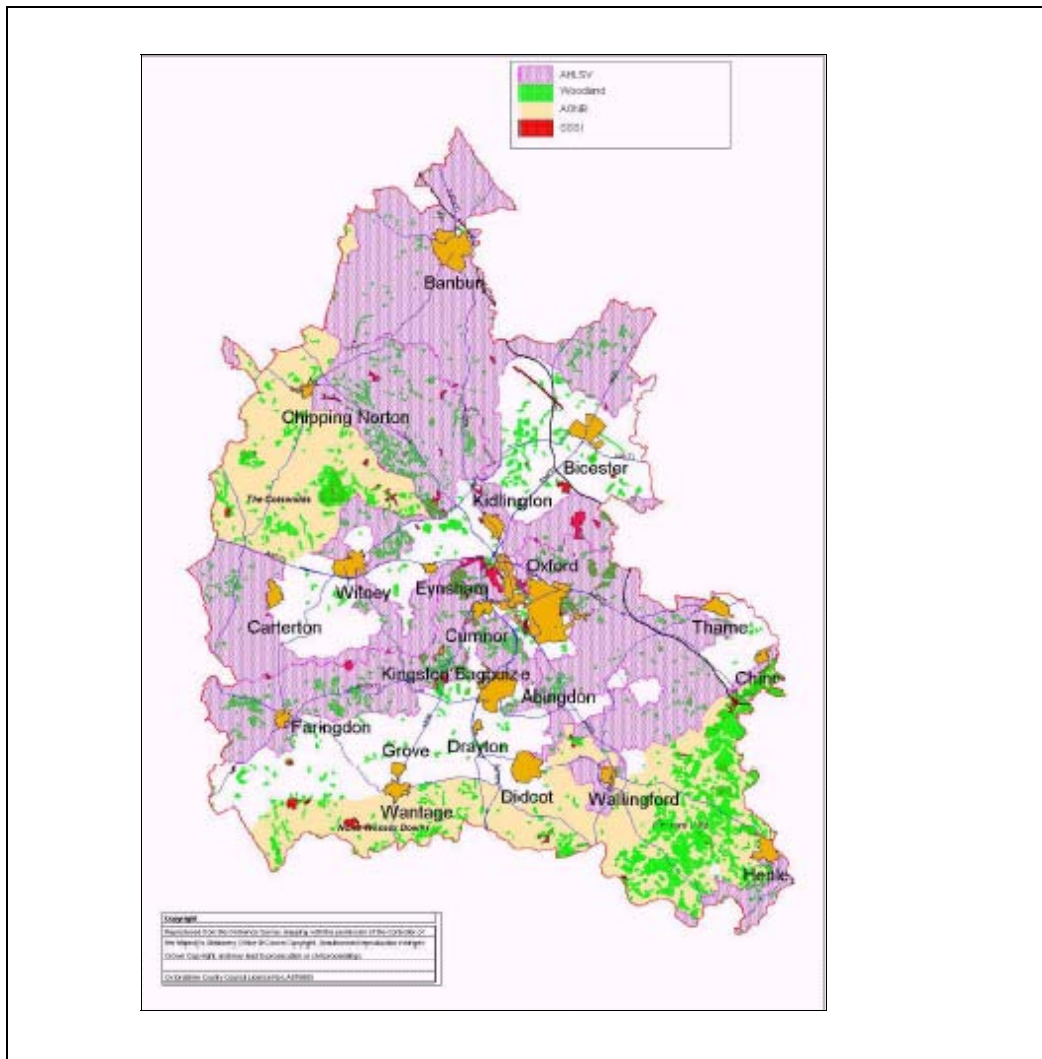
- as a key input into the new Sustainable Community Strategy being developed by the Oxfordshire Partnership & District Local Strategic Partnerships;
- to help develop a rural target for the new Local Area Agreement 2008-2009;
- to provide feedback to the South East Rural Delivery Framework;
- to help inform local community groups and interests in linking local community needs to strategic planning;
- to help guide rural actions in Oxfordshire that contribute to the delivery of the Regional Economic Strategy and Rural Delivery Framework;
- to identify key challenges less easily supported by statistical evidence which could therefore be overlooked.

4 Rural Oxfordshire in context

4.1 Oxfordshire is a beautiful county in the centre of England. Most of its rural towns and villages have strong links with the city of Oxford and good access to the major urban areas of London and Birmingham.

4.2 Almost 80% of Oxfordshire is managed for agriculture and the county includes 3 areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs), 4 national nature reserves and 109 sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs).

Figure 2 Oxfordshire's AONBs, SSSIs, woodland and Areas of High Landscape Value



Source: Oxfordshire County Council

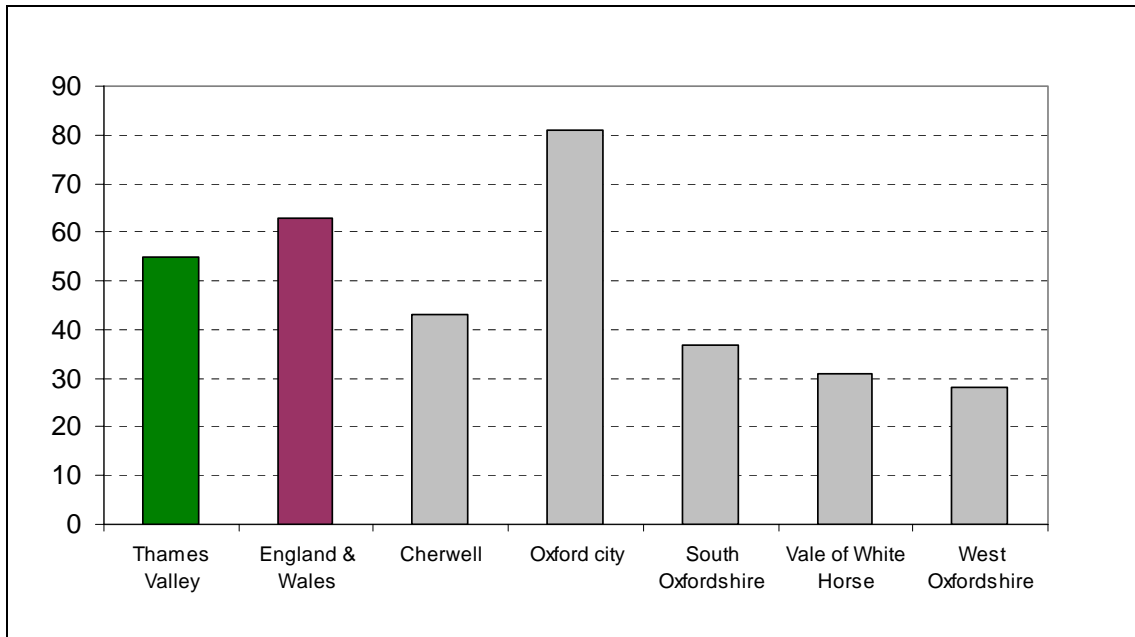
4.3 Over 2,600 miles of paths, bridleways and byways are open to the public providing extensive access to the countryside. However, these routes often do not provide a connected, safe or enjoyable network for walkers and riders.

4.4 There are a large number of small communities in rural Oxfordshire. Of the 308 parishes with a population below 10,000 people, three quarters (231) have fewer than 1,000 residents.

4.5 The research suggests that:

- people in rural Oxfordshire are relatively well involved in their local communities.
- rates of crime are low compared with the Thames Valley¹ and national averages.

Figure 3 Crime rate per 1,000 population 2005/06, Oxfordshire's districts



Home Office, British Crime Survey published July 2006

4.6 Rural communities however are under pressure. Secure jobs in traditional rural occupations continue to decline, house prices are out of reach to workers in rural areas and increasing car use affects the safety of local roads and the viability of local services.

4.7 A consequence of these pressures is the potential polarisation of our local communities between settled rural dwellers and new-comers and between the older and younger generations.

4.8 These may not be exclusively rural issues, but the effects can be more severe in rural areas where a "minority group" may be a single family, statistically invisible and potentially out of reach to support services based in towns or urban areas.

¹ The Thames Valley lies to the North and West of London and includes the 3 English counties of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire

5 The challenges for rural Oxfordshire

5.1 Many of the social, economic and environmental pressures affecting rural Oxfordshire are relevant to urban areas as well. However, these pressures can be felt very differently in rural areas. In developing a rural framework the aim has been to identify the ways in which rural areas are affected differently from other (urban) areas, and opportunities for appropriate responses to these issues. For example:

- with a lower density of population, reduced access to services in some rural areas may affect only a small minority of people, and therefore require a more specific and flexible response appropriate to the needs of this vulnerable group.
- some effects of predicted climate change will be very different in rural areas, where changes in crop production are likely to have a major and lasting impact on the appearance of the countryside and on biodiversity.

5.2 The debate on the priorities for this framework identified six challenges for the future of rural Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire's Rural Challenges

1. Access to services and facilities
2. Affordable housing
3. Countryside and environment
4. Climate change and resource use
5. Economy and enterprise
6. Vulnerable people

5.2 The following section expands on each of these challenges in turn under the headings of:

- Why is this a challenge?
- What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?
- Options for the future
- Links to relevant partnerships and projects

5.3 Case studies are included as examples of some of the work already going on in rural Oxfordshire.

5.4 Data and evidence accompanying this framework is set out in more detail in an accompanying paper: *Understanding Rural Oxfordshire: Summary of Evidence*. This summary and other working papers are available under the rural theme of the Oxfordshire Data Observatory at www.oxfordshireobservatory.info.

Rural Challenge 1: Access to services and facilities

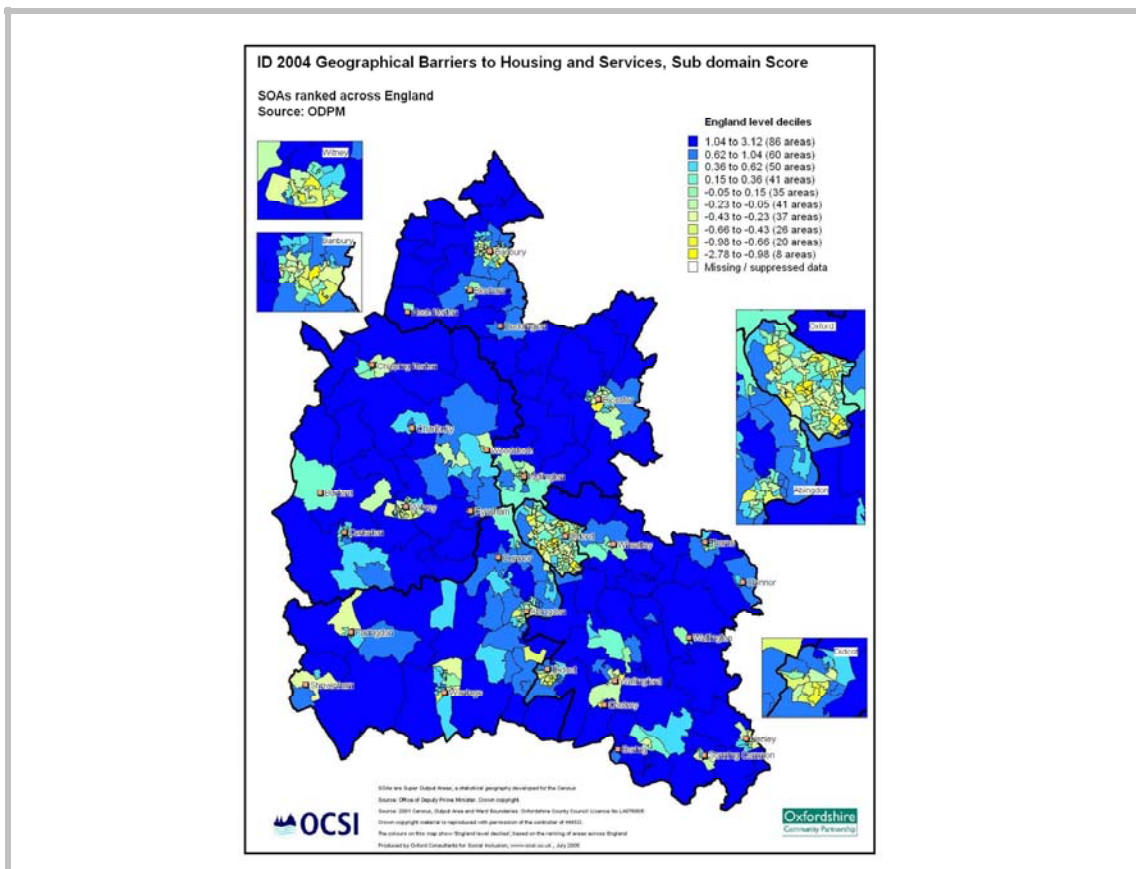
Accessibility is about getting to the key services we need – either by being able to travel to a service or by a particular service being available where it is needed. Good accessibility is important for everyone but particularly important for the most disadvantaged groups.

Oxfordshire Local Transport Plan Accessibility Strategy, July 2005

Why is this a challenge?

- Rural Oxfordshire ranks relatively poorly on national measures of access to services such as health, education and retail compared with other rural areas in the South East.
 - Around a fifth (21%) of Oxfordshire's super output areas are in the worst 10% of areas in England on distance to local services.
 - Half of the most deprived areas in Oxfordshire on this indicator are in rural Cherwell.
- Local services such as village post offices and shops remain at risk of closure in rural areas. The recent DTI consultation² on the post office network proposes new access criteria and restructuring that will involve the closure of 2,500 post offices across the UK.

Figure 4 Access to services in Oxfordshire (darkest shades show most deprived areas)



Source: Communities and Local Government Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004

² The Post Office Network, A consultation document, December 2006, DTI

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- Increased centralisation of services particularly affects rural areas because it leads to reductions in local services and facilities and longer journeys to the remaining service locations. Services are often centralised without adequate provision being made for access for all groups.
- People in rural areas without access to a car, including young people and the increasing numbers of older people, are most affected by reduced access, especially in areas where public transport provision is poor. These groups often face difficulty gaining access to facilities such as health, education, employment and leisure.
- In many villages and market towns where local services such as shops, post offices and pubs have had to close, there has been a decline in community spirit and activities, and an increase in social isolation and exclusion for more vulnerable people.
- There is an increasing reliance in rural areas on voluntary effort to fill gaps left by public and private service providers.
- Market towns have the potential to play an important role in providing services to rural areas and significantly improve and promote their retail offer, but need support to do so³.

Oxfordshire Market Towns Network

The Oxfordshire Market Towns Network was launched in October 2004 to deliver a new scheme to help regenerate market towns in the county. The scheme, co-ordinated through Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC), is supported by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) through its Small Rural Towns Programme which runs until 2011. Nineteen small towns in Oxfordshire are eligible for help under the scheme, which can offer grants of up to £120,000 to projects that will provide economic benefits. Before applying for funding, the town must have completed a validated health check and Action Plan. So far 5 towns have completed a healthcheck, and a further 6 towns are in the process of carrying out a healthcheck.

To-date, Carterton Fast Forward Partnership has been granted £120,000 from the Market Towns Programme matched with support from West Oxfordshire District Council, for a new Community Hall in Carterton. There are three other towns hoping to gain funding from the programme for their projects.

In addition to the work being carried out through the Market Towns Programme, ORCC were successful in applying to the Carnegie Trust and to Oxfordshire County Council for funding to engage consultants to support market town communities to get involved in the community planning process and to progress town healthchecks and project ideas. This project runs from January 2007 until June 2008.

Contact :Ann Tweney <http://www.oxonrcc.org.uk>

³ Report on Retail Opportunities in Networking by Keith Slater, Caprese Ltd, November 2006 produced for Business Link and SEEDA

Options for the future

- Carry out detailed mapping of the location of essential local services such as post offices, village halls, and education to help local organisations target support and action.
- Where possible, focus on innovation in mobile/outreach services which bring services to people, as well as ways of getting them to services.,
- Explore creative and co-ordinated use of transport resources available within the public, voluntary and private sector through partnership working.
- Explore greater use of ICT to provide access to services.
- Consider how to strengthen support for the voluntary and community sector and local initiatives.
- Improve support for Market Towns and encourage initiatives to protect and promote market town retail offer.
- Support Oxfordshire bid to SEEDA’s Access to Services Programme.

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

<p>Promotion of and support for community transport schemes and partnership provision through ORCC and the Rural Transport Partnership.</p> <p>Village of the Year competition</p> <p>Village Shops Development Scheme and Village Halls Advisory service work supported by rural district councils and Oxfordshire County Council</p>	<p>www.oxonrcc.org.uk</p>
<p>Oxfordshire Voluntary Sector Development Partnership.</p>	<p>www.oxnet.org</p>
<p>Local Transport Plan: Accessibility Strategy 2005 - mapping of access to services.</p>	<p>www.oxfordshire.gov.uk</p>
<p>Extended schools – using schools for community activities</p>	<p>www.oxfordshire.gov.uk</p>

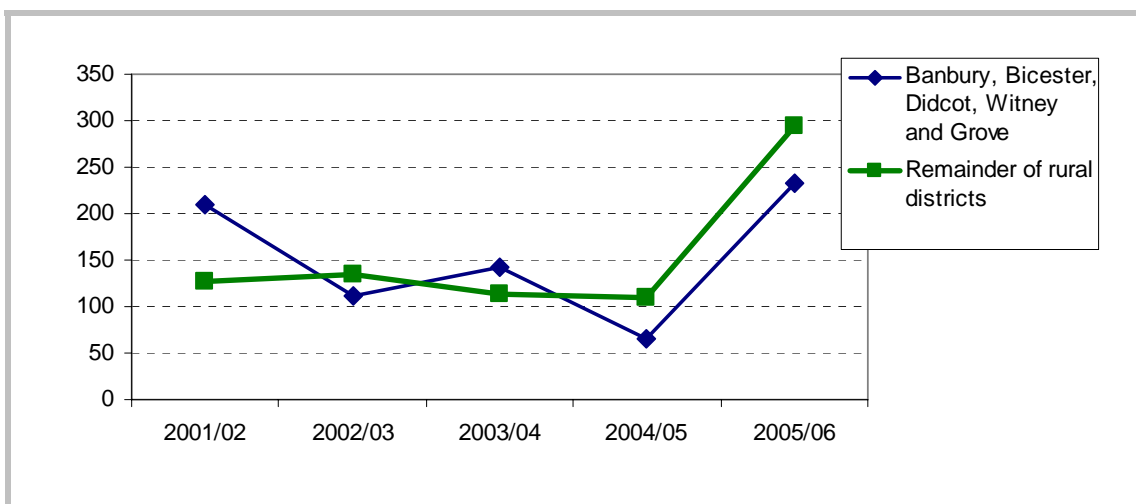
Rural Challenge 2: Affordable housing

Affordable housing is defined as non-market housing including social-rented and “intermediate” housing. *Intermediate housing* includes schemes such as shared equity loans. *Affordability* is whether or not market housing is on offer to buy at a level which people can afford.

Why is this a challenge?

- Over the past few years, relatively few new social and affordable homes have been built in rural areas. Before 2005/06 there were fewer than 150 affordable homes being built per year in rural Oxfordshire (see chart below).
- This low build rate is a result of:
 - Limited opportunities to use policies for securing a percentage of affordable housing in housing developments;
 - “Rural Exception Sites” being generally more expensive to develop than urban schemes and which are in short supply;
 - Negative perceptions of affordable housing: people identify a need for affordable housing in villages, but then object to planning applications.
- The least expensive market housing in Oxfordshire’s rural districts is around 9 to 10 times the lowest incomes, and the house price to income ratio is increasing.
- This means that younger people and people on lower incomes are finding it increasingly difficult to get housing near their home communities, and have to live elsewhere.

Figure 5 Number of affordable housing units built in Oxfordshire’s rural districts 2001 to 2006



Source: LDPS for all districts other than Cherwell. Cherwell data from the 2006 AMR

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- While all of the county suffers from a lack of affordable housing, in rural areas the problem of price is compounded by the shortage of available affordable houses in some rural areas.
- This means that certain groups, especially young people, are unable to find housing in their local community. The result can be an imbalance in the age profile of small rural communities, leading to commuter and dormitory villages and towns, and increasingly polarised communities.
- In seeking to address these problems, there is a need to review and debate the requirements for a sustainable rural community: what is the balance of housing and other service provision necessary to ensure a vibrant and thriving local community? Housing needs surveys and community plans have an important role to play in this process.

“Many of Tackley’s young people have left the village because they are unable to afford local house prices. New affordable homes to rent or part-buy which allow people to remain in the village, have been, and will continue to be, of immense value in maintaining a balanced and vibrant community” Chairman, Tackley Parish Council

Options for the future

- Encourage housing needs surveys by parishes.
- Make better use of existing evidence of housing need at local authority and ORCC level.
- Review existing policies for allocation of affordable housing, and explore alternative options in terms of tenures and allocations
- Make use of community planning to improve local understanding of housing aspirations and needs of communities and individuals.
- Consider the need to adapt to changing circumstances, and needs of elderly, in housing design.

Case study: affordable housing in Kingston Bagpuize

Six “much needed” affordable homes have been unveiled in Kingston Bagpuize thanks to the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP).

Sovereign Housing Group’s in-house architects designed the new development to help the new residents feel safer, and the homes can easily be altered to adapt to changing family circumstances, such as a disability or to meet the needs of the elderly.

Sovereign has worked closely with Abingdon-based Leadbitter Construction, the Parish Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, and other ORHP partners to secure the site, and provide three rented homes, plus three part-buy part-rent properties to meet the village’s housing needs.

New resident Amber Swadling said: “I have moved in with my two year old son from a smaller two bed home into this lovely new three bed, I’m really happy to be able to stay in the village because I’ve lived here all my life and all my friends and family are here.”

Already this year, Sovereign has completed eight affordable homes in Crays Pond near Goring, and has started on site to deliver village housing needs at Marcham and Watlington.

News release February 2007

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

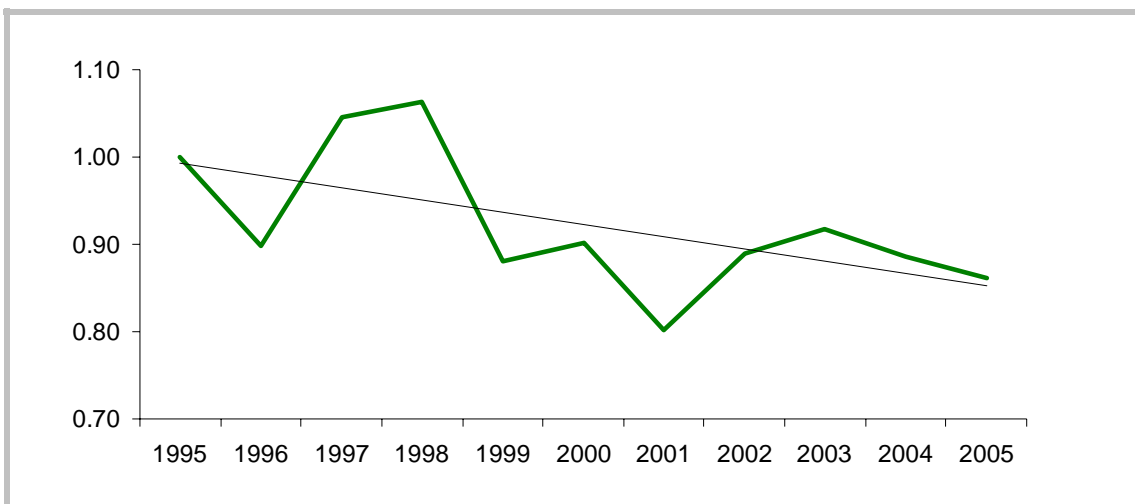
Affordable Housing partnership groups e.g. Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership	www.orhp.org.uk
Housing Market Assessment for Oxfordshire	<i>not yet published</i>
Rural Housing Enablers, managed by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, work with local communities, district councils and housing associations to develop affordable housing in villages where a need has been identified	www.oxonrcc.org.uk

Rural Challenge 3: Countryside and environment

Why is this a challenge?

- Oxfordshire’s countryside is one of its greatest assets in economic and social as well as environmental terms. It is vital to maintain an attractive, high quality countryside and environment as an economic asset supporting tourism and business development and investment decisions.
- However the pressures from changes in farming practices, inappropriate land management, increased development, and climate change are a threat to Oxfordshire’s environment and countryside.
 - The pressures on farming incomes and employment (see challenge 5) pose a threat to farmers’ roles as guardians of the countryside who maintain our natural assets;
 - Oxfordshire’s habitats and biodiversity remain at risk – the farmland bird index is below the 1995 baseline (see chart below);
 - Forecast new housing growth will increase pressures on the environment, natural resources, and green spaces.
- Many rural settlements have poor access to their local countryside and Oxfordshire has been identified as the county with the lowest percentage of accessible green space in the South East⁴.

Table 8 Oxfordshire’s Farmland Bird index and trendline, 1995 to 2005



Source: TVERC, 2006

⁴ An analysis of Accessible Natural Greenspace Provision in the South East, Forestry Commission, 2006

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- Over three quarters of Oxfordshire's countryside is under agricultural land use, of which just over half is used for crop production. There has been increased uptake of agri-environment schemes such as the Environmental Stewardship scheme, but changes in world prices for crops, changes in cropping to produce biomass for renewable energy and the impact of climate change (challenge 4) will continue to affect biodiversity and the landscape.
- Inappropriate management of forested land is an additional threat to biodiversity, but there are environmental benefits to be gained from improved management and promotion of woodlands.
- Demand for natural resources and land for new housing and infrastructure will have continue to have an impact on the countryside and biodiversity.
- Public rights of way are the main means for people to get a countryside "experience" of Oxfordshire, as there are no major country parks or urban commons outside Oxford city. Improving access to the countryside has implications for the strategy to encourage more tourism in rural Oxfordshire (see challenge 5).

Case study: **Lower Windrush Valley Project**

The Lower Windrush Valley Project, launched in 2001, works closely with mineral operators, landowners and the community to co-ordinate, implement and help manage projects that improve the landscape, biodiversity and public access of the area.

Long-term financial provision to secure the conservation management of the restored sites is secured via policies in The Minerals Local Plan, with the long-term funding agreements a condition of planning permission.

Examples of conservation management include Standlake Common, and Rushy Common, where mosaics of wetland and grassland habitats have been created, with the security of guaranteed management into the future. (RSPB Case Study of Lower Windrush Valley).

Ongoing extraction in the Lower Windrush Valley now continues alongside restored areas.

Full case study in Environment theme paper

Options for the future

- Recognise the value of a good quality environment as an economic asset which helps to attract skills, income and business to rural areas.
- Encourage farmers to collaborate on use of agri-environment schemes, and target areas which will provide the maximum benefit to reduce damage to the environment and biodiversity.
- Maintain links to Biodiversity Action Plans at county and regional level.
- Continue to give priority to the need for access to a well maintained, joined up and improved rights of way and countryside network.
- Continue support for environment and conservation groups.
- Encourage sustainable tourism (see challenge 5).

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

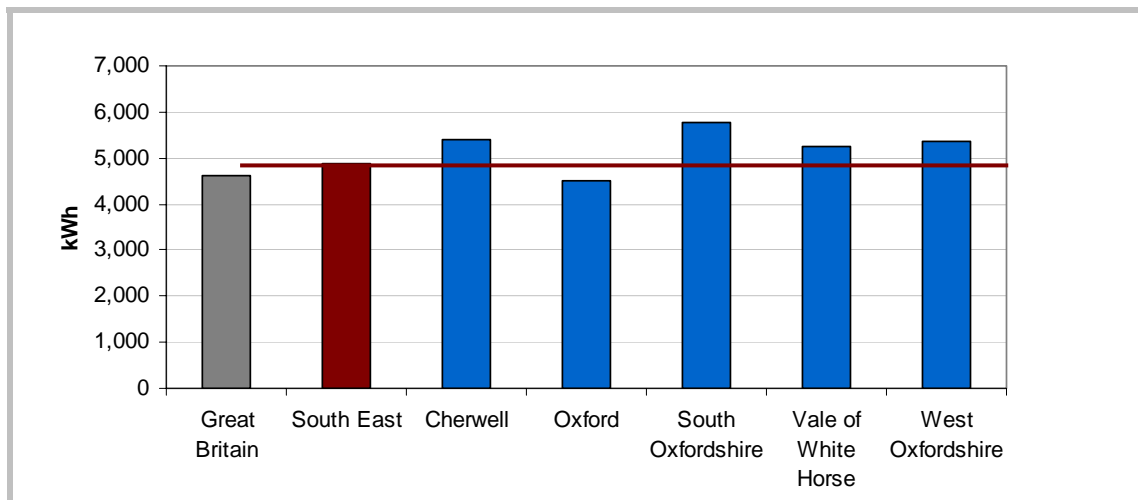
Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS)	www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/countryside
Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum	
Oxfordshire Woodland Project	
Oxfordshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan	
Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum	www.oncf.org.uk
Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan	www.oncf.org.uk
Wychwood Project	www.wychwoodproject.org
Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	www.cotswoldsaonb.com
Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	www.chilternsaonb.org
North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	www.northwessexdowns.org.uk
National Farmers Union	www.nfuonline.com
Woodland Habitat Action Plan for Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire	www.tverc.org

Rural Challenge 4: Climate change and resource use

Why is this a challenge?

- Climate change is increasingly seen as the greatest threat facing the world. Urban and rural Oxfordshire will be affected by climate change, but there will be some particular effects on rural Oxfordshire, both on the countryside and the communities that live there. Milder, wetter winters, and hotter, drier summers are predicted as a result of climate change; the increased risk of flooding, drought and water shortages is likely to affect farming practices and biodiversity in Oxfordshire's countryside.
- Levels of car ownership are higher in rural areas: according to the 2001 census only 11% of Oxfordshire's rural households were without a car (compared with 23% of urban households). Rural residents travel longer distances to work.
 - The census 2001 survey travel to work data shows that 25% of rural residents were local commuters compared with 46% of urban residents. Rural Cherwell had the highest proportion of long distance commuters.
- Domestic electricity consumption in Oxfordshire's rural districts is above the regional average (see chart below). Electricity consumption and fuel use contribute to climate change and both are expected to continue to rise.

Figure 6 Average annual domestic electricity consumption (2005) – sales per consumer



Source: DTI regional consumption statistics

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- The amount of crops grown as biofuel for renewable energy production in Oxfordshire (eg oilseed rape and short rotation coppice) has increased gradually and this is likely to continue, to meet government targets for energy generation. More food crops which are viable in warmer, drier weather conditions are also being introduced, as marginal crops such as maize become viable in southern Britain. These changes will have a major impact on Oxfordshire's landscape and biodiversity (challenge 4), but also present new opportunities for farming and land-based businesses.
- Climate change will also affect biodiversity in the county; some changes in species behaviour such as breeding patterns for birds, frogs and newts are already being observed.
- There continues to be insufficient supply of locally grown food to meet escalating demand. Increasing the production of locally grown food will reduce the need for imports and the associated "food miles", and also support rural business diversification (challenge 5).
- Rural communities may feel particular effects from future increases in fuel and transport costs introduced in response to the threat of climate change. Increasing fuel costs could affect businesses and services in rural areas disproportionately, increasing access problems as well as running costs which would accelerate their decline.
- The effects of a changing climate could affect the viability of some rural and land-based businesses, and may have an impact on rural tourism.

Case study: Blewbury village energy project

This is a community project aimed at reducing the energy use of householders in Blewbury village. A thermal imaging company took images across a range of different property types in Blewbury, which were then displayed at the Village Open Day in March. Householders were surveyed about their energy use and given free energy saving lightbulbs and personal home energy reports, with advice on ways to save energy and information on grants available.

The project is now engaging with local tradespeople to help improve the energy efficiency of people's homes based on the results of the thermal images and household surveys.

www.blewbury.co.uk/energy

Winner of Oxfordshire Sustainability and Conservation Award (OSCA) 2006

Options for the future

- Support local renewable energy production, including wood fuel and biofuels, and encourage the creation and development of markets for these products.
- Promote measures to increase production and develop new markets for local food.
- Support community initiatives by villages and market towns to reduce their carbon footprints, and ensure these are incorporated into parish and community plans.
- Improve access and transport opportunities by developing community based solutions, for example rural car clubs. (see also Challenge 1, Rural Transport Partnership)
- Encourage zero-carbon development and high environmental standards and use of renewables on new buildings; adopt the Code for Sustainable Homes for new housing launched in 2006.
- Continue support and encouragement for business and community initiatives to reduce resource use including waste minimisation and composting schemes.
- Ensure rural dimension is included in county-wide climate partnership work to combat climate change and promote adaptation measures.

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

TV renewable energy agency and TVEC supported by rural forum members	www.tvenergy.org www.tvec.org.uk
UK Climate Impacts Programme working in Oxfordshire to identify impacts and adaptation responses	www.ukcip.org.uk
The Oxfordshire Climate Xchange communications campaign based at Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute	http://climatex.org/
National Federation of Womens Institutes Climate Challenge	www.nfwi.org.uk
Oxfordshire Sustainable Business Partnership helping local businesses to reduce resource use	www.oxsbp.org.uk
Community Action Groups promoting community composting and waste reduction Schemes.	www.cagoxfordshire.org.uk

Rural Challenge 5: Economy and enterprise

Why is this a challenge?

- The economy in rural Oxfordshire is in relatively good health, with economic activity and employment rates above the rural South East average, and very low levels of unemployment compared with urban Oxfordshire. But there are a number of issues of concern for business in rural Oxfordshire.
- Business density in rural Oxfordshire, at 77 businesses per 1,000 working age residents, is lower than the rural South East average (84) and there are pockets of unemployment in some rural areas.
- The average household income in rural Oxfordshire is around 5% above the rural South East, however, workplace earnings - ie income from Oxfordshire-based jobs - are below the regional and UK averages. The largest difference is in Cherwell district where average workplace earnings are 12% below the average for the South East.
- Farm-based employment has declined by almost one fifth since 1990, employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing is below the national average, and the number of people employed in this sector (2,700) is low compared with other rural industry sectors (see table below). However, farming remains of vital importance to Oxfordshire's rural identity.
- Self-employment and home working are particularly important features of employment in rural Oxfordshire. A striking finding is that almost one quarter (23%) of those working in rural Oxfordshire are home-based workers, compared with only 11% in urban Oxfordshire.

Table 1 Number of Employee Jobs in Rural and Urban Oxfordshire by Industry Sector

Industry Sector	Rural Oxfordshire		Urban Oxfordshire	
	Number	%	Number	%
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	2,700	2.9	700	0.3
Mining & utilities	800	0.9	400	0.2
Manufacturing	10,700	11.6	26,600	11.9
Construction	5,000	5.4	6,100	2.8
Wholesale & retail	11,700	12.6	40,000	17.9
Hotels & catering	8,900	9.6	15,600	7.0
Transport, storage & comms	3,600	3.9	9,200	4.1
Real estate, renting & business services	24,400	26.4	44,000	19.7
Public admin & defence	5,200	5.7	8,700	3.9
Education	7,000	7.6	30,300	13.6
Health & social work	5,700	6.2	26,200	11.7
Financial and other services	6,600	7.2	15,200	6.8
Total: All Employees	92,200	100.0	223,100	100.0

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2004 Annual Business Inquiry (NOMIS). Figures for rural and urban Oxfordshire are calculated from data for lower layer super output areas (LSOA's). All farm-based employees (2003 SIC class 01.00) are assumed to be located in rural Oxfordshire. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- Relatively low earnings, high housing and transport costs, and lack of people with the relevant skills can cause particular recruitment difficulties for employers in rural areas. This can affect the longer-term viability and sustainability of rural businesses, which can have a knock-on effect on the profitability of neighbouring businesses.
- Lack of local employment and enterprise encourages car commuting out of the local area, resulting in further decline of market towns, and commuter and dormitory villages, as well as increased pollution and CO₂ emissions.
- The comparatively lower workplace earnings of people working in Oxfordshire's rural districts put them at a disadvantage when housing and transport costs are determined by the greater purchasing power of people working outside the district and in or near London.
- Home working offers many potential benefits and opportunities for local rural communities including reduced outward commuting and potentially increased involvement in local community activities and services. The significance of home working for Oxfordshire's rural areas needs to be recognised by service providers, and options explored for further support.
- Tourism is of vital importance to Oxfordshire's rural economy. There is an opportunity for the proposed Oxfordshire tourism strategy to recognise tourism's contribution to the economic viability of Oxfordshire's market towns and villages. The development of a sustainable tourism strategy (see also challenges 3 and 4) could help to open up new opportunities for businesses in rural Oxfordshire.
- There are significant opportunities to develop the role of market towns in attracting and supporting new business and enterprise. (challenge 1)

Case study: Faringdon Enterprise Gateway

Since its formation in March 2003, the Faringdon Enterprise Gateway in the Vale of White Horse district in Oxfordshire has been helping new and growing businesses by providing space and on site business support. The objectives of the Gateway are to:

- Remove barriers to small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) by providing flexible workspace and a sustainable support network.
- Increase the start up, survival and growth rates of local SMEs
- Promote a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation
- Contribute to the regeneration of Faringdon

The Faringdon Enterprise Gateway provides business support to a wide range of ventures from start-ups, sole traders and entrepreneurs to social enterprise and not-for-profit organisations. The planned new business centre will provide a mix of office space and workshops with flexible lease terms and on site business support, with links available to business advice mentoring and training through the Enterprise Gateway network and will help Faringdon provide new local business opportunities.

The Faringdon Gateway is one of a number of enterprise gateways that have been established across the region by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA). It is run in collaboration with the Business Link for MKOB (Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire). www.faringdongateway.co.uk www.businesslinksolutions.co.uk

Options for the future

- Encourage opportunities for employment and enterprise in Market Towns through the Oxfordshire Market Towns Network (see also Challenge 1)
- Consider more flexible responses from planning authorities in response to applications for business use in rural areas.
- Develop a rural skills centre in the Oxfordshire Countryside to preserve traditional countryside skills such as stone-walling and hedge laying.
- Continue to encourage and develop local production and supply chains.
- Consider incentives and support for homeworking, and draw on experience of homeworkers' local networking groups (eg in Adderbury and Goring) which are potential sources of information sharing, mutual support and joint action.
- Ensure that the proposed Oxfordshire tourism strategy has a strong rural dimension, and recognises the important role of sustainable tourism in supporting the rural economy.

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

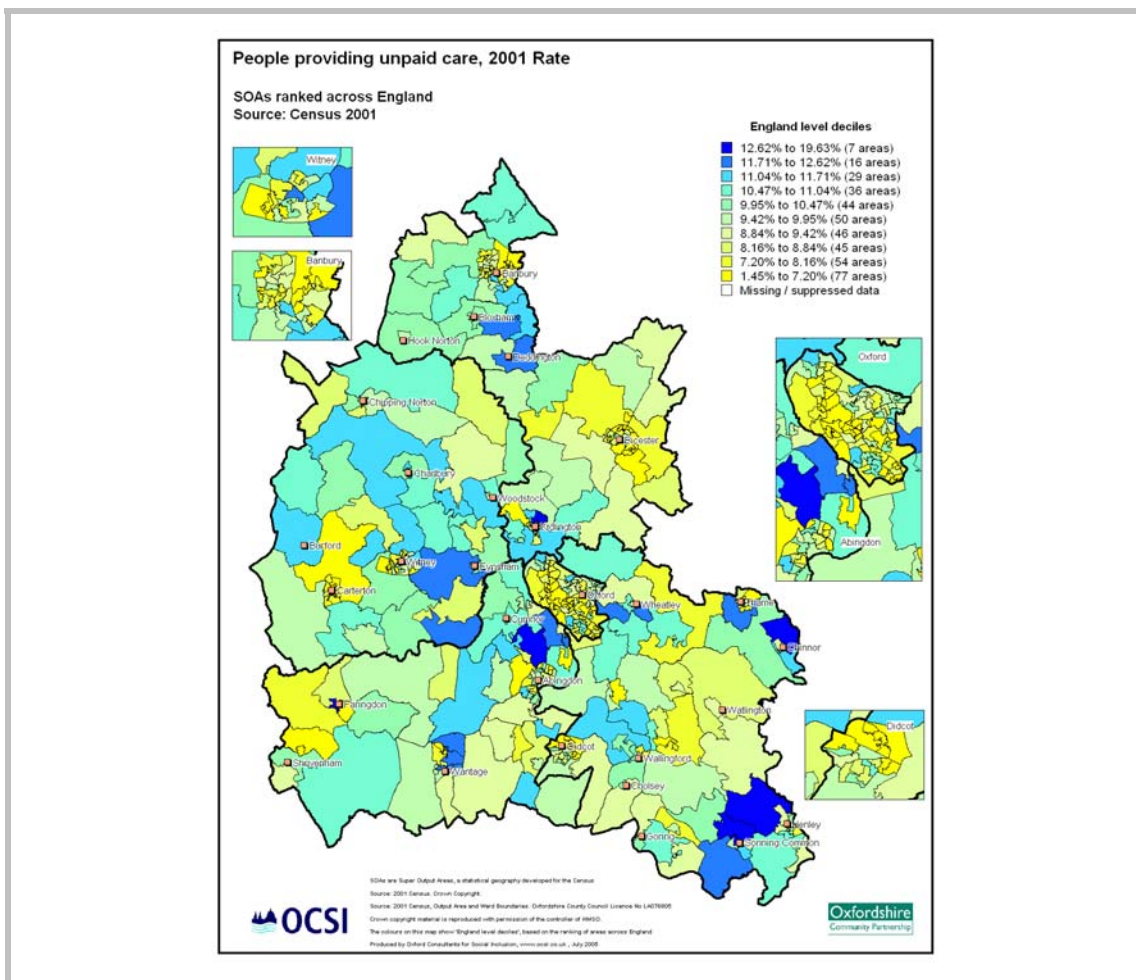
Oxfordshire Town Chambers Network	www.otcn.org.uk
Oxfordshire Food Group; support and marketing opportunities for local food producers and businesses	www.local-food.net
Oxfordshire Federation of Small businesses	www.fsb.org.uk
Abingdon & Witney College help run local dry-stone walling courses with the Cotswold Conservation Board	www.abingdon-witney.ac.uk
Oxfordshire Broadband Partnership	http://www.oxbroadband.co.uk/

Rural Challenge 6: Vulnerable People

Why is this a challenge?

- There are pockets of deprivation scattered across generally prosperous rural areas.
- The number of people over 85 living in rural areas is expected to increase significantly over the next 20 years. An additional 88% (or 9,100) of people in the over 85 age group are forecast to be living in rural districts by 2026.
- Fear of crime is relatively high in rural Oxfordshire and the police report higher rates of hate crime than in urban areas.
- A higher proportion of older people living in rural areas are providing unpaid care (see map below).
 - The age group with the biggest difference is 60 to 64 year olds where 19.3% of those living in rural Oxfordshire provide unpaid care compared with 17.4% of those living in urban areas.

Figure 7 People providing unpaid care across Oxfordshire ((darkest shades show highest rates)



Source: Census 2001, ONS crown copyright reserved

What are the consequences for rural Oxfordshire?

- It is difficult to identify and support vulnerable people scattered in small numbers across rural areas; in some areas the lower numbers of people at risk require a more specific and flexible response appropriate to their needs.
- Vulnerable people are likely to be most affected by reduced access to local services and poor public transport, and risk becoming more isolated. The growth in the number of older people may increase the number of isolated people in rural areas.
- Young people, people from minority ethnic groups and other individuals and groups at risk of social exclusion also have needs which can be overlooked; there are generally fewer local facilities and activities for young people in rural areas.
- Pockets of deprivation in relatively affluent areas can lead to polarisation within communities.
- Crime may be under-reported, and victims of crime in rural areas may be invisible to agencies but very visible in communities.

Case study: The Rural Grassroots Realities Research Project

This three year collaborative project between Age Concern Oxfordshire and Oxford Brookes University aims to create an archive record of older peoples' lives in rural West Oxfordshire at the beginning of the 21st Century and to influence rural policies for older people.

Older people living in rural West Oxfordshire have recorded their day-to-day lives with photographs and interviews, with the help of volunteer researchers, who themselves are over 65. Emerging themes focus on life transitions: retiring from paid work; contributing in different ways; moving to a different place or home; becoming ill, disabled or frail; being bereaved; and dying.

Understanding these transitions should help support organisations to develop flexible responses that can help prevent rural isolation and exclusion, meet people's individual needs, and help them continue to manage their own lives.

Case study: Mind and Body

The Mind and Body Project was developed by Oxfordshire County Council's Adult Learning Service in response to a request from June Hepworth, the Manager at the Hanover Gardens Sheltered Housing complex in Bicester, who had become very concerned that she did not see some of the residents for days at a time. They rarely mixed with the other residents and there were serious concerns about their health particularly mental health.

A 10 week programme of 2 hour learning activities was put together for the residents on central theme of 'health'. Activities included seated exercise sessions, a health walk, healthy cooking advice and demos and an aromatherapy massage session plus fun craft sessions. In one of the sessions children from one of the local primary schools joined in, making it a real intergenerational project.

The projects in Bicester and Banbury were a partnership between Oxfordshire County Council, Cherwell District Council and the Primary Care Trust. A proposal for funding has been developed to roll out the project to sheltered housing, care, nursing and other residential homes throughout the county .

Graham Ablett, Community Development Officer, Oxfordshire County Council

Options for the future

- Provide forecast data to parish, district and county planners to encourage forward planning.
- Use a locality based approach, and pinpoint priority areas.
- Raise awareness of service providers of the specific needs of vulnerable individuals and groups
- Ensure the Rural Framework and Rural Forum link with relevant strategies including the Children and Young People's plan, the Oxfordshire Play Strategy, and leisure strategies.
- Support inclusive community action planning which covers minority needs including needs of young people.
- Strengthen the provision of services for vulnerable people particularly through the role of the voluntary sector

Links to relevant partnerships and projects

Oxfordshire Children and Young people's plan	www.oxfordshire.gov.uk
Oxfordshire Rural Community Council	www.oxonrcc.org.uk
Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action	www.oxnet.org
Age Concern Oxfordshire	www.ageconcernoxon.org.uk
Citizens Advice Bureau	www.citizensadvice.org.uk
Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships	District Council websites
Oxfordshire County Council Community Development Team	www.oxfordshire.gov.uk
Oxfordshire Services Directory (OSD) - your guide to services, organisations and activities for children, young people and their families.	www.spired.com
Oxfordshire Carers Strategy	www.oxoncarersforum.org.uk www.oxfordshire.nhs.uk/carers www.oxfordshire.gov.uk

Conclusions and next steps

6.1 The workshop discussions have highlighted some key themes and conclusions which have emerged across all the topic areas. These should inform future decisions about how to take forward the proposals in the rural framework.

The role of the voluntary sector in supporting rural communities

6.2 Voluntary effort has long been a prominent feature of rural life, but the role of the voluntary sector has become increasingly important in rural areas where provision of local services is already sparse or where services have been lost.

6.3 Volunteers play a pivotal role in maintaining a sense of community and helping to support people at risk of exclusion or isolation. Thus, in developing appropriate responses in the future, it is of vital importance to acknowledge and support the role of the voluntary and community sector and of local volunteers in supporting local rural communities.

The need to strengthen parish and community planning and local governance

6.4 The problems associated with loss of local services, increased outward car-commuting, and lack of affordable housing have all played their part in reducing a sense of community, or “community spirit” in some rural towns and villages.

6.5 By May 2007 only 31 parish plans had been completed in Oxfordshire. A stronger local community planning process and framework (support for parish and market town plans) will enable local communities – both in villages and in market towns, to articulate their concerns and to make an active contribution to planning for their future. This may help to reduce the problem of “nimbyism” and build more cohesive local communities.

6.6 Part of the process should be to support capacity building and awareness raising for parish and town councils to enable them to respond to local issues and needs.

Defining local sustainable communities

6.6 It remains difficult to reach a consensus about the definition of a sustainable local community, and what are acceptable environmental limits. There are a range of different factors and actions which can contribute to the sustainability of any community of whatever size, and there cannot be one set template for measuring success. This debate is likely to continue at national and regional level, and in developing Oxfordshire’s Sustainable Community Strategy. Meanwhile it is proposed that, alongside a stronger role for local community plans, rural proofing and social inclusion proofing should be used to help evaluate the social, economic and environmental impact of plans, policies and services on local rural areas and communities.

Improving dialogue about rural issues between service providers, planning authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships

6.7 The rural workshop discussions were useful in bringing together spatial planners with voluntary and public sector service providers, sometimes from within the same local authority. There was general consensus on the need to engage in regular dialogue between these groups in order to shape a more flexible response to the concerns outlined in this rural framework. In addition, planning authorities should be encouraged to use rural evidence to inform Local Development Frameworks.

Taking forward the work of the rural framework

6.8 The process of developing a rural evidence base and framework has initiated a useful dialogue between a range of organisations, local authorities and individuals across Oxfordshire. This has already started to raise the profile of rural issues in Oxfordshire; the material from the evidence base and the workshop discussions is being incorporated into the Sustainable Community Strategy for Oxfordshire which is being developed through 2007 and early 2008.

6.9 The next stage of this work will need to be to:

- promote, develop and monitor progress of the six rural challenges with partner organisations.
- develop a target or targets for the Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement being developed during 2007/2008 around the role of volunteering and/or local or community plans to strengthen community life in rural areas.
- develop joint funding bids to support these initiatives.
- engage with planning authorities and strategic partnerships to raise rural issues of concern emerging from local community plans,
- promote awareness of Rural Services Standards and the need for rural proofing of policies, plans and services.
- continue to support development of the rural evidence base, and work to identify key challenges that are less easily supported by statistical evidence and could therefore be overlooked.

6.10 Developing the rural framework and evidence base has been the first task of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum, alongside hosting its launch event on the theme of sustainable energy in November 2006 at Blenheim Palace. To date the work to develop the rural framework and evidence base has been led by Oxfordshire County Council and financially supported by the county council and rural District Councils. However the work of the Rural Forum has been supported largely from within existing ORCC resources and by leveraging in external money, and has stretched ORCC's capacity.

6.11 Rural Forum members believe that a strong and dynamic rural forum, led and supported by ORCC, is needed:

- to take forward the rural framework challenges and recommendations at a strategic level,

- to provide leadership, and to promote and debate rural issues across Oxfordshire and the South East,
- to enable and catalyse local community action that addresses rural priority issues.

Recommendations

6.12 At its meeting on 12 June 2007, the Public Service Board agreed the following recommendations:

- a) to endorse the draft Rural Framework for Oxfordshire as a first step in setting out the challenges that need to be addressed in rural Oxfordshire.
- b) to invite the Oxfordshire Rural Forum Steering Group to explore innovative solutions to address the challenges identified.

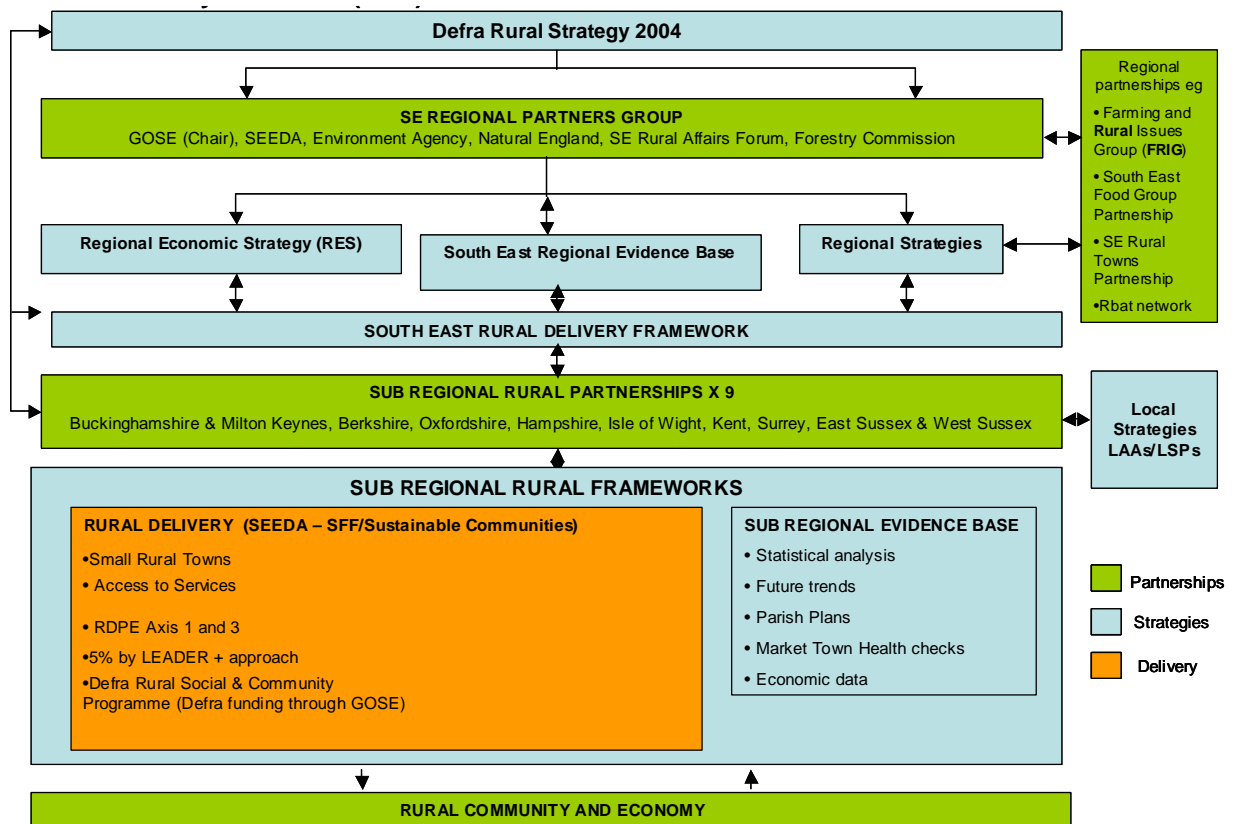
6.13 The Oxfordshire Rural Forum Steering Group therefore proposes to:

- Consider with other partners on the rural forum a prioritised plan of action in response to the rural framework challenges.
- Ensure arrangements are in place to monitor, review and communicate progress on rural issues across Oxfordshire on a regular basis.
- Develop a business plan setting out the costs and requirements for ORCC to provide a secretariat and leadership for the Oxfordshire Rural Forum, and ensure that appropriate and innovative actions to take forward the rural framework challenges are developed and implemented.

ANNEX 1 - Rural Forum Steering Group members 2007

Anne Kelaart	Chair
Toby Warren	Vale of White Horse District Council
Linda Watson	Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
Alison Baxter	Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action
Dene Robson	West Oxfordshire District Council
Sally Truman	South Oxfordshire District Council
Ian Davies	Cherwell District Council
Susie Ohlenschlager	Oxfordshire County Council
Margaret Melling	Data consultant
Emma Hodgkinson	SEEDA
Jean Mitchell	Oxfordshire Economic Partnership
Mike Jennings	Business representative
Clare Mowbray	Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum
Peter Cox	NFU
Martin Harris	Horspath Parish Council
Belinda Young	Savills
William Barton	West Oxfordshire District Council
Gwen Davies	Oxfordshire County Council
Gavin Colborne	Abingdon and Witney College
Glyn Evans	Rural Officer, Diocese of Oxford
Bryony Brown	Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust

ANNEX 2 – Delivery of rural policy and programmes in the South East



South East Contacts

South East Rural Affairs Forum	www.gos.gov.uk/gose/environmentRural/regionalRuralPolicy/ruralAffairsForum/
South East Food Group Partnership	www.sefgp.co.uk
South East England Development Agency	www.seeda.co.uk
South East England Regional Assembly	www.southeast-ra.gov.uk

ANNEX 3: Comparison with South East rural priorities

The following table shows the key themes highlighted by the South East rural delivery framework (2006 to 2009) cross-referenced to the Oxfordshire rural evidence base and framework.

<i>South East rural theme</i>	<i>Work done as part of Oxfordshire framework</i>
Biodiversity	Section on Biodiversity in the Rural Environment paper Link to Oxfordshire Biodiversity action plan
Economic development and Enterprise	Rural Economy paper Poverty and deprivation paper
Exclusion	Poverty and deprivation paper Work from SE rural exclusion project (OCSI)
Food and farming	Link to Berks, Bucks and Oxfordshire Food Groups
Forestry	Woodlands and forestry section in Rural Environment paper
Green space	Link to Oxfordshire Countryside service Rights of Way improvement plan Link to Oxfordshire play strategy
Heritage	Link to Cotswold AONB management plan (historic environment section)
Housing	Rural housing paper
Landscape	Link to AONB management plans
Water and waste	Water and waste sections in Rural Environment paper