



5. Protecting and enhancing the environment

- 5.1 The protection, conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment has always been a priority of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan. The policies in this chapter continue to protect and enhance the county's environmental assets in both urban and rural areas, as well as setting out a framework for its effective management.

Landscape character

EN1 Local planning authorities will ensure that proposals for development contribute to the protection, maintenance and, where possible, enhancement of Oxfordshire's landscape character, and in particular the natural beauty of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to reflect their national importance. Development will be permitted only if it does not unacceptably damage the local landscape.

- 5.2 Oxfordshire has an attractive and diverse landscape. Government policy in PPS7 (Sustainable Development in Rural Areas) is to protect the countryside for the sake of its intrinsic character and beauty and diversity of its landscape, heritage and wildlife, and that development plans should seek to protect, and where possible, enhance the character of the landscape.
- 5.3 In line with the character based approach to landscape protection, the County Council has undertaken work on the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS)¹⁷, which provides local planning authorities, developers and other organisations with greater understanding of Oxfordshire's landscape and biodiversity resource, from joint countryside character areas at national level, down to information on wildlife habitats and landscape character at a parish level. Landscape character assessments have also been carried out by the district councils in Oxfordshire and should be taken into account in preparing development plans and considering development proposals.
- 5.4 There are three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Oxfordshire: the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, and the North Wessex Downs. The primary objective of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape, which includes wildlife, archaeological and cultural heritage. In considering proposals for development, priority will be given to conserving and enhancing the beauty of the landscape within AONBs in accordance with PPG7.

¹⁷ This is a national pilot project sponsored by the County Council, English Nature, Countryside Agency and the Northmoor Trust. OWLS is a combined landscape character assessment and biodiversity appraisal of the county which provides strategic and detailed information to better enable the protection, management and expansion of Oxfordshire's landscape and biodiversity resource.

- 5.5 The Countryside and Rights of Way Act placed a statutory duty on local authorities to produce management plans for AONBs. Management plans have been produced for the Chilterns, Cotswolds and North Wessex Downs AONBs.



Biodiversity

EN2 The following sites of at least national importance will be protected from damaging development:

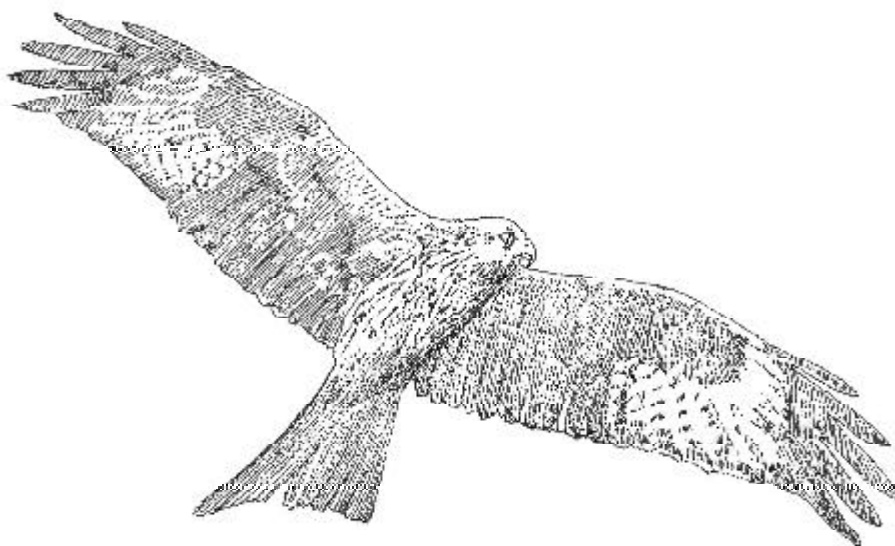
- Special Areas of Conservation;
- National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest; and
- sites which support specially protected species.

On other sites of acknowledged nature conservation importance development will be permitted only if there is an overriding need or if damage to the ecological interest can be prevented by the use of conditions or planning obligations.

In determining proposals for development local planning authorities will seek environmental measures and promote the use of conditions and management agreements to help protect, manage and expand the biodiversity resource of the county, in particular priority habitats and species.



- 5.6 The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)¹⁸ was prepared in response to the 1992 Earth Summit, at which a convention on biological diversity was signed by the UK and 150 other countries. In 1994 the UK produced a report Biodiversity, The UK Action Plan¹⁹, which identified a range of priority habitats and species of international importance. The plan also recognised that “biodiversity is ultimately lost or conserved at the local level” and that local BAPs are an essential part of the process. Oxfordshire’s BAP was published in 1998 and it was subsequently followed by a series of more detailed habitat action plans (HAPs) focussing on the protection, management and expansion of the local biodiversity resource. In particular it highlighted those priority habitats relevant to Oxfordshire which fall within the UK action plan. They include:
- woodland;
 - neutral meadows and pastures;
 - chalk and limestone grassland;
 - heathland;
 - wetlands.
- 5.7 At present, much of the biodiversity resource associated with these priority habitats is closely linked to designated sites such as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)²⁰ and county wildlife sites. Appendix 3 shows the distribution of sites of different levels of designation across Oxfordshire. In addition some local authorities have also designated sites of local importance for nature conservation. Their combined total area represents a very small area of the county, probably less than 4%, and it is essential that the planning process includes policies which help to safeguard, maintain and expand this limited resource. The underlying principle should be that there is no further net loss of priority habitats or species within the county.



¹⁸ Action for Wildlife, Oxfordshire’s Biodiversity Plan, Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum, July 1998.

¹⁹ Biodiversity, The UK Action Plan, DOE, HMSO 1994.

²⁰ SSSIs include nationally important geological sites as well as those which are valuable for their habitats or species. All SSSIs including those of geological importance, are protected by policy EN2.



- 5.8 Local authorities and land managers have a key role to play in relation to the implementation of Oxfordshire's BAP. Joint support of the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre will provide effective definition and monitoring of biodiversity, and through support for the county wildlife sites project, organisations like the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and landowners will be provided with expert guidance on the protection and appropriate management of key habitats. Planning authorities can also make significant contribution to the BAP process through the appropriate use of conditions and management agreements. The restoration and subsequent management of mineral workings can specifically strengthen the status of priority habitats such as heathland, calcareous grassland and wetlands such as reedbeds.

Agricultural land quality and soil

EN3 Development on the best and most versatile agricultural land shall have a regard to the quality and productiveness of such land alongside other sustainability considerations. Where significant development of agricultural land is unavoidable, areas of poorer quality land shall be used in preference to that of a higher quality, except where this would be inconsistent with other sustainability considerations. Where undeveloped agricultural land is to be developed, any adverse effects on the environment shall be minimised.

- 5.9 Regional Planning Guidance (RPG9) says that valuable characteristics of soil and land should be protected. Government policy in PPS7 is that the presence of best and most versatile agricultural land (defined by DEFRA as land within grades 1, 2 and 3a) should be taken into account alongside other sustainability considerations such as biodiversity, landscape character, amenity or heritage interest, access to jobs or services, and protection of natural resources. The decision as to whether best and most versatile land should be used for development rests with local planning authorities taking into account relevant factors.
- 5.10 Soil fulfils a wide range of interrelated functions. It is a growing medium for food and fuel crops and for providing animal pasture, a key factor in landscape and habitat diversity, and a source of geological and historical evidence. The Department of Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has published a national strategy for moving towards more sustainable soil use and protection²¹.

²¹ In March 2001 the then Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions published for consultation the Draft Soil Strategy for England. DEFRA published the first Soil Action Plan for England: 2004-2006 in May 2004.



Historic and cultural heritage

EN4 The fabric and setting of listed buildings including Blenheim Palace and Park, a World Heritage Site, will be preserved and the character or appearance of conservation areas and their settings will be preserved or enhanced. Other elements of the historic environment, including historic parks and gardens, battlefields and historic landscapes will also be protected from harmful development.

5.11 Oxfordshire contains many buildings, areas, gardens and landscapes which are an irreplaceable part of the county's heritage which should be conserved. There are nearly 13,000 listed buildings and structures in Oxfordshire and over 220 conservation areas, and Blenheim Palace and Park is designated as a world heritage site. World heritage site status reflects the outstanding international importance of sites. Proposals for development that affect the world heritage site or its setting are not precluded but will be carefully scrutinised. The contribution that development might make to saving historic buildings and their grounds may exceptionally be an additional and significant factor in the consideration of proposals which would otherwise be unacceptable. Where demolition or alteration of listed buildings is to be permitted, local planning authorities should consider the need to ensure recording of features which would be affected or lost. There is not currently an historic landscape character assessment of the county. However, work has been carried out for the Cotswolds AONB, and assessments for the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs are underway in conjunction with the Conservation Board and Council of Partners.

EN5 The conservation of Oxford's architectural and historic heritage, including its green spaces and its landscape setting, will take priority in considering proposals for development in and around the city.





- 5.12 A key element in RPG9 is that urban areas should become the main focus for development. At the same time however the best of the region's cultural and natural heritage needs to be protected and preserved. The future development of urban areas must therefore be based on an understanding of their historic character; preserving and adapting historic buildings to accommodate new uses and provide a focus for urban communities; and by enhancing urban rivers, canals, parks and other green spaces. Apart from the need to protect the historic character of Oxford for its own sake, the city is the county's largest urban area and will see significant housing and other development over the next decade. It is also a major tourist destination and its character is an important factor in its attractiveness as a business location. Policy EN5 recognises Oxford's particular importance, and should be read in conjunction with the policy on the Green Belt.

Archaeology

EN6 There will be a presumption in favour of preserving in situ nationally and internationally important archaeological remains, whether scheduled or not, and their settings. Development affecting other archaeological remains should include measures to secure their preservation in situ or where this is not feasible, their recording or removal to another site.

- 5.13 Archaeological remains are by their nature a finite and non-renewable resource which once destroyed cannot be recreated. Development proposals which would affect Scheduled Ancient Monuments also require scheduled monument consent from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Oxfordshire has a rich archaeological resource with nearly 300 Scheduled Ancient Monuments. However, these represent only about 2% of the known archaeology resource in the county. Oxfordshire County Council is responsible for maintaining the Sites and Monument Record which currently holds information on more than 13,000 archaeological remains.
- 5.14 There is considerable archaeological potential on many sites for which information is presently limited. Historic town and village centres, greenfield and previously developed sites may all contain significant levels of surviving archaeology. In assessing proposals for development local planning authorities will seek to identify this potential by requiring archaeological desk-based assessments and field evaluations in accordance with PPG16. Advice on the implications of development should be sought from the County Archaeologist at an early stage and preferably before planning applications are submitted. Where planning permission is to be sought from Oxford City Council advice should be sought from the City Archaeologist.



Geology

EN7 Nationally and regionally important geological features including geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Regionally Important Geological Sites shall be protected from harmful development and retained in situ unless there are exceptional reasons justifying their removal, in which event their presence shall be appropriately recorded.

- 5.15 Oxfordshire has a rich geological resource, including a full range of limestone rocks from lias clays to chalk. In addition to important geological sites which are designated as SSSIs and protected by policy EN2 and regionally important geological sites (RIGS)²², previously unknown geological remains may sometimes be discovered. The County Council considers that where such finds are made, all efforts should be made to protect those of national or international importance and, if this is not possible, they should at least be recorded. The Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum is proposing to prepare a geodiversity action plan (GAP) to help recognise the significance of geological resources and enable their protection.

Water quality

EN8 Development that will lead to unacceptable deterioration in water quality will not be permitted.

- 5.16 Rivers, canals, lakes, ground-water, ponds and wetlands are amongst the areas protected by this policy. New development can have significant effects on the quality of surface and groundwater, and proposals which would place it at risk will not be permitted. Development proposals can offer opportunities to enhance the water environment by increasing public access or improving water-related habitats, landscape or water quality. Such proposals will be welcomed where they comply with other development plan policies.
- 5.17 Achieving a continuing overall improvement in the quality of water through the control of pollution is a principal aim of the Environment Agency, and also British Waterways.

²² The full title of RIGS is Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites.

Flood risk and surface water drainage

EN9 Development in undeveloped areas at high risk from flooding or in the functional floodplain will not be permitted. A flood risk assessment will be required for proposals for development except where there is little or no flood risk. Proposals for redevelopment of existing buildings and their curtilage within areas of high flood risk should aim to improve conditions locally and not worsen flood risk elsewhere.

New development should not lead to an increase in run-off, which would exacerbate flood risk elsewhere. The use of sustainable drainage systems to regulate run-off will be required as part of development proposals.





- 5.18 Large areas of Oxfordshire within each of the main river catchments are prone to flooding. In recent years Oxfordshire, as with other parts of the country, has experienced significant damage to property due to flooding. The predicted impact of climate change is likely to include increased flood risk as a result of more intense periods of rainfall, hotter drier summers and wetter winters, and a greater incidence of extreme weather. Wetter winters may also result in instances of groundwater flooding. Farmers and land managers can assist the seasonal control of water by providing winter water storage on farms.
- 5.19 Government policy in PPG25: Development and Flood Risk is to reduce the risks to people and the developed and natural environment from flooding. Policy EN8 sets out how the County Council will apply a risk based approach to development proposals in accordance with PPG25. This may result in development being permitted that requires the provision of flood defence and mitigation measures, generally funded by the developer. If agreement cannot be reached on the provision of contributions, the applications for development should be refused in accordance with the precautionary principle. An indication of the extent of land at risk of flooding is available from the Environment Agency.
- 5.20 Development can have an impact on flooding by increasing run-off, even in areas of little or no flood risk, and PPG25 encourages surface water run-off to be controlled as near to the source as possible by encouraging sustainable drainage systems²³.

Water resources and waste water infrastructure

EN10 Development will be permitted only where adequate water resources and waste water infrastructure for the development already exist or can readily be provided without risk to existing abstractions, water quality, the water environment or nature conservation.

- 5.21 Demand for water in Oxfordshire is growing and is likely to become a more significant issue over the next few decades due to climate change. RPG9 says that the need to balance the growing demand for water with the needs of the environment is crucial. It states that new development should be located and its implementation planned in such a way as to allow for sustainable provision of water services and timely investment in sewage treatment and discharge systems to maintain the appropriate standard of water quality. Consultation with the Environment Agency and Thames Water Utilities (or other relevant water utility company) should be carried out at the earliest possible stage in preparing development proposals.

²³ Sustainable drainage systems use techniques to control surface water run-off as close to the source as possible before it enters a watercourse. It includes a range of measures such as preventative measures (e.g. rain water recycling), filter strips and swales, filter drains and permeable and porous pavements, infiltration devices, basins and ponds.



EN11 Proposals for major new reservoirs in Oxfordshire will be permitted only if there is a proven need for increased water resources which cannot be met in more economical and environmentally less intrusive ways, and all reasonable measures to manage demand for water, including controlling loss through water leakage, have been taken.

5.22 The demand for water resources in Oxfordshire and the South East is growing. Thames Water continues to undertake studies into the feasibility of developing a new reservoir within Vale of the White Horse district. However, a formal planning application for this proposal has yet to be submitted.