

## **OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **South East Plan: District Housing Distribution**

#### **Sustainability Appraisal – Central Oxfordshire**

##### Introduction

1. The South East Plan is subject to a Sustainability Appraisal process which is being carried out on SEERA's behalf by Environmental Resources Management (ERM). This note sets out how Oxfordshire County Council has carried out Sustainability Appraisal for the central Oxfordshire sub-region and the rest of the county in response to SEERA's requests for inputs to the regional Sustainability Appraisal.

##### Identifying Key Sustainability Issues

2. The first step in the Sustainability Appraisal was to identify key sustainability issues for the Central Oxfordshire sub-region. In September 2004 Oxfordshire County Council officers identified which of the sustainability issues in the Government's Integrated Regional Framework were both significant for Oxfordshire and deliverable at the county level the key issues for the sub-region and recorded this on a template provided by ERM (Table 1).

##### First Appraisal

3. A second template provided by ERM (Table 2) was then used by County Council officers to record their assessment of the sustainability of the central Oxfordshire strategies that were put forward in the first draft South East Plan:

- Option A: the development of larger settlements beyond the green belt;
- Option B: one or more significant urban extensions to Oxford.

##### Second Appraisal

4. In July 2005 a group met to review the Sustainability Appraisal for the two options for housing in Central Oxfordshire that were being developed for consultation. These options were both variants that were developed based on Option A from the draft South East Plan:

- Option 1. Most of the additional greenfield requirement divided equally between Bicester and Didcot (about 4,000 homes at each town); and
- Option 2. Concentrating more of the greenfield development in the south of the county where there is potential for significant employment growth. This would mean up to 4,000 homes at Didcot, about 2,000 at Wantage & Grove, and about 2,000 at Bicester.

5. The Sustainability Appraisal group for this second Appraisal consisted of County Council officers and business and environmental experts from the Central Oxfordshire Working Group. In the Sustainability Appraisal meeting the group recorded their assessment of sustainability issues for each option, once again using Table 2 of the template provided by ERM. In addition the group appraised the sustainability impacts of "rest of county" areas, although this was less meaningful due to the lack of geographic

specificity of the distribution for areas beyond central Oxfordshire. This second Appraisal took into account the sustainability issues that ERM had highlighted as important for the sub-region.

### Final review of the Sustainability Appraisal

6. A final review of the Sustainability Appraisal was carried out by Oxfordshire County Council officers who checked the results of the second Appraisal taking into account the technical work that informed the development of a preferred strategy for housing in central Oxfordshire and the rest of the county. This review was recorded on the same template that was used for the second Appraisal, retaining the information from the second Appraisal and highlighting in bold review comments any changes.

### Evidence Base

7. The second Appraisal drew on all available SEERA guidance and the county council's ongoing technical feasibility assessment as background information. This included information on the constraints to development (floodplains, agricultural land, landscape value, transport constraints, employment, services such as schools, waster availability), on the key characteristics of potential strategic development areas, and contextual information from the county council's Understanding Oxfordshire data project.

### Input to the decision making process

8. The first Appraisal was one of the background papers available to Cabinet members for their 19 October 2004 meeting and helped to inform their decision. At this meeting, members agreed, among other things, that "...the preferred strategy for further development in central Oxfordshire should be that outlined in Option A in the report (Development of Larger Settlements beyond the Green Belt)."

9. The second Appraisal was one of the background papers for Cabinet members on 6 September 2005 where they agreed the approach to be taken for consultation on central Oxfordshire housing options and to the publication of background material for the consultation which included the Sustainability Appraisal.

10. The final review of the Sustainability Appraisal was an annex to the report considered by the Cabinet on 6 December to inform their decision on a housing distribution for central Oxfordshire to recommend to SEERA.

### ERM feedback

11. ERM's comments on the first Appraisal were received on 13 September 2005 so could not inform the second Appraisal which took place in July 2005.

12. ERM identified flooding, poverty and social exclusion and regeneration, land use on vacant land in urban areas, biodiversity, and countryside and historic environment as issues that may be critical sustainability problems or constraints at the sub-regional or local level. A key part of the central Oxfordshire strategy is a green belt policy, one of the purposes of which is to support urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. However, central Oxfordshire is not an area identified in the

South East Plan for regeneration and regeneration is not highly significant for the sub-region. Poverty and social exclusion were identified by the county council as of medium rather than high priority for the central Oxfordshire sub-region. However the other critical sustainability areas identified by ERM were identified by the county council as high priorities and these issues were reviewed during the both the first and second Sustainability Appraisals.

13. ERM identified a number of issues from the first Appraisal which in their view should be included in the sub-regional strategy. These issues were: raising educational standards; reducing crime and the fear of crime; improving accessibility to all services and facilities; issues relating to effective protection of the environment; waste management; water resource management; and energy efficiency. The sub-regional strategy incorporates the need for services such as schools, waste management and water resources, and the strategy has been fully integrated with the county council's planning on transport and accessibility. Policies for reducing crime and the fear of crime and for effective protection of the environment more generally are included in South East Plan core policies.

14. The final officer review of the second Sustainability Appraisal found no points in ERM's list of specific points from the first Sustainability Appraisal which remained relevant for amending the second Appraisal matrix. For the second Appraisal, the specificity of the housing distribution options had moved on considerably and a more in-depth appraisal was able to be carried out which addressed many of the concerns that ERM had about the first Appraisal. ERM's specific comments on the first Appraisal were effectively superseded by the fact that different options were reviewed in the second Appraisal and that it brought together a range of experts who were able to undertake a more informed consideration of the issues drawing on the evidence base that was then available.

## Sustainability Appraisal

Table 2

AIM: To assist the development and refinement of options by identifying potential sustainability impacts.

NOTE: The appraisal below focuses on the main difference between Option 1 and 2, which (at this stage in the process) was locating more housing at Bicester, versus more housing at Wantage and Grove with the same level of development at Didcot under both options.

Integrated Regional Framework Objective	Option 1 Split the Greenfield development equally between Bicester and Didcot		Option 2 Less development at Bicester and more in Wantage&Grove (same as Option 1 at Didcot)		Option 3 Rest of County – 660 dwellings	
	Performance	Commentary / explanation	Performance	Commentary / explanation	Performance	Commentary / explanation
<p><b>Key for performance:</b>                      + positive      - negative      0 neutral      ? uncertain                      A distinction should also be made between short, medium and long term, if appropriate</p>						
<b>Social progress which recognises the needs of everyone</b>						
1. To ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live in a decent, sustainably constructed and affordable home	+		+		+	
	<p>There is potential for a positive impact on sustainable construction and affordability but it depends on delivery which is beyond local authority control.                      50% affordable housing is sought in Central Oxfordshire policy. Large scale development may be able to deliver significant amounts of AH, depending on location. Quality of the housing is important.  <b>Review comment: no changes</b></p>					
2. To <del>reduce</del> <u>minimise</u> the risk of flooding and the resulting detriment to public well-being, the economy and the environment.	0		0	Wantage & Grove have potential groundwater and drainage issues which can be managed, and has only small areas of potential flood risk.	?	LAs need to take account of flood risk in deciding location and design of development.

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		<p>Flood risk needs to be considered in deciding location and design of development. Local authorities would seek to avoid development in flood plains under Structure Plan and SE Plan policies.</p> <p>Didcot areas of potential development have never flooded according to historical records, although they could be at risk according to the latest EA data. There are concerns about parts of the Didcot area but development can be accommodated by avoiding potential areas of flood risk. There are no obvious concerns at Bicester although small areas of flood risk would have to be avoided.</p> <p><b>Review comment: a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment is envisaged for Didcot, with results available towards the end of 2006.</b></p>				
3. To improve the health and well-being of the population and reduce inequalities in health	0		0		0	Development should provide some opportunity to meet social needs.
		<p>Location of development makes little difference to meeting objective 3.</p> <p>Links to decent quality of housing and affordable housing, provision of facilities. Good cycle networks, being able to get out in to the country. Access to the Ridgeway from Wantage &amp; Grove.</p> <p>Concern over access to major health care facilities. Bicester has better road access to JR hospital than Didcot, Wantage &amp; Grove. Car access and public transport is better from Bicester than at Grove/Wantage. Public transport access to hospitals could be addressed for either option 1 or 2.</p> <p>Development in either option 1 or 2 may help to retain local community hospitals and improve other health facilities.</p> <p>Development close to jobs can increase opportunities for walking and cycling which can improve health. Potential to cycle to work from Didcot and to the station. In Bicester it is possible to cycle to the stations, although this depends how far further development in peripheral areas is from the station and provision of cycle-routes. There is also scope to enhance employment in Bicester which might then facilitate cycle access to jobs.</p> <p><b>Review comment: No change. Work is ongoing to identify health service needs to support development under the South East Plan.</b></p>				
4. To reduce poverty and social exclusion and close the gap between the most disadvantaged communities [in the South East] and the rest [of the region]	?		?		?	

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	Not location specific. Depends on design and implementation.  This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level. However location of employment land in or accessible to the most deprived areas could help to reduce poverty and social exclusion.  <b>Review comment: No change.</b>					
5. To raise educational achievement levels [across the region] and develop opportunities for everyone to acquire the skills needed to find, remain and progress at work	?		?		?	
	Depends on facilities (existing or provided). Development could secure improved access to a wider range of education.  <b>Review comment: The proposed Implementation Plan includes skills development initiatives and helping people to fulfil their potential is one of the priorities in the Oxfordshire Plan.</b>					
6. To reduce crime and the fear of crime	?		?		?	
	Safety and security measures could be designed into the new communities but it depends on implementation.  <b>Review comment: No change.</b>					
7. To create and sustain vibrant communities	+/-	Opportunities in Bicester, if development delivers new facilities and employment.	+/-	Housing at Wantage&Grove encourages shorter commutes than at Biceser, but the character of these towns will change.	?	

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	<p>The potential exists to improve and sustain the vibrancy of main development locations, resulting in an increased range of jobs, services and leisure facilities, subject to the necessary infrastructure being provided. Potential to add vitality and improve town centres.</p> <p>Development at Bicester might support more facilities. If it becomes a larger commuter town this would harm Bicester community. Need employment in Bicester to support current and additional housing. Small town character of Wantage&amp;Grove will change and they are expected to accommodate employees working at Harwell and Milton Park which could lead to short-distance commuting and may therefore detract from the vibrancy of these communities.</p> <p><b>Review comment: Town centre development and improved road and rail links to Bicester are very important to support development. The proposed Implementation Plan includes economic and marketing strategies to address the number and range of jobs at Bicester. Commuting from Wantage &amp; Grove would be likely due to resident/jobs imbalance.</b></p>					
8. To improve accessibility to all services and facilities	+	Bicester has some local facilities, town centre improvements, and better access to Oxford. There are prospects for the East-West rail link. Bicester has better access to jobs in Oxford.	+/-	Wantage & Grove have fewer local facilities and worse access to Oxford than Bicester, but is a good location in terms of access to jobs in the south of Oxfordshire.	?	More remote from major facilities and jobs (except Banbury).
	<p>Further development would give the opportunity for improving public transport within settlements and increasing the range of services.</p> <p><b>Review comment: Bicester and Didcot have greater capacity for improved services and facilities and improved transport links, particularly by public transport.</b></p>					
9. To encourage increased engagement in cultural activity across all sections of the community [in the South East]	+	Bicester has better access to Oxford (if rail links are improved).	+/-	As above	?	
	<p><b>Review comment: Bicester and Didcot have greater capacity for improved services and facilities and improved transport links, particularly by public transport.</b></p>					

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<b>Effective protection of the environment</b>						
10. To improve efficiency in land use through the re-use of previously developed land and existing buildings, including re-use of materials from buildings, and encourage urban renaissance	+		+		?	Depends on where the houses go
	All options have the same assumptions on reuse of pdl within settlements and will involve development on greenfield land. Cannot deliver reuse of materials and use of materials is not location specific. Growth at Bicester potentially could achieve urban renaissance if the towns gets better facilities and jobs. No significant difference between the options. <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
11. To reduce air pollution and ensure air quality continues to improve	?		?		?	
	Transport is the main source of air pollution. Didcot, Bicester, Wantage&Grove are not in AQMAs. Wantage&Grove has better air quality at present but is more car dependent than the other locations. Bicester commuting is for longer distances, but it has better public transport options. Air pollution impact depends on whether local employment is created in Bicester. <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
12. To address the causes of climate change through reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and ensure that the South East is prepared for its impacts	?		?		?	
	The main issues are transport, construction and energy efficiency (in buildings and fuel use). Aim for more walking and cycling, local employment, local facilities and community services, good local bus services, and making better use of train services. Ensure development at any location does not increase floodrisk. <b>Review comment: Bicester has potential to perform better than Wantage &amp; Grove in terms of many of the factors noted above.</b>					

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13. To conserve and enhance the region's biodiversity	?		?		?	
	None of the potential development options include SSSI. Need to check Oxfordshire BAP and request BBOWT comments. Impact of increased abstraction of water on sites such as Otmoor, and possible water quality issue. Design and landscaping of development sites can make a big difference.  <b>Review comment: No comments received from BBOWT. Water abstraction, water for environmental needs, and water quality is an issue at Bicester unless supply/demand balance in the Swindon and Oxfordshire water resource area is addressed.</b>					
14. To protect, enhance and make accessible for enjoyment, the region's countryside and historic environment	?		?		?	Many rural settlements are historic
	Wantage&Grove are more accessible to the countryside and close to the Ridgeway . Both Wantage&Grove and Didcot are close to AONB. Few constraints at Bicester and Didcot. Bicester appears to have less pedestrian access to the countryside.  <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
15. To reduce road congestion and pollution levels by improving travel choice, and reducing the need for travel by car/lorry	?		?		?	Will be negative unless housing is meeting local needs and balanced by employment.
	Bicester has better potential rail access than Wantage&Grove. Didcot is also well placed for public transport. Wantage&Grove has less scope for public transport. Premium bus routes linking Bicester with Oxford. Potential for East West rail link between Oxford, Bicester and Milton Keynes. If people are going to travel, Bicester has the potential for more sustainable modes of travel. But Wantage&Grove and Didcot could involve shorter commutes.  <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
<b>Prudent use of natural resources</b>						
16. To reduce the global social and environmental impact of consumption of resources by using sustainably produced and local products						

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	This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level. <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
17. To reduce waste generation and disposal, and achieve the sustainable management of waste						
	This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level. <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
18. To maintain and improve the water quality of the region's rivers and coasts, and to achieve sustainable water resources management						
	Water resources management could be encouraged by LAs eg water storage and saving measures, but is not deliverable at county or district level. Possible water quality issue (Thames Water study to come). Urban development may increase run off. Need to incorporate sustainable drainage systems.  This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level. <b>Review comment: Continuing issue of waste water treatment and the impact on water quality at Bicester, but this is not identified by Thames Water as preventing growth, subject to the requirements of the Environment Agency which might be tightened in the future.</b>					

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19. To increase energy efficiency, and the proportion of energy generated from renewable sources in the region						
	Oxfordshire should use new methods in our construction and lead the way given the high tech industries located in the county, and publicly funded research. This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level. <b>Review comment: No change</b>					
<b>Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth</b>						
20. To ensure high and stable levels of employment so everyone can benefit from the economic growth of the region	0		0		0	
	Lots of planned employment at Harwell and Milton Park whereas employment at Bicester requires encouragement, and so there is a risk in depending on employment growth there. No impact on areas of social deprivation from development under either option. Neutral impact overall. <b>Review comment: A strategy for growth at Bicester must be accompanied by local economic and marketing strategy for the town involving the local authorities, economic development partners and the private sector.</b>					
21. To sustain economic growth and competitiveness across the region	+		+		+	
	Option 2 delivers more housing closer to where more employment is already planned. Bicester is a more flexible location for more employment areas (Milton Keynes as well as Oxford). Bicester has better transport links. <b>Review comment: Bicester is well located for access to employment locations eg Oxford and Milton Keynes.</b>					
22. To stimulate economic revival in priority regeneration areas						

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		<p>Bicester will benefit more from economic revival in the longer term. Key aim is to stimulate employment at Bicester. Need to ensure good quality housing to avoid creating regeneration areas. There are no priority regeneration areas in Oxfordshire, although there are pockets of deprivation.</p> <p><b>Review comment: No change</b></p>				
23. To develop a dynamic, diverse and knowledge -based economy that excels in innovation with higher value, lower impact activities	?		?		?	
		<p>Good quality housing will attract the innovative skilled people. High tech industries are going into Harwell and housing in the south of the county would support this.</p> <p><b>Review comment: No change</b></p>				
24. To encourage the development of a buoyant, sustainable tourism sector	?		?		?	
		<p>No difference between options in terms of access to tourist locations or workforce for tourism, or access for a day out from different locations. Restoration of the Wilts and Berks canal runs through Wantage&amp;Grove and is expected to improve tourism. No significant difference for the different options. We need to preserve the natural beauty of Oxfordshire as a characteristic which businesses value.</p> <p><b>Review comment: No change</b></p>				
25. To develop and maintain a skilled workforce to support long-term competitiveness of the region						
		<p>Need to ensure that infrastructure is provided. Not deliverable through spatial strategy. Quality of housing and transport links are important to attract skilled people.</p> <p>This objective is not deliverable through the Plan at the local level.</p> <p><b>Review comment: The proposed Implementation Plan includes skills development initiatives.</b></p>				

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<b>Additional Comments (including changes to the alternative) and Preferred Option</b>			Didcot is probably the most sustainable location. We should consider more development going to Didcot instead of Wantage&Grove if it can be accommodated without increasing flood risk.			
General comments:  Many of these objectives depend on infrastructure provision (eg transport network, waste water and water supply). Need to consider the impact of growth in adjoining areas on Oxfordshire eg Aylesbury, Milton Keynes, Swindon, Reading as this could affect prospects for employment and housing growth in Oxfordshire. Some of the objectives are not relevant or related to sub-regional level, particularly the economic objectives. It is difficult to appraise some of these objectives because we do not have a regulatory framework to back up delivery. National standards would be helpful for many of these issues.						

Appraisal done on 18 July 2005 by: Frankie Upton, John Disley, Owen South, Fiona Mullins (OCC), Jean Mitchell (OEP) and Frances Johnson (EA)  
 Final review done on 21 November by Fiona Mullins and Frankie Upton (OCC)