

S&V Local Plan Examination - Opening statement

Good morning everyone and welcome to Bee House and to our wonderful districts of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. My name is Tim Oruye and I am the Head of Policy and Programmes at South and Vale Councils. I am pleased to be the representative to introduce the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041 for examination.

The submitted draft Joint Local Plan is the culmination of the work over the past few years. It follows the steps we have taken since both Councils South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse took the **bold** decision to prepare a new Joint Local Plan in March 2021 instead of continuing with individually adopted plans. Our joint work has resulted in a plan that will set policy requirements for new development to follow, leading to more sustainable development in each District, covering a plan period of 2021 to 2041.

This is a joint plan that will not only meet identified needs but also secure nature recovery, more affordable housing, a substantial response to climate change (in particular to address embodied carbon for the first time) and protect valued landscapes. All important new gains for each District.

Why undertake a Joint Local Plan?

To start by giving some context, our two districts of South and Vale are very similar geographically. Both are mainly rural districts, neighbouring Oxford, with the River Thames running through, and large parts covered by two national landscapes of chalk hills and woodland. Our location, its assets and our people bring together many exciting opportunities like nationally important employment, two enterprise zones, and three garden communities being planned for and expanded with government funding.

Achieving a single spatial strategy for South and Vale in the JLP brings advantages, like planning better for Didcot Garden Town (which spans across both districts) and for the area called 'Science Vale' which contains advanced science, space and engineering campuses, many of which are spin offs from Oxford University or from government investment in fusion and AI research.

And it's not just innovation in big science here, we also embrace innovation in how we do planning. Not only are we a shared service, preparing a joint local plan, but we are also known for piloting new government initiatives. The councils were frontrunners for neighbourhood planning and now have a significant number of 57 made neighbourhood plans (37 in South Oxfordshire, 20 in Vale) that form part of the councils' development plan. We have a strong track record of empowering local communities to deliver better planning outcomes. We embrace the opportunity to help communities make neighbourhood plans, and our new joint local plan leaves space for that valuable work.

To help businesses grow and flex rapidly, we have adopted two Local Development Orders – including one for Milton Park where we are sitting today, where we offer a ten day turnaround for planning approvals under the LDO – we believe no other council in the country is working like this.

Plan vision and engagement

We are also ambitious for climate and nature recovery - this plan sets out to tackle for the first time embodied carbon as well as net zero. We like to be national leaders here – knowing that we have the right conditions and development viability to do this– if not here, then where?

On engagement - we had an ambition from day one to write the plan in plain English and for this to be the most accessible plan developed by the councils. This has been well received. Our

innovative consultations, interactive mapping and digital planning methods, developed in-house by our talented team, led us to be finalists for three national awards, and to be awarded Highly Commended at the Planning Resource 2024 Awards.

During the course of the plan's preparation, we held thirty-five engagement sessions with councillors, with significant input from Council Leaders, Cabinet Members and elected members from all parties. In September 2024, the draft plan received unanimous support from all elected councillors at both district councils to progress towards submission. This full cross-party support for a local plan shows a level of endorsement that few Councils can match. A truly remarkable achievement and a testament to the positive approach and dedication of the officers, primarily from the Planning Policy team, working diligently with other internal services and external partners on this programme.

The development and scope of the Joint Local Plan

The focus for this new Joint Local Plan has been on providing a unified set of policies for the two districts, raising quality standards for the existing planned development, meeting development needs in full, and on securing the necessary infrastructure.

While we are of course guided by the NPPF, our Joint Local Plan delivers Council priorities for each Council. It means the new higher policy obligations, underpinned by an extensive evidence base and viability assessment, will come forward to help ensure we get 'good' development as a result. This is a forward-looking Plan for securing a sustainable future for each District.

We recognise the context for our work is changing. By way of illustration, the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor is a renewed focus, and the area will host the first Artificial Intelligence growth zone in the UK at Culham. Local government reorganisation is on the horizon, and from April 2028 we expect to be in a new authority with new partners, within a new local plan geography, with a new spatial development strategy above that. But that doesn't mean we should wait – indeed the Government wants councils to speed up plan production and is accelerating the plan making process through planning reforms well ahead of that.

In response, and also remaining true to the vision of the plan from the outset, we were in prime position to positively progress our plan-making to allow us to utilise the proposed transitional arrangements of the new NPPF to continue our preparation under its predecessor, and so avoid any disruption in our timetable for putting the plan in place.

We worked under the transitional arrangements and submitted in December 2024. This means that the Joint Local Plan is being examined under the December 2023 version of the NPPF.

Subject to this Examination, and adoption of the JLP, the councils will start work on a new plan to address national policy requirements at that time.

Duty to cooperate

On one critical issue, the Duty to Cooperate, we have pursued significant and deep engagement with all neighbours on a wide range of cross boundary matters, extending beyond strategic matters strictly subject to that Duty. Our voluminous published evidence illustrates this.

We know that this is an issue that will be explored during the hearing sessions

Housing Growth

Our two councils want to make crystal clear our strong commitment to housing and infrastructure delivery. We have a strong track record of planning new development. Under the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal, all of the Oxfordshire councils, including our own, committed to plan for 100,000 new homes by 2031, and we did this. This Joint Local Plan carries that momentum forward, identifying ample land to meet our requirements, plus the agreed needs of our neighbour Oxford, with a healthy surplus to assist with deliverability. In total the plan provides for around 40,000 homes, well above the quantified requirements for South and Vale, which are around 16,500 and 14,500 respectively. Similarly, the quantum of planned employment land comfortably exceeds the employment land requirements.

With many allocated strategic sites scheduled to deliver for many years beyond the plan periods of the adopted plans, there has been no need to identify further new greenfield sites in the Joint Local Plan, although we have proposed an expanded allocation on brownfield land at one of our three Garden Communities.

We are not just planning for numbers on paper, we are backing it up with real infrastructure. A prime example is the major HIF1 infrastructure scheme now approved by the Secretary of State which will unlock planned growth across Science Vale around Culham and Didcot. In partnership with government, we have secured funding for roads and transport improvements, schools and other critical infrastructure to ensure that new housing is delivered hand in hand with the facilities and services our communities require.

We, like many other council areas, face challenges like traffic congestion, air pollution, flooding, climate change, water scarcity, and an ageing sewage treatment infrastructure to solve as part of the planning puzzle. We believe we've struck the right balance. Our councils are doing everything in our power to make great places, not only allocating and permitting development, but ensuring infrastructure will be in place to support that development.

So, this is a Local Plan that we believe is right for the two Districts of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

A 'sound' plan

We believe it to be a Plan that meets the test of 'Soundness'. It is a Plan that has been:

- Positively prepared. It demonstrates extensive and innovative consultation and engagement with both our communities and other public bodies.
- Is Justified – by evidence and testing and as our viability assessment shows, is deliverable too.
- Effective – this is a joint plan that will deliver homes and jobs, and
- Shows consistency with national policy.

Our two councils have a clear united voice today: we are proud of this plan, we are resolute in our commitment to deliver development, with policies that address critical issues like climate change, that seek to restore nature and deliver genuinely affordable low carbon homes alongside the necessary supporting infrastructure.

In short, the JLP is about building sustainable communities for the future, and we stand before you confident in its merits and committed to getting on with turning the JLP's proposals into reality.

We look forward to explaining our plan over the next few days and to reconvening later in the year to complete its Examination.

Thank you again for the opportunity to introduce the plan.