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Head of Planning

[REDACTED]

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse
Joint Local Plan 2041

WS2/43

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**WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Inspectors R A Bust and C Malloy
The Planning Inspectorate
c/o Ian Kemp, Programme Officer,
PO Box 241, Droitwich, Worcestershire,
WR9 1DW

2 June 2025

Dear Ms Bust and Ms Malloy

**South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041
Matter 2 – The Duty to Co-Operate**

I am writing in relation to the above, and specifically in respect of Matter 2 of the forthcoming Joint Local Plan hearing session scheduled for 3 June 2025, which concerns the Duty to Co-Operate.

Regrettably, West Oxfordshire District Council will not be represented at this session. However, I hope this written submission will be of assistance and can be taken into account alongside other written and oral representations received.

In preparing this response, I have reviewed a number of relevant documents, including the Inspectors' Initial Questions (IQs), the more detailed Matters, Issues and Questions (MIQs), and the responses submitted by the Councils.

As you will be aware, West Oxfordshire District Council is a signatory to the Statement of Common Ground with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils, dated 20 March 2025 (ref: LPA09).

Issue – Whether the Councils have complied with the legal duty to cooperate in the preparation of the Local Plan

Q2.2 – In response to IQ10 of the Inspectors' Preliminary and Initial Questions (LPA02), the Councils set out the structure and processes which were put in place following the decision to abandon the Oxfordshire Plan. Have the various tiers of those structures, including the Oxfordshire Planning Policy Officers Group, the Planning Advisory Group and PAG Officer Group provided effective mechanisms to enable constructive, active and ongoing engagement?

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We have reviewed the Councils' response to your initial questions as set out in examination document LPA02 and the associated appendices (LPA02.1 – LPA02.4). This response usefully outlines the structures that have supported continued partnership working following the cessation of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

These include the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) and its various advisory and support groups, a range of officer liaison meetings such as the Oxfordshire Heads of Planning and the Oxfordshire Planning Policy Officers Group (OPPO) and a number of technical working groups.

There is a longstanding culture of collaborative working on strategic planning matters among the Oxfordshire authorities, facilitated by bodies such as FOP and its predecessors.

You will be aware that, as of January 2025, the FOP was replaced by the Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee (OLJC). While this transition occurred after the submission of the Joint Local Plan, it is notable that the OLJC's terms of reference include specific functions in relation to strategic planning, including the oversight of cross-boundary issues and ensuring compliance with the Duty to Co-Operate under Section 33A of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, as well as national planning policy.

This continuity of function underscores the collective commitment of Oxfordshire authorities to sustained and meaningful strategic engagement.

As illustrated in the diagram on page 12 of LPA02, various advisory and support groups were established under the FOP framework, thematically organised around housing, infrastructure, environment, and planning. We are satisfied that these forums have provided effective opportunities for discussion and coordination on strategic planning matters, in accordance with the duty to co-operate.

At the operational level, LPA02 also sets out the work of regular officer-level forums, notably the Oxfordshire Planning Policy Officers Group (OPPO). OPPO has long served as a forum for policy dialogue among the Oxfordshire local authorities and continues to play a key role in enabling ongoing co-operation on strategic planning matters and plan-making processes more broadly.

The meetings of OPPO, as described in LPA02.1, are underpinned by structured agendas and written notes, and address a broad range of planning issues. They allow for the open exchange of information and the identification of cross-boundary implications of emerging plans and proposals.

Additionally, a number of working groups have been established to support OPPO, many of which focus on specific technical areas. These groups have enabled detailed discussions that are escalated where necessary to OPPO or the Heads of Planning group.

Key strategic themes addressed through these workstreams, such as the Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA), the accommodation needs of travelling communities, and housing land supply, are reflected in the Statement of Common Ground (SOCG) dated 20 March 2025 (LPA09).

In summary, and as outlined at paragraph 3.3 of LPA09, we are satisfied that South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Oxfordshire District Councils have engaged constructively, actively, and on an ongoing basis in order to secure effective cooperation on strategic cross-boundary matters relevant to their respective Local Plans.

Q2.3 Has the additional information included in the Councils' response to the Inspectors' Preliminary and Initial Questions (LPA02, LPA02.1, LPA02.2, LPA02.3, LPA02.4) sufficiently demonstrated that they have met the Duty to Cooperate?

As outlined above, document LPA02 provides a helpful overview of the structures and processes put in place following the cessation of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, including in diagrammatic form. We have reviewed the Councils' response including the information set out in the four supporting appendices and consider that this provides clear evidence that the duty to co-operate has been met.

Q2.5 In overall terms, have the Councils engaged constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis with all relevant organisations on strategic matters of relevance to the Plan's preparation to maximise the effectiveness of the preparation of the Plan?

In conclusion, we consider that the Councils have engaged constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis with West Oxfordshire District Council on strategic matters of relevance to the preparation of the JLP and that this has helped to maximise the effectiveness of the joint local plan's preparation.

I hope the above is of assistance to you in your consideration of this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further clarification.

Yours sincerely

Chris Hargraves
Head of Planning