

## INTRODUCTION

- 6.1 This Chapter is about the use of land and buildings for employment. Employment uses in this chapter do not include retail. Policies to deal with retail uses can be found in the Town Centres and Shopping Chapter.
- 6.2 West Oxfordshire enters the 21st Century with a strong and healthy local economy. The District contains a wide and diverse range of flourishing businesses, many of them in expanding sectors of the economy. In particular, Oxfordshire, including West Oxfordshire benefits from growing clusters of businesses in the bio-technical, medical and high-performance motor engineering sectors.
- 6.3 A farming study of the County published in 1999 indicated, however, that agriculture in Oxfordshire is in some state of crisis due to the strength of the pound, low world commodity prices and the impact of BSE. Employment in this sector continues its long-term decline and agriculture now employs less than 4% of the district's workforce. This compares with around 11% employed directly or indirectly in tourism, a major and growing area of economic activity within the district.
- 6.4 Overall, with an unemployment rate (claimant count) of less than 1% (April 2005), West Oxfordshire enjoys one of the lowest rates of unemployment in the UK. Previous Local Plans have contributed to this healthy economy by ensuring that a wide range of land, sites and premises, together with supporting infrastructure, is available to meet the needs of businesses. Farm diversification has also been encouraged to support the local agricultural community.
- 6.5 The aim has been to distribute additional employment in both rural and urban areas
- to reflect the growth of the working population within these areas;
  - to ensure that both the urban and rural economies remain healthy;
  - to combat employment decline in some traditional industries, e.g. Blanket making in Witney, textiles in Chipping Norton and agriculture throughout the rural areas.
- 6.6 This approach has been successful in that job growth in both urban and rural areas has been sufficient both to replace lost jobs and increase the overall level of jobs broadly in line with the growth in the working population.
- 6.7 But, it has not been practical, or indeed desirable, to exactly match numerically jobs and resident workforce within the District. An increasing number of people work from home. Oxford has approximately 30,000 more jobs than working residents. This means that West Oxfordshire, together with other neighbouring districts provide the homes for many Oxford workers.
- 6.8 In 2001 approximately 15% of West Oxfordshire working residents worked in Oxford. Local surveys of new housing in settlements close to Oxford suggest that over 40% of new residents work in the City of Oxford. This imbalance between jobs and resident workforce in Oxford is unlikely to change to any extent under current Structure Plan policy.
- 6.9 Whilst increasing both jobs and housing in the rural and urban areas has provided in theory the opportunity to work locally near home, thus reducing long distance commuting to work, in practice this has occurred only to a limited extent, particularly in the rural areas. Surveys of employment sites in the rural areas indicate that only around 15% of the workforce live locally, i.e. within 5 kilometres (3 miles) whilst nearly 25% commute over 20 kilometres (13 miles) to work, invariably by car.
- 6.10 Even in Witney, the district's main employment centre, surveys of new housing indicate that only around 17% of new full-time workers work in the town (compared to 27% in Oxford) although approaching half of the part-time workforce does work in Witney.
- 6.11 The policies in this chapter seek to maintain and build on past success by ensuring that an adequate range of land and premises is available to meet the economic needs of the area, but restraint will be exercised in provision of employment in the more remote areas of the district and in smaller settlements where population and public transport is sparse, in order to avoid excessive commuting to work by car.

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- 6.12 Given that there are very low levels of unemployment within the district as this Plan was being prepared the Council will seek to avoid releasing excessive areas of land for employment, which in turn would lead to excessive pressures on the levels of housing proposed for the district in the Structure Plan.
- 6.13 At April 2005 there were about 30 hectares of undeveloped land available for employment use in West Oxfordshire, although much of this had planning permission. Given this provision, only limited additional allocations for employment are proposed in this Plan. Some are associated with proposed new housing allocations, maintaining the approach of placing housing and employment growth in close proximity to each other.
- 6.14 The objectives (below) and policies provide guidance as to where and in what circumstances new employment development will be allowed.
- 6.15 These policies, however, should not be read in isolation but in conjunction with other policies in the Plan, particularly those that address the environmental, amenity and transportation impacts of new development.

## Objectives

- To provide a wide range of sites and buildings in suitable locations in order to assist in maintaining a healthy local economy with a diversity of job opportunities to match the skills available throughout the district.
- To ensure that the location and level of employment sites and buildings does not erode the high environmental quality of West Oxfordshire, does not lead to an unacceptable increase in traffic levels, and does not lead to overheating of the economy and stimulation of excessive growth beyond that planned for in the Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

## EMPLOYMENT POLICIES

### Policy E1 - Employment Allocations

The following sites as shown on the Proposals Map are allocated for employment uses:

Witney - off Downs Road

Chipping Norton depot site

Lakeside Industrial Estate, Standlake

- 6.16 Land at Witney remains from the allocation in the 1997 adopted Local Plan (see Witney Chapter). Employment provision forms part of the mixed use development proposed at Cromwell Park, Chipping Norton (see Proposal 1).
- 6.17 The land allocated (1.9ha) at the Lakeside Industrial Estate, Standlake is part of an existing employment area. Development will be restricted to B2 and B8 and similar sui-generis uses only. Additional screen planting will be required along the south-west boundary as necessary.

### Policy E2 - New Employment Sites in Towns and Larger Villages (Group C)

Within or adjoining the larger settlements in the district (Group C), the development of a small estate of up to a maximum of one hectare for employment purposes will be permitted where there is a lack of land available for employment purposes in the immediate area and where the development would not jeopardise the overall policies of restraint contained in the Development Plan. Development on these estates will be limited to:

- a) firms occupying units of less than 500 square metres; or
- b) firms whose sources of supply, commercial linkages, labour supply and markets make the specific location necessary for them.

- 6.18 Policy E2 recognises the need for sites for new build employment development adjoining or within the larger settlements which have a reasonable range of facilities and act as local service centres. These settlements are of a size that offer a reasonable opportunity for people to live and work locally, or to use public transport to reach their workplace. This policy encourages the development of small estates provided individual proposals are not subject to objection under other policies in this Plan, particularly those seeking to protect local amenities, the environment and transportation objectives. Development, however, will not be allowed in locations where adequate supplies of land for employment provision already exist. The aim of this policy is to maintain a healthy local economy throughout the district but to avoid overheating.
- 6.19 These estates primarily will provide small units of up to 500m<sup>2</sup> and are particularly relevant for small start-up businesses, or businesses providing a local service within the area. The policy also recognises that specific locations may be required for businesses requiring larger premises because of existing markets, linkages or labour supply. In these cases, larger units may be allowed.
- 6.20 In particular, the Council is conscious that there are growing clusters of businesses operating in similar areas of economic activity, which both national and local policy seek to foster. In Oxfordshire these include bio-technical, medical and high-performance motor engineering. It is generally acknowledged that the growth of these sectors, essential to the British economy, benefit from being clustered together and in reasonable proximity to associated research establishments such as Oxford University and Harwell. Policy E2 is designed to help these specific needs being met.

## Policy E3 - Individual Premises

The development of new sites for single employment uses, commensurate with the scale and character of the locality, will be allowed within or next to settlements listed in Groups B and C in Figure 5.2.

Elsewhere the development of new build sites for employment will not be allowed unless the building

- a) provides accommodation ancillary to an existing dwelling where the occupant(s) work directly from home; or
- b) is required to secure the diversification of a farming enterprise.

- 6.21 The economic strength of West Oxfordshire has in part been due to the ability of smaller businesses to set up within the district in both the urban and rural areas. This policy enables businesses to develop within medium sized and larger communities provided there is no conflict with other Plan objectives and policies.
- 6.22 At the same time it is recognised that excessive dispersal of employment could cause adverse impact on the high environmental quality of the district and could lead to excessive journeys to work by car. For this reason new build employment development in the open countryside, or in the smaller settlements, will be strictly controlled. In these areas exceptions will only be made for small additions to existing dwellings required to provide accommodation for people working from home and for development that will help to sustain farming operations in the district. In this context proposals relating to farm diversification will need to demonstrate that the business will be a genuine extension to, and fully integrated with, the existing farm enterprise.

## **Policy E4 - Re-use of Vernacular Buildings**

The use of vernacular buildings for employment purposes will be permitted provided the building makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area and is of permanent and substantial construction.

- 6.23 This policy encourages the re-use of traditional buildings for employment. Traditional buildings include vernacular farm buildings built in local materials and buildings such as chapels and schools no longer in active use. Re-using such buildings is sustainable in that it reduces the need for new build and for greenfield development and creates the opportunity to provide unobtrusive economic activities and job opportunities, particularly in the rural areas.
- 6.24 The proposed employment use must be compatible with its surroundings and all proposals will be assessed against all relevant policies in the Plan, particularly Policies BE9 and BE10 which relate to the change of use/ conversion of listed and unlisted vernacular buildings.
- 6.25 This policy applies to all settlements in the district. The re-use of traditional buildings may also be acceptable in the open countryside if the location is not too remote from existing settlements and public transport. It should be recognised, however, that in some cases a building may be so isolated and inaccessible by any form of transport except a car, that an employment use may not be acceptable under Policy T1 of this Plan.

## **Policy E5 - Re-use of Non-vernacular Buildings**

The use of non-vernacular buildings, including modern farm buildings, in the countryside for employment purposes will only be allowed where all the following criteria are met:

- a) the form, bulk and general design of the building(s) are in keeping with the surroundings;
  - b) the building is within or adjoining an existing settlement, or forms part of an agricultural holding and will form part of a farm diversification scheme;
  - c) the scale and type of employment use is suitable for the building and the location;
  - d) the building is capable of being converted to an employment use without excessive rebuilding or enlargement which would be tantamount to the erection of a new building.
- 6.26 Policies E4 and E5 reflect advice in PPS7 that the re-use or adaptation of appropriately located and suitably constructed buildings has an important role in meeting the needs of rural areas for commercial and industrial development. This can be particularly important to the viability of some farm enterprises.
- 6.27 The release of modern agricultural and other similar buildings for employment can meet sustainable development objectives where the criteria of Policy E5 are met. These criteria have been set for the following reasons:
- a) There are a large number of modern mainly agricultural buildings scattered widely throughout the district. The general release of these buildings to employment would lead to a very dispersed pattern of employment, with many sites only reasonably accessible by car. This would be contrary to national and local planning objectives which seek to reduce dependence on car use, particularly for work trips, and would undermine the development of sites under other policies and proposals contained in the Plan which are in more sustainable locations. As the level of unemployment in the rural areas

is low and job creation is high, there is no overriding economic need to utilise buildings for employment which would be in inappropriate locations in terms of the Plan's strategy and policy objectives.

- b) A number of modern agricultural buildings, whilst clearly necessary for the purpose of agriculture, appear incongruous in their surroundings, they either detract from the high visual quality of the countryside or appear alien in terms of bulk, scale or the use of materials in terms of the local built environment. Perpetuating the life of buildings which have an adverse impact on the surroundings would be inconsistent with the Plan's objective which seeks to protect and enhance the natural and built environment of West Oxfordshire.

6.28 For these reasons the Council will be selective in the modern farm buildings it will allow to be used for employment purposes. The Council will wish to ensure that buildings are not built ostensibly for agricultural uses but with other purposes in mind. Within this policy it is recognised that existing farm buildings can play a useful role in farm diversification schemes. (Also see Policy E3 for proposed new development to create a single employment use that would not involve re-use of existing buildings.)

## Policy E6 - Change of Use of Existing Employment Sites

The change of use of existing premises and sites with an established employment use to non-employment uses will not be allowed unless

- a) it can be demonstrated that the site or premises are not reasonably capable of being used or redeveloped for employment purposes; or
- b) the site or premises is considered unsuitable on amenity, environmental or highway safety grounds for employment uses; or
- c) substantial planning benefits would be achieved by allowing alternative forms of development.

6.29 Retaining a wide range of existing employment sites throughout the district plays an important part in maintaining and promoting a balance between employment and housing both in urban and rural areas. Retaining existing sites is as important as promoting new ones. Whilst the impact of the loss of a single employment site may be small the cumulative impact of the loss of a series of sites can be significant in terms of job losses and reduction in economic activity. The relationship between jobs and housing can quickly become imbalanced, particularly if the employment sites are redeveloped for housing. In addition, acceptable replacement sites for employment, particularly in the rural areas of the district can be difficult to find. The Council therefore will resist the loss of existing employment sites unless they are obviously unsuitable for that purpose or there would be substantial overriding planning benefits in allowing alternative forms of development.

6.30 Some cases will be clear-cut. The loss of an employment site which is a bad neighbour or creates unacceptable levels of traffic on unsuitable roads is likely to be accepted. Other benefits may be less clear-cut. The loss of an employment site to housing may create a benefit in that it may be a suitable sustainable location for housing and the development of the site may reduce the need for greenfield housing sites in less sustainable

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locations. But, account also needs to be taken of the potential loss of jobs and economic activity and the fact that the need for replacement employment sites may also create pressure on greenfield sites. A number of employment sites also provide a useful range of premises for small businesses, particularly start-up businesses, which can be difficult to replicate economically once lost.

- 6.31 In cases where proposals are put forward to redevelop an employment site for housing, the suitability of the site for housing and the need for housing, including affordable homes locally, as well as the contribution the site will make towards overall housing provision, will always be balanced against the number of jobs lost (directly or indirectly), the loss in terms of reduction in local economic activity and the ability to replace lost sites without further greenfield employment development.

## **Policy E7 - Existing Businesses**

Proposals for the expansion of existing established businesses either within, adjoining or adjacent to the existing premises that are commensurate with the scale and character of the locality will be permitted.

- 6.32 The Council recognises that in a rapidly changing economic world businesses have to adapt and adjust to changing economic circumstances. This is a key factor in maintaining a healthy local economy, a key objective of this Plan. This policy allows businesses to do so providing there is no serious conflict with other Plan policy or objectives.
- 6.33 Whilst the Council wishes to foster the continued success of existing local businesses through this policy there will, however, be cases where individual businesses have outgrown their site, e.g. in terms of scale of the business, or traffic generation. In these cases relocation may be the only solution.