

INTRODUCTION

- 7.1 West Oxfordshire falls within the overlapping catchment areas of the sub-regional centres of Oxford and Cheltenham, the latter increasing its influence as traffic congestion continues to increase on the Oxford approach roads. The expanding centres of Swindon and Banbury also draw trade from the south-western and northern parts of the district respectively.
- 7.2 For more local shopping, particularly food, and for leisure activities, Witney is the main centre for West Oxfordshire. About three quarters of the District's population reside within the town's shopping catchment area. Carterton has benefited from the opening of a new superstore, and from environmental improvements in the town centre and this has widened the appeal of the town. Chipping Norton remains an important centre, serving the needs of the northern part of the District.
- 7.3 The policies in this Chapter comprise only the locational strategy for town centre uses. These policies should not be read in isolation but in conjunction with other policies in this plan, particularly those in the Environment Chapter.

Town Centres

- 7.4 The main aim is to protect and improve the town centres of West Oxfordshire, in terms of their appearance and the range of services they offer. Town centres are important for a number of reasons:
- they underpin the economic well-being of their town,
 - they are the most accessible locations by all means of transport,
 - they act as the cultural and social focus for the town and surrounding area.
- 7.5 However, the success of town centres can be threatened by a number of factors, including:
- the presence of out of town/out of centre stores,
 - a poor image or signs of neglect,
 - traffic congestion,
 - the loss of popular shops.
- 7.6 Clearly, such factors can lead to a downward spiral leading to a poor image of the town which in turn drives away more businesses and customers. Fortunately, the town centres in West Oxfordshire have generally remained healthy with continued investment. The policies in this Plan aim to prevent any loss of vitality and viability in order to protect the important role of our town centres.
- 7.7 Town centres contain the most diverse range of land uses of any location. Shopping is clearly the use which underpins the centres, but other uses are also vital to their health. Town centres are also home to restaurants, cafes and pubs which maintain activity and interest after shops have shut; leisure uses such as the Windrush Leisure Centre and the Market Square cinema in Witney, The Theatre in Chipping Norton and the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock provide entertainment for local people and visitors alike. Educational establishments such as the Abingdon and Witney College and offices in town centres, increase the numbers of people using the centres. Services such as doctors and dentists also find town centres the most convenient location for their practices. This range of uses means that town centres are used by the entire population of West Oxfordshire, for a wide variety of reasons.
- 7.8 There is very little out of centre shopping in West Oxfordshire, and this has helped to strengthen the vitality and viability of the town centres. However, the health of the centres can be threatened by changing shopping patterns, competition from other centres, or from the introduction of uses which do not enhance the appearance and attraction of the town centre. One of the strengths of the town centres of West Oxfordshire is the mix of town centre uses with residential flats and houses. There is a fine balance between town centre activities driving out residential uses, and an increasing residential presence suppressing levels of activity in town centres through problems of noise, disturbance and amenity. The policies in this Plan aim to preserve the balance in the town centres and to enhance the successful and attractive mix which exists today.

Objectives

- To enhance the character and improve the environment of the main town centres and to increase their attraction to all users.
- To maintain and improve where possible the overall range and quality of the district's shopping facilities but to resist proposals that would damage the vitality and viability of existing service centres and measures to improve them.

7.9 The strategy of this Plan for town centres and shopping will:

- Steer large scale development for retailing, entertainment, leisure and other such uses, which attract large numbers of people, to sites in or adjoining one of the main town centres of Witney, Carterton or Chipping Norton.
- Enable the provision of small scale local neighbourhood shops serving major new residential development and existing settlements.
- Seek to retain village shops (as well as other community facilities such as pubs) by resisting their loss through changes of use.
- Control the development of farm shops and garden centres.

TOWN CENTRE POLICY

General Town Centres and Retail Location Policy- The Sequential Approach

- 7.10 Major new retail development and other appropriate town centre uses should be located within, or on the edge of town centres. The development of less central sites to accommodate town centre uses for which a need has been demonstrated should only be considered when all options within the centre or on the edge of the centre have been thoroughly assessed. This approach accords with Government guidance in PPS6 and with Structure Plan policy. However, the sequential approach to site selection only covers the locational strategy for such uses. Matters of scale, appearance, traffic impact and implications for amenity and the environment are the subject of policies elsewhere in this Local Plan.

West Oxfordshire Retail Hierarchy

- a) Principal Town Centre - Witney
- b) Primary Town Centres - Carterton, Chipping Norton
- c) Secondary Centres - Woodstock, Burford
- d) Local and village centres.

For the purposes of national planning guidance centres in categories (a) to (c) are 'town centres'.

7.11 The Local Plan seeks to maintain as well as improve the role of town centres. Proposals, particularly outside centres, which would harm the vitality and viability of the town centre and/or measures to improve it will be resisted. The success of town centres (in terms of numbers of people using the centre, and how much money is being spent in shops and businesses) can be harmed if rival uses are established outside the central area. Out of town retail and leisure facilities draw people away from town centres, and tend to be highly accessible by car and less accessible by alternative means of transport. These uses are therefore better located in or close to a town centre where they will reinforce the vitality and viability of the centre, and where people will have a choice on how they travel. The availability of suitable central sites and the need for significant new retail or leisure development will be key factors determining appropriate location.

Environmental Improvements in Town Centres

7.12 Environmental improvement of town centres is an important part of strengthening their role. Enhancement schemes have already taken place in Witney (Market Square), Carterton, Chipping Norton and Woodstock, focusing on improvements to street appearances and better traffic and parking management.

7.13 The older town centres in West Oxfordshire have distinct and historic characters, strongly influenced by Cotswold building designs and materials, and by their roles as market towns. Buildings such as the Buttercross in Witney, the Tolsey in Burford and the Town Hall in Chipping Norton are reminders of this history. These settlements are also characterised by the mix of residential, shopping, office and leisure uses within the town centre, and close linkages to the rest of the town.

7.14 These historic centres are successful in serving the needs of the residents of West Oxfordshire, and in attracting tourists from across the UK and abroad. However, the success of the town centres can bring problems of pollution and congestion from traffic, of damage to buildings and surfaces due to “wear and tear” from

vehicles and people, and from the varying “corporate images” of retailers and town centre operators. The environmental enhancement schemes carried out by the Council aim to protect and reinforce the historic fabric of the town centres and to reduce the harmful effects of traffic. Thus the character of the centres can be preserved and so they will remain attractive and pleasant places for people to use and visit.

7.15 Carterton is clearly distinct from the older town centres of the district, due to its more recent origins. Improvements to Carterton have focused on enhancing its appearance to produce a clear and attractive identity for the town centre and to widen the range of facilities available. This Plan contains further proposals to improve the centre for its users (see the Carterton Chapter).

7.16 In Witney, further environmental enhancement schemes will need to be linked to the Witney Integrated Transport Strategy (WITS). This strategy is included in the Oxfordshire Local Transport Plan and includes measures to reduce the adverse impact of car traffic in the town centre. WITS aims to improve conditions for shoppers and other users of the town centre, particularly pedestrians, cyclists and users of public transport. As these measures are introduced, a complementary environmental enhancement scheme can be implemented. (See the Transport and Witney Chapters).

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Policies for Witney, Carterton, Chipping Norton, Burford and Woodstock Town Centres and Local Centres

Policy SH1 - New Retail Development

Proposals for retail development, other than to meet purely local needs, will be located according to the following sequence:

- 1) within the town centres;
- 2) on the edge of the town centres;
- 3) in out of centre locations that are, or can be made, readily accessible by a choice of means of transport,

Proposals for retail and other town centre uses in locations other than town centres will only be permitted where:

- i) a need for the development has been established;
- ii) the sequential approach has been followed and there are no suitable sequentially preferable sites available;
- iii) the development would not harm either directly or cumulatively the vitality and viability of any nearby town centre or planned measures to improve it;
- iv) the development proposed is appropriate in nature and scale to the location;
- v) the proposal accords with other policies in the plan with regard to traffic impact, amenity and environment.

Policy SH2 - New Development in Town and Local Centres

Policy deleted.

Policy SH3 - Changes of Use in Town Centres

In the town centres in Witney, Carterton, Chipping Norton, Burford and Woodstock the following proposals will be permitted:

- a) the change of use of existing premises to shops (Class A1) except for proposals in Burford and Woodstock which would;
 - i result in the loss of a permanent dwelling unless it can be demonstrated that the existing residential use does not provide satisfactory accommodation, or;
 - ii fall outside the central policy areas defined on the Inset Maps for Burford and Woodstock.
- b) The change of use of ground floor retail premises in the primary shopping frontages defined on the Witney and Chipping Norton Inset Maps to other uses only where the proposed use would be of overall benefit to the shopping activities along the designated frontage.

Other proposals for the change of use of existing premises within the central policy areas of Burford and Woodstock which would result in the loss of a permanent dwelling will not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that the existing residential use does not provide satisfactory accommodation.

- 7.17 When considering development proposals under the objectives and policies of this Plan, account will be taken not only of the impact on centres as they exist at the moment but also on planned proposals to improve them. Proposals outside existing centres that would undermine the economic viability of planned developments within centres will not be permitted. Equally new development within existing centres that would reduce the vitality, viability or attraction of these centres themselves will not be permitted.

7.18 Policy SH3 addresses the change of use of town centre premises. In the primary shopping frontages designated in Witney and Chipping Norton the Council will resist proposals which would fragment and “deaden” these frontages to the disadvantage of the shopper and of the overall character of the area. Class A2 uses, particularly estate agents and building societies, are not normally appropriate and will be steered to other locations in these town centres. Where A3, A4 or A5 uses that comply with Policy SH4 are proposed within a primary shopping frontage and they are of benefit to the shopping activities along the designated frontage, the Council may apply planning conditions to ensure that the permitted uses continue to meet objectives of this Plan.

7.19 In Burford and Woodstock, the mix of residential properties with shops, hotels and other town centre uses is part of the charm and attraction of these centres. Opportunities to create new dwellings in these historic centres are also limited. Proposals which undermine this land use mix undermine the basis of the character of these areas and thus weaken their attraction. Policy SH3 therefore resists proposals, which would eliminate a viable dwelling in Woodstock and Burford town centres.

7.20 Pressures for the change of use of existing premises in Burford and Woodstock are high. Uncontrolled permissions for change of use could seriously damage their fragile character. Consequently the change of use of premises to retail uses outside the central policy areas defined on the Inset Maps for these two towns will be resisted.

OTHER SHOPPING POLICIES

Policy SH4 Shopping - Facilities for the Local Community

Proposals for small scale individual shops or groups of shops (Class A1), or other small-scale retail premises to meet the daily needs of the local community will be permitted within towns and villages, provided all the following criteria are met:

- a) the site would be readily accessible by bicycle and on foot;
- b) the proposal would not harm the vitality and viability of an existing town centre or an established village centre for shopping;
- c) there is no detrimental impact on the amenity of occupiers of residential property from noise, fumes, smell, lighting, activity levels or hours of operation at the site.

7.21 Groups of shops and other retail uses within residential areas serve a variety of needs. Since they are accessible by a significant number of people who can travel the short distance to the facilities on foot or bicycle, they help to reduce the need for residents to travel by car to larger centres for daily shopping needs. They also increase accessibility to shops and services for those who find it difficult to travel further afield, such as the elderly or disabled. Such facilities help to promote a sense of community and identity in predominantly residential areas.

7.22 A3, A4 and A5 uses, generally defined as food establishments and including cafes, restaurants, sandwich bars and public houses, may in many cases be acceptable under Policy SH4. However, people are often concerned about such uses because of potential problems associated with noise, smells and late opening hours. These worries need to be weighed against the benefits of having convenient local facilities.

7.23 There is an established trend of A1 shopping units being located on petrol filling station forecourts. Very often these retail facilities are ancillary to the use of the site as a petrol filling station and therefore do not require permission. However, where larger shops are

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proposed which require planning permission, they should meet the provisions of Policy SH4. Issues such as the location of the facility in relation to towns and villages, accessibility by all modes of travel, servicing requirements and the overall size and scale of the development will be taken into account.

Policy SH5 - Retention of Local Shops and/or Post Offices

Proposals which would result in the loss of a shop and/or post office serving the local community will not be permitted unless:

- a) the existing use is not viable; or
- b) there is no demonstrable loss to the range of goods and services available within or adjoining the settlement.

- 7.24 The number of shops and post offices in the District's rural communities has steadily declined over the years. Such shops often fulfil a social role in a small settlement, and the loss of these facilities can weaken the community as well as severely limiting access to shopping facilities for people without access to a car.
- 7.25 The loss of such shops and post offices will be resisted unless the criteria in Policy SH5 are met. It is recognised that some premises may no longer be viable, and therefore unable to continue trading. Where a proposal can demonstrate that a retail use is not viable i.e. no longer capable of being kept open either economically/commercially or through social enterprise, or where the settlement would still retain a range of shops accessible to most of its population, a change of use may be appropriate, provided the new use does not conflict with other policies in the plan. Before considering residential use, the Council may wish to be satisfied that other uses of greater benefit to the rural community are not viable. This approach mirrors that set out in Policies E6 and TLC12.
- 7.26 For an applicant to demonstrate that a shop unit is not viable, it will be necessary to provide evidence that the shop has been effectively marketed over a realistic period of time, and that the marketing exercise has generated little

realistic prospect of the shop being sold as a going concern. In rural areas this marketing should explore the possibility that the local community would be prepared to take over the running of the shop or post office as a form of social enterprise. In some cases it may be possible to preserve the village shop/post office by combining it with other uses. For example, the local shop, bank and post office could be combined with the village pub, library (if present) or village hall. Evidence of accounts may also be produced to demonstrate that the retail use is not profitable. These details should be submitted with the planning application. Applicants should be aware that financial assistance for rural shops/post offices is available.

Policy SH6 - Retail uses on Employment Sites

Policy deleted.

Policy SH7 - Farm Shops

Where farm shops in the open countryside require planning permission they will be allowed provided that:

- a) it can be demonstrated that the shop is needed to sell goods produced on the farm unit and that any imported goods will remain ancillary to the sale of local produce; and
- b) they do not seriously undermine or erode the viability and vitality of shopping provision in existing villages.

- 7.27 The use of an existing farm building for the sale of goods produced on that farm does not necessarily require planning permission. However, such activities can lead to the sale of imported goods and the proliferation of associated activities which warrant planning control. In considering proposals, the Council will take account of the impact upon the countryside generally and on the local amenities and the benefits for local shopping facilities. When granting planning permission for farm shops, conditions will be imposed restricting the range of goods sold and, where appropriate,

limiting the total square footage of the unit to ensure that the shop remains a genuine retail outlet of local agricultural produce.

- 7.28 Farm shops which are proposed within an existing town or village, and which require planning permission, will be considered under other relevant policies such as SH4.

Policy SH8 - Garden Centres

Proposals for the expansion of existing garden centres or for new centres will only be permitted where they are located on land within or adjacent to medium or larger sized settlements, and provided that they are accessible by a choice of means of transport.

- 7.29 Garden centres are not considered to be an agricultural use, and are principally a retail outlet. They do not need to be located in the open countryside. The most suitable locations for such uses will be within or adjacent to existing medium or larger sized settlements (i.e. Groups B and C as set out in Figure 5.2), where traffic generated by the use can be more readily absorbed by the road network, and where the garden centre will be more accessible by a choice of means of transport.
- 7.30 Any proposal for a new garden centre, or for the expansion of an existing facility, should demonstrate that the goods to be sold are genuinely associated with horticulture and gardening. Planning conditions will be imposed limiting the type of goods sold to ensure a general retail outlet does not become established.
- 7.31 Nurseries are considered to be a horticultural use. They are therefore not covered by the provisions of Policy SH8 unless goods not produced on-site are retailed to the public.

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