



6. Sustainable economic growth

Witney

Our economic objectives include:

- CO3 Promote safe, vibrant and prosperous town and village centres and resist proposals that would damage their vitality and viability or adversely affect measures to improve those centres.
- CO7 To support sustainable economic growth which adds value to the local economy, improves the balance between housing and local jobs, provides a diversity of local employment opportunities, capitalises on economic growth in adjoining areas, improves local skills and work readiness, removes potential barriers to investment and provides flexibility to adapt to changing economic needs.
- CO8 To enable a prosperous and sustainable tourism economy.
- CO12 Look to maintain or improve where possible the health and wellbeing of the District's residents through increased choice and quality of shopping, leisure, recreation, arts, cultural and community facilities.
- CO13 Plan for enhanced access to services and facilities without unacceptably impacting upon the character and resources of West Oxfordshire.
- 6.1 Having outlined our approach towards housing delivery, in this section of the plan we focus on the economy and how we will promote sustainable economic growth in the District in the period up to 2031. We explain how we will seek to meet our economic objectives particularly through our policies on the provision of land for employment, the rural economy, tourism, community facilities and town centres.

Context

- 6.2 West Oxfordshire has a successful local economy and has weathered the recession relatively well. Economic activity rates are high at 84.5% which is well above the South East average of 79.9% and whilst unemployment has increased in recent years, at 3.4% (modelled), it remains at about half the national average and is lower than the South East average (5.0%).
- 6.3 There are approximately 52,000 jobs in the District and two thirds of these are taken by local residents. A high proportion of jobs are in the manufacturing, engineering, retail and tourism sectors.
- 6.4 The area has particular specialisms including biomedical equipment manufacture and engineering with significant employers such as Abbott Diabetes Care (employs approximately 900 staff), Siemens Magnet Technology (employs approximately 750 staff) and Owen Mumford (employs approximately 600 staff).
- 6.5 The District has a long history with military aerospace and today RAF Brize Norton is seeing continued investment as the UK's main strategic military air transport base employing in the order of 7,300 personnel (comprising around 5,800 service personnel, 1,200 contractors and 300 civilian staff members). In addition, there are many small businesses established in the District which are involved in high value activities in service-based and professional sectors. In terms of future growth, it is predicted that future economic growth is expected to come mainly from the financial and business services sector.

- 6.6 The District's town centres are vibrant, with vacancy rates much lower than national averages, but require continued investment to face off challenges in the future as shopping habits change and competition increases. The attractive environment of the District, including the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, River Thames and its tributaries, historic market towns and villages, and Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site are also significant economic assets for the visitor economy. Employment in agriculture provides fewer than 2% of jobs but remains an important sector economically and for landscape management.
- 6.7 Many businesses are located within or next to one of the larger towns and villages where the largest employment sites are generally located but there is also a diversity of mainly smaller employment sites and businesses in the rural area. 72% of businesses employ less than 5 workers and 87% employ less than 10. The formation of new businesses is steady and survival rates are strong.
- 6.8 The District is surrounded by strong and growing economic areas with better strategic transport links – notably Oxford, Swindon, Banbury, Bicester and the area between Didcot and Abingdon which is known as Science Vale. This is an area of high technology science related business and research which incorporates the centres of Milton Park and Harwell Oxford Campus. These areas attract significant numbers of workers from the District which leads to congestion on major roads including the A40.
- 6.9 The 2011 Census identified a net out-flow of 8,000 commuters, with 20,000 people travelling out of the District to work each day and 12,000 travelling in. There is a particularly high net outflow of workers in 'education', 'health' and 'professional scientific and technical' sectors.
- 6.10 Whilst West Oxfordshire's economy is considered to be very resilient with a well-balanced industrial structure, productivity is relatively low. There are several challenges to delivering sustainable economic growth which need to be tackled. Traffic congestion within towns and major routes such as the A40 impacts on commuters and businesses alike. The availability of superfast broadband throughout the District is critical to future economic success including rural areas which are harder to reach.
- 6.11 There is a continuing need for modern, good quality business premises and the amount of available employment development land will need to be increased to meet longer term needs. Consideration will need to be given to the replacement of aging employment units on existing sites where there is limited demand, although it will be important to retain a range of unit types to cater for different sectors.
- 6.12 The skill base of the workforce is good but there is a shortage of workers with technical skills across the area and employers seek improved 'work readiness' from school leavers. The Council will therefore seek to encourage measures designed to improve skills such as the use of community employment plans (CEPs) whereby larger developments (typically 1,000 or more homes and/or 4,000 sqm of floorspace) will be encouraged to implement training initiatives to help up-skill the local workforce e.g. use of apprenticeships. CEP's are already in place at the Westgate Centre re-development in Oxford City, as well as in Cherwell at the NW Bicester Eco-town site.

6.13 In accordance with national policy, we must plan for sustainable economic growth to meet the needs of business and address barriers to growth. To achieve our objectives the strategy is to:

- Maintain a flexible supply of land for businesses in accessible locations adjacent to the main towns to support key industrial, manufacturing, and engineering sectors, the Oxford Bioscience Cluster, aviation businesses related to RAF Brize Norton and facilitate investment in the stock of business premises.
- Address transport congestion in towns and on major routes - notably the A40. We will work in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council as they look to deliver already funded plans to improve access along the A40 corridor to Oxford through a proposed Park & Ride site at Eynsham and a bus lane along the A40 eastbound into Oxford. We will also work with Oxfordshire County Council to identify funding for their long term strategy for the A40 which will involve dualling between Witney and Eynsham and a westbound bus lane. The delivery of a new junction on the A40 at Downs Road in Witney is critical for businesses in western Witney, and improved access to Carterton is needed to help the town realise its economic potential.
- Provide access to superfast broadband to all premises in the District, including commercial and residential by the end of 2016 and ensure new development is 'broadband ready'. Improve mobile connectivity through working in partnership with providers.
- Maintain a labour supply with appropriate skills and 'work readiness'
- Invest in our town and village centres as the first choice for shopping and leisure development to reinforce their role, enhance their environments and manage car parking to ensure they remain accessible and attractive to shoppers and visitors.

- Promote a successful visitor economy which benefits visitors and local communities alike whilst protecting and enhancing the attractive environment and heritage of the District – itself a key economic asset.
- Support a vibrant rural economy through rolling out superfast broadband, facilitating homeworking, small rural business premises and diversified farming and land based sectors.

6.14 To fully deliver our economic objectives and strategy, the Council will continue to work in partnership, including with the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to ensure businesses have the support, skills, transport, ICT and other infrastructure they need to grow sustainably.

6.15 The following policies set out our approach to land for employment, the rural economy, tourism, town centres and community facilities. Other relevant issues are addressed in the housing, infrastructure and transport policies as well as the sub area strategies.

Land for employment

6.16 For the purposes of this section, Employment Development Land and Employment Sites include land and sites with office-based, industrial and warehouse/storage uses (known as the B-use classes). Employment uses under this section do not include housing, care homes, retail or leisure uses which are considered elsewhere in the strategy.

6.17 Our evidence indicates the need for more employment development land to allow for the movement and expansion of business, start-ups and inward investment. This will help meet the identified need for modern employment premises, whilst providing a good balance of unit types and ages across the District. Whilst a mix of unit sizes is necessary, the bulk of demand is for smaller units of less than 3,000 square feet and therefore the priority will be towards the provisions of smaller units.

- 6.18 The Council's original economic evidence²¹ suggested the need for around 60ha of employment development land over the plan period focussed on the main towns where it can be best served by transport and communications infrastructure, and support a range of businesses including larger scale businesses and high technology sectors. More recent evidence²² suggests that around 27 ha is needed to meet the committed economic growth scenario that underpins the Council's identified housing need and that at any one time the Council should be seeking to have 8 hectares of employment land available.
- 6.19 Around 24.5 ha is currently identified within existing planning permissions and previous local plan allocations particularly at Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton. This includes around 18 ha to the west of Witney (including 10 ha as part of the West Witney/North Curbridge committed urban extension and 8ha in the existing employment area around Downs Road) around 6ha in Carterton (including around 4.5 ha at the West Oxon Ventura Business Parks and 1.5ha at the committed urban extension east of Monahan Way) and around 0.5ha in Chipping Norton, split between two sites (former highway depot and Cromwell Park).
- 6.20 However not all of this land is available for various reasons and as such there is a need to consider additional provision to provide sufficient flexibility.
- 6.21 Small scale schemes and business extensions have accounted for a significant proportion (about 25%) of employment land supply in the past and are expected to continue in towns, villages and the countryside.
- 6.22 It is acknowledged that the economics of business property versus residential development means that the market is unlikely to identify and bring forward significant employment sites without direction and intervention by the Council. At the same time, businesses need options and choices to make investment decisions. The Council will therefore seek to identify future employment sites and work with the landowners to bring them forward as a key strand of its developing economic development strategy.
- 6.23 In the Carterton sub-area, the Council's Economic Snapshot Report (2015) suggests that of the overall 27ha requirement, around 3ha of employment land should be provided within this sub-area. In this respect, around 6ha is available through existing commitments at West Oxfordshire Business Park and Ventura Business Park (including permissions and previous Local Plan allocations) and the committed mixed-use urban extension east of Monahan Way.
- 6.24 However, there is a desire locally to more significantly increase the amount of employment land available and evidence suggests there is a lack of jobs relative to resident workers. The Council will therefore support in principle the provision of additional employment land at Carterton in suitable locations. The Council will work in partnership to help identify suitable sites if possible. One option for additional provision could be to replace the existing sports pitches on the corner of Monahan Way and Carterton Road with employment land although this would require the replacement of the pitches in a suitable location elsewhere and at present no suitable sites have been identified/allocated. These and other potential opportunities will be investigated further.

21 West Oxfordshire Economy Study (NLP 2007)

22 West Oxfordshire Economic Snapshot (CAG 2015)

- 6.25 In Chipping Norton, there is a shortage of available employment land with around 0.5 hectares identified, not all of which is available. As such, this Local Plan seeks to provide 5 hectares of business land at Chipping Norton to be provided as part of the East Chipping Norton Strategic Development Area (SDA) on land to north of London Road. This slightly exceeds the suggested 3ha level of provision set out in the Council's Economic Snapshot Report (2015) but will therefore provide additional flexibility.
- 6.26 The Eynsham – Woodstock sub-area has been identified in the Council's recent economic evidence as being particularly important for the local economy benefitting from a proximity to Oxford and the Oxfordshire 'knowledge spine'. As such, this plan identifies that as part of the planned garden village to the north of Eynsham, a new science/business park of around 40 hectares will be provided to meet current and future long-term needs (including those beyond 2031). Further detail is set out at Section 9 - Strategy at the Local Level.
- 6.27 In the Witney sub-area, the Council's Economic Snapshot Report (2015) identifies that provision should be made for around 10 ha of employment land to meet the committed economic growth scenario. It is anticipated that this will be met through the provision of 10 ha as part of the committed West Witney (North Curbridge) mixed-use urban extension as well as around 8ha through existing permissions/previous Local Plan allocations within the Downs Road employment areas. In the longer term there may be potential for further business land provision to the west of Downs Road forming a logical extension of the existing adjoining employment areas and also taking advantage of the improved accessibility onto the A40 to be created through the proposed Downs Road/A40 junction. This would need to be considered alongside other reasonable alternatives through a review of the Local Plan.
- 6.28 In addition to new provision of employment land, consideration must be given to the existing stock of premises in the District. There are many existing employment sites throughout the District the loss of which would undermine the sustainability of our market towns and rural communities and the economic diversity of West Oxfordshire. The Council will therefore seek the retention of all employment sites where there is an on-going prospect of a suitable business use and will support the expansion and redevelopment of sites of an appropriate scale to enable businesses to expand, adapt and make the most efficient use of this resource. The scale of new business expansion or redevelopment will need to reflect the character of the area and access opportunities.
- 6.29 In some cases, a continuing business use may not be suitable or economically viable and in these circumstances non-employment uses will be acceptable in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework. Where the issue is one of viability the Council will require robust evidence, including evidence of a robust marketing campaign, to demonstrate that continuing employment use has been fully tested before non-employment uses are permitted. Further guidance will be issued by the Council on the marketing evidence that will be expected. In considering the change of use of existing employment sites the Council will also take account of prevailing economic conditions. During economic downturns the retention of employment sites will be important to aid long term recovery.
- 6.30 Non-employment uses may also be allowed on employment sites where they offer community benefits which cannot otherwise be achieved, provided there are not strong economic reasons why the change of use would be inappropriate. Some small scale retail and other uses such as cafés, crèches, or trade counters, may improve the functionality and attractiveness of an employment site and help to facilitate the refurbishment and regeneration of premises. Retail and leisure proposals which are ancillary to other uses may be supported on employment sites, otherwise these will be considered in the light of the town centre first approach (See Policy E6). The Council will also use Article 4 Directions in appropriate circumstances to restrict changes of use to residential on defined employment sites.

POLICY EI: **Land for employment**

Provision of new employment land

Employment Development Land and Employment Sites are those which include predominantly office-based, industrial or storage and distribution activities (B class uses) or related sui generis uses. Including existing commitments, the following Employment Development Land provision is identified to meet employment needs:

- Witney Sub-Area - 18ha to the west of Witney including 10ha to be provided as part of the West Witney (North Curbridge) urban extension and 8ha within the existing employment area around Downs Road through existing commitments and previous Local Plan allocations.
- Carterton Sub-Area – 6ha including land at West Oxon Business Park, land at Ventura Park (4.5ha) and land east of Monahan Way (1.5ha) with further consideration to be given to additional sites for employment use in appropriate locations.
- Chipping Norton Sub-Area - 5 hectares of employment land to be provided as part of the Land East of Chipping Norton Strategic Development Area (SDA).
- Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village – around 40 hectares of employment land in the form of a campus-style 'science park' to be taken forward through an Area Action Plan (AAP).
- Other Towns Villages and Rural Areas – At least 5ha within existing commitments with 2ha at Lakeside Standlake (previous Local Plan allocation).

The take up of land for employment will continue to be monitored and the need for further provision considered through Neighbourhood Plans and any future Local Plan review.

Where justified, new employment allocations may be subject to an Article 4 Direction in the interests of safeguarding local employment opportunities. Proposals for new employment premises and sites may be subject to a condition limiting permitted development rights to protect the employment use.

Existing employment sites

Proposals to improve the effectiveness of employment operations on existing employment sites will be supported where commensurate with the scale of the town or village and the character of the area. This may include redevelopment, replacement buildings or the expansion of existing employment uses.

Non-employment uses on employment sites will be refused except in the following circumstances:

- where it can be demonstrated that the site or premises are not reasonably capable of being used or redeveloped for employment purposes; or
- where the site or premises are considered unsuitable on amenity, environmental or highway safety grounds for employment uses; or
- where the proposed use includes community, leisure, or retail uses which are complementary and compatible to the functioning of the employment site and the local community, and conform with Policy E6: Town Centres; or
- where substantial community benefits would be achieved by allowing alternative forms of development.

Supporting the rural economy

- 6.31 Our rural areas are attractive places to live but we must seek to ensure that they remain attractive places to work so that rural communities remain vibrant. Our evidence indicates that businesses in rural areas are typically engaged in similar activities to our urban areas with a high proportion of service based activities, although businesses tend to be smaller and there is more home working and self-employment.
- 6.32 Superfast broadband and mobile telecommunications are crucial to the success of such businesses particularly as home working in the District represents a reasonably high proportion of total employment and has been growing. It is expected that this will continue on an upward trend and in recognition of this, the Council is working to ensure all premises in the District will have access to superfast broadband by the end of 2017.
- 6.33 In the interest of sustainable development, our strategy directs larger businesses and employers to Witney, Carterton, Chipping Norton and the Eynsham area which have generally better transport connections, but continues to support the rural economy through a positive approach towards homeworking flexible working practices, small rural business premises and diversifying the land based sector. Tourism and leisure activities, such as walking, cycling and horseriding, are also significant and are considered in the policies that follow.
- 6.34 As part of this general approach there will be the proposed science/business park element of the planned garden village to the north of Eynsham. The garden village will in itself form a new rural service centre for the District. The scale of proposed employment uses at around 40 ha will be well in excess of what would typically be sought at a rural service centre. However, given the strategic location of the site in close proximity to the A40 and Oxfordshire knowledge spine and the intention that this new settlement will play a strategic role for the wider area up to 2031 and beyond, the scale of this business opportunity is appropriate. Detailed masterplanning will help develop this concept further.
- 6.35 The development of new small employment sites within and adjacent to the other Rural Service Centres and Villages will be supported where they are commensurate with the scale and character of the area. Small employment sites are considered those up to 500sqm (gross internal) and should not have unacceptable adverse impacts on local communities and the character of the countryside, particularly in terms of traffic, noise, lighting and visual impact.
- 6.36 The Council supports the re-use of existing buildings to provide new employment premises in accordance with Policy E3. Where new buildings are proposed in rural locations it will need to be demonstrated that the business need cannot be met through the conversion of existing buildings or through the use of existing premises or land in more sustainable locations such as the Main Service Centres. In addition, it will also need to be demonstrated that new buildings will safeguard the amenity of local residents, the character of the countryside and the local highway safety.
- 6.37 Where Live Work premises are proposed or other new business premises which also include residential accommodation, the appropriateness of the residential use will be considered in accordance with the housing policies of this Plan and against all other relevant policies.

- 6.38 The land based sector remains important to protecting home food production which is of increased importance as the world population continues to increase. In addition, this plays an essential role in reducing food miles and in shaping and maintaining the character of the countryside. The prospects of the sector are good but there is a continuing need to adapt to changing subsidy regimes, emerging markets, environmental, hygiene and animal welfare standards as well as climate change.
- 6.39 Diversification into non-agricultural activities can be vital to the continuing viability of many farm businesses. The need to protect home food production is important to reduce food miles and profitable farming is also the most cost effective means of delivering environmental and landscape management benefits. Farm diversification may include bed and breakfast/self-catering units, equestrian development, farm shops, processing farm produce, and the letting of existing buildings for office space, or industrial and commercial uses.
- 6.40 The Council is generally supportive of well-conceived farm diversification schemes which secure long term benefits for farming and the local economy. New activities should not conflict with agricultural operations, which should remain the dominant land use. Farm diversification is not an opportunity for asset stripping to raise short term revenues and new economic activities should remain part of the farm business to provide an on-going additional farm income.
- 6.41 Existing buildings should be reused where feasible and proposals should conform to Policy E3. New buildings will only be allowed where they are required for a diversification proposal which is a genuine extension of and fully integrated with the existing farm business (e.g. buildings necessary for processing farm produce and farm shops selling local farm produce) or to meet a specific economic need which cannot otherwise be met in the locality including within or on the edge of a nearby village or town.
- 6.42 All proposals should be consistent in scale with a rural location and not result in the loss of amenity to other local businesses or residents, or spoil the enjoyment of other users of the countryside. New buildings will be preferably located within or adjacent to a group of existing farm buildings and be located and designed to integrate with the landscape having regard to local landscape appraisals, policy areas and guidance in the Cotswolds AONB management plan (see Policy EH1 and EH2).
- 6.43 Proposals for farm shops will be assessed to ensure that they are proposed to be a genuine retail outlet of agricultural produce from the local area and in terms of their impact on existing village or town centre shops serving the local community. Conditions will be applied limiting the type of goods sold and proportion of externally sourced goods. A farm business plan should accompany applications for farm diversification so that the proposal can be properly assessed. The Council will issue further guidance on the content of farm business plans.
- 6.44 There are many large country estates in the District including Blenheim, Cornbury, Heythrop and Ditchley. Such estates manage a variety of natural, historic and cultural assets of importance locally, nationally or internationally, often in addition to a farming enterprise, business premises and tourist facilities. These estates continue to seek to diversify their incomes in a similar way to farm diversification. The diversification of an estate economy will be supported where it provides a sustainable approach to balancing economic activity with the conservation and enhancement of natural and heritage assets. This should be demonstrated through an estate management plan which should also demonstrate that there is a good prospect that the proposed enterprise will be economically viable and is capable of being sustained in the medium to long term.

**POLICY E2:
Supporting the Rural Economy**

New small employment sites in or adjacent to Service Centres and the Villages as listed in Table 4b will be supported where they are commensurate with the scale of the settlement and the character of the area.

Elsewhere new and replacement buildings will be allowed where required for diversification proposals which are fully integrated with an existing farm business or where they meet a specific business need which cannot otherwise be met in a more sustainable location.

Development proposals which are necessary for agricultural production or which make a positive contribution to farm or country estate diversification will be supported where they:

- are supported by or operate as part of and will continue to add value to a viable core farm/estate business; and
- remain compatible and consistent in scale with the farm/estate operation and a countryside location; and
- re-use existing buildings where feasible in accordance with Policy E3.

Any new building(s) must be suitably located for the scale and type of the proposed use and have regard to the level of accessibility to settlements, facilities and services and impact on the character and amenity of the area.

Farm shops will be permitted where they form part of a diversification scheme to sell produce from the farm or farms in the immediate vicinity and do not demonstrably undermine the viability and vitality of shopping provision in existing villages. Conditions will be imposed to limit the proportion of goods from other sources.

Development proposals for new or replacement buildings may be subject to a condition to safeguard their use in the interests of the local economy.

The Council will seek to secure access to superfast broadband and improved mobile telecommunications in rural areas and subject to compliance with other relevant policies, will adopt a positive approach to well-designed proposals to facilitate homeworking and flexible working practices (such as live-work units) which maintain the amenity of existing residents. All new development will be required to demonstrate that the necessary infrastructure is in place or will be provided to enable access to superfast broadband.

Re-use of non-residential buildings

- 6.45 Many non-residential buildings throughout West Oxfordshire are built in the vernacular style (using local building styles and materials) and a high proportion of these are former agricultural buildings. These traditional buildings are a key part of the character and history of West Oxfordshire and many are listed for their architectural or historic interest. Due to modern agricultural practices, many agricultural buildings have become redundant and it is recognised that the best way to secure the upkeep of such buildings and their contribution to the character of the area is to keep them in active use. Re-using these buildings reduces the need for new building and creates the opportunity to provide unobtrusive economic activities, community facilities and housing.
- 6.46 In accordance with the overall strategy, conversion of existing buildings to residential use is more appropriate within our service centres and villages with services and facilities (see Policy H2). Elsewhere, re-use for employment, tourism or community uses is generally more suitable than residential use in accordance with Paragraph 55 of the National Planning Policy Framework which seeks to avoid isolated new homes in the countryside.
- 6.47 In addition, the re-use of such buildings to employment, tourism or community uses often involves fewer alterations to such buildings or their setting and provides a valuable contribution to maintaining a vibrant rural economy. Many of these buildings cater for small and start-up businesses and therefore their retention is important to the local economy.
- 6.48 Suitable buildings for re-use will be of substantial and permanent construction and the Council may require structural surveys to demonstrate that buildings are capable of conversion. Ecological surveys are also likely to be required as many redundant buildings provide habitats for protected species such as barn owls and bats.
- 6.49 It is not the Council's objective to prolong the life of buildings that are harmful to the appearance of an area. Non-traditional or modern agricultural buildings are typically unworthy of retention due to their form and unsympathetic materials. As there are many such buildings throughout the countryside, their general re-use could lead to a dispersed pattern of development contrary to the overall spatial strategy and having an adverse impact on the character and tranquillity of rural areas.
- 6.50 Outside of the provisions of permitted development rights, opportunities for the re-use of non-traditional buildings will be limited to more sustainable locations and where they contribute to farm diversification in accordance with Policy E2. Other proposals for the re-use of non-traditional buildings will only be supported if they can be demonstrated to meet an economic or social need which cannot be met in a more sustainable location and where this significantly enhances the character of the area, such as through the removal of other intrusive and harmful buildings. Non-traditional buildings are unlikely to be suitable for conversion to residential use without major improvement or rebuilding and as such conversion to employment, tourism or community use will normally be more appropriate.
- 6.51 The impacts resulting from the re-use of non-residential buildings will need to be weighed alongside the contribution of the building(s) to the character of the area and the potential local economic and social benefits that may result from re-use. The potential impacts of a building conversion may include visual and landscape impacts, traffic and accessibility impacts and light pollution. In some cases where a building is situated in an isolated and inaccessible location or where it detracts from the character of the surrounding area, re-use may not be appropriate, particularly in the Cotswolds AONB or other designated areas.

6.52 If the principle of conversion is accepted, it is important that detailed proposals respect or improve the original character of the building. The condition of the building and the methods of construction should be understood before significant works of repair or alteration are undertaken. Loss of historic fabric should be minimised, features of historical or architectural significance should be retained and repairs should be carried out using appropriate materials. Further guidance is available in the West Oxfordshire Design Guide SPD and the Historic England good practice guidance on the Conversion of Traditional Farm Buildings.

POLICY E3:

Re-use of non-residential buildings

The Council supports the re-use of traditional buildings for employment, tourism and community uses to support the rural economy where the following criteria are met:

- the existing form and design of the building(s) positively contribute to the character of the area; and
- the building(s) are capable of conversion to the proposed use without necessitating alteration(s) or extension(s) which would harm the form of the original building and without removing features of historic, architectural or nature conservation interest; and
- the building(s) are suitably located for the scale and type of the proposed use, having regard to the level of accessibility to settlements, facilities and services and impact on the character and amenity of the area.

The re-use of non-traditional buildings, including modern farm buildings, for employment, tourism and community uses will be supported within or adjoining Service Centres or Villages, or where it forms part of an agricultural holding and the proposal is part of a farm diversification scheme under Policy E2 or where re-use would address a specific local need which cannot be met in an alternative way. This is provided that the following criteria are met:

- the general character and form of the building(s) are not harmful to the surroundings; and
- the scale and type of use is suitable to its location and will not result in excessive alteration(s) or extension(s) to the host building.

Sustainable tourism economy

- 6.53 Tourism is an important and growing economic sector in West Oxfordshire. Spend in 2014 from tourist activity was £280m, accounting for an estimated 3,559 jobs (full-time equivalent). This reflects the area's attractive countryside, including the Cotswolds AONB, historic Cotswold market towns and villages and a range of visitor attractions, including the Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site. The District also has considerable water assets including the River Thames and its tributaries and the Oxford Canal on the District's eastern boundary. Most of these attractions have a cultural or historic affinity with the area and its rural character.
- 6.54 Through the Oxfordshire Cotswolds brand, the local tourism strategy seeks to capitalise on West Oxfordshire's inherent assets and promotes tourism development which complements and enhances them. The Council will continue the long held approach of seeking the optimum use of existing tourist facilities and encouraging small scale new tourist facilities and attractions which can be more easily assimilated into the landscape and local communities.
- 6.55 Larger new attractions, which generate significant visitor numbers, are more appropriate in or adjacent to the main towns where there are public transport opportunities and traffic impact on rural roads can be minimised. For some facilities, such as hotels and restaurants, a town centre location will be most appropriate although other locations may be acceptable taking into account both the town centre first approach and specific locational and functional requirements.
- 6.56 Tourism investment and visitor spending can support the management and conservation of historic and natural sites, local traditions, events and the distinctive features of the Cotswolds AONB and other designated areas. Tourism enterprises and visitors are encouraged to support practical conservation initiatives, some of which are highlighted in Section 8 - Environmental and Heritage Assets.
- 6.57 Visitor-related facilities may offer benefits to existing local communities, such as supporting local food producers, shops and pubs or new recreational opportunities. Locating new visitor related development within or close to existing settlements will enable the potential wider community benefits to be realised whilst minimising the spread of development into the open countryside. In some cases tourism development in the open countryside may be justified if associated with a particular countryside attraction or a farm diversification scheme. Existing buildings should be utilised wherever possible although replacement buildings should be considered where this would result in a more sustainable development.
- 6.58 Camping and touring caravan sites are scattered throughout the District and many are small in size and of limited visual or environmental impact. The siting and screening of new sites will need careful consideration, particularly in the Cotswolds AONB, and appropriate existing buildings should be used for associated facilities where possible. The intensification or extension of existing camping or caravan sites should achieve positive environmental improvements. Additional sites for static holiday caravans are not generally considered appropriate in West Oxfordshire because of the landscape quality and special character of the built environment. In most cases, well designed (non-caravan) holiday units are more appropriate.
- 6.59 The location, scale and design of any new visitor related development must be appropriate to the area and its environmental impact will be carefully assessed and weighed against any economic and community benefits. Where tourist accommodation is proposed in locations where new dwellings would not normally be permitted the Council will impose planning conditions or require legal agreements restricting buildings to holiday accommodation use.

- 6.60 The after-use of former mineral workings in the Lower Windrush Valley may offer particular opportunities for leisure and tourism development. Existing recreational uses include walking, fishing, horse riding, windsurfing, sailing, banger racing, power boating and water skiing. The after-use strategy established in the Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan 1996 has been for the more intensive water based recreation to be focussed in the Standlake area with lower key recreation uses such as angling, walking, cycling and non-intrusive leisure uses and provision for nature conservation elsewhere in the valley. This strategy continues to be appropriate, notably as the more intensive leisure uses are likely to be incompatible with nature conservation if in close proximity.
- 6.61 The Lower Windrush Valley Project was set up to co-ordinate habitat creation and conservation alongside achieving leisure opportunities such as the Windrush Path which also provide social and economic benefits. The work of the project has also identified opportunities to improve recreational access in the area by creating connections between existing rights of way. The Council will continue to work with the Project and the County Council as Mineral Planning Authority to determine suitable after-uses. After-use proposals which offer a positive and comprehensive legacy for local communities and nature conservation interests will be supported.
- 6.62 The River Thames on the District's southern boundary is a significant asset in terms of its environmental quality and as a recreational resource. The Thames in West Oxfordshire flows through remote and tranquil open countryside. The Council will support low key tourism and leisure proposals along the Thames which are sensitive to and enhance where possible its ecological, landscape and heritage value. The Council will also support the retention and improvement of cycling and walking routes throughout the District, including along the River Thames which incorporates the Thames Path National Trail as well as within the Lower Windrush Valley.
- 6.63 In accordance with this approach and The Thames Waterway Plan, the further provision or extension of permanent base moorings and associated facilities will only be allowed in suitable locations off the main river channel. There is a suggested need for further overnight public visitor mooring facilities. Such moorings will be best located where there is access to facilities and services such as nearby local shops or pubs. Given the rural nature of the Thames in West Oxfordshire, appropriate locations will be limited but the potential for further visitor moorings and associated facilities will be investigated.

POLICY E4: Sustainable tourism

Tourism and leisure development which utilises and enriches the natural and built environment and existing attractions of West Oxfordshire to the benefit of visitors and local communities will be supported.

New tourist and visitor facilities should be located within or close to Service Centres and Villages and reuse appropriate existing buildings wherever possible. In small villages, hamlets and the open countryside, new tourism and visitor facilities may be justified in the following circumstances:

- where there is a functional linkage with a particular countryside attraction; or
- the nature of the tourist and visitor facility is such that it could not reasonably be located within or close to Service Centres and Villages; or
- to secure the diversification of a farm enterprise or country estate in accordance with Policy E2; or
- the proposal will re-use an appropriate building in accordance with Policy E3

Subject to specific locational or functional requirements, the town centre first approach will be applied to tourism and leisure development, including hotels.

Proposals in the Cotswolds AONB should conserve and enhance the landscape quality and biodiversity of the area and support the objectives of the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan and Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

In the Lower Windrush Valley the Council will continue to work with the Lower Windrush Valley Project and the County Council as Mineral Planning Authority to identify appropriate opportunities for tourism and leisure development. Proposals which complement the rural character of the area and deliver comprehensive long term recreational access, community or nature conservation benefits will be supported.

The Council, working in partnership with other organisations, will support tourism and leisure proposals which are sensitive to and where possible enhance the ecological, landscape and heritage value of the River Thames. The provision or extension of permanent base moorings and associated facilities will be allowed in suitable locations off the main river channel, provided these do not harm the ecological, landscape or heritage value of the river and provide an enhancement where possible.

Retention and development of local services and community facilities

6.64 Local services and community facilities provide for the health and wellbeing, social, educational, spiritual, recreational, leisure and cultural needs of the community. They include town, village and neighbourhood shops, post offices, pubs, community/youth centres and halls, theatres and museums, indoor and outdoor sports and leisure facilities, schools, education and training centres, libraries, doctor's surgeries and health centres, public toilets, crèches and children's nurseries, places of worship and other facilities which meet people day to day needs.

6.65 Local facilities are essential in meeting the day to day needs of residents, providing social meeting places, sports venues and essential local services. These also assist in maintaining healthy and inclusive communities, sustainable travel patterns and local employment opportunities. Surveys of parish facilities in our Settlement Sustainability reports have indicated that many settlements have seen the closure of shops, post offices, public houses and other facilities. This is in part due to changing social and economic circumstances including the ways we now access many services using the internet or telephone. Economies of scale and public service budget cuts are also leading to public services being concentrated in the larger centres of population. In other cases the high residential land values in the District make

the closure and conversion of facilities such as shops and pubs attractive to investors. This is a threat to the sustainability of our communities particularly in the rural areas where such facilities can form the hub of social life.

- 6.66 Through the Localism Act the Government has implemented the Community Right to Bid whereby communities can apply for services and facilities which further the wellbeing or social interest of the local community to be listed as Assets of Community Value. When listed assets become available, the Community Right to Bid provides a delay in the disposal process to give community groups the time to develop a bid and seek to buy the asset when it comes on the open market. The provisions apply to the sale of land or assets not to their use which continues to be decided through the planning process. However, where assets have been listed under the provisions, this reflects the importance of a facility to a community and the Council will have regard to this in the consideration of planning proposals for a change of use.
- 6.67 The Council will continue its approach of resisting the loss of local services and community facilities as a result of change of use proposals. In considering proposals involving the change of use of such facilities, the Council in consultation with the local community, will take into account the importance of the facility to the local community particularly in meeting day to day needs. To justify the change of use of facilities it will need to be demonstrated that they are no longer viable (through a robust marketing exercise where possible) and are no longer required because equivalent or alternative provision will remain or will be provided to meet local needs.
- 6.68 For commercially run facilities such as local shops and pubs, the Council considers that a robust marketing exercise is the most transparent way of demonstrating that such facilities are no longer viable. This allows local communities to consider making a bid to run or acquire premises of value through the Community Right to Bid. The Council will publish separate guidance on the required

nature of marketing exercises. In seeking to justify the change of use of local services or community facilities, applicants will also be required to consider whether existing premises or sites can be adapted to retain a viable community facility or service. In the case of the potential loss of any healthcare facilities, the Council will have regard to relevant circumstances including any programme of modernisation/rationalisation by the NHS.

POLICY E5: Local services and community facilities

The Council will support the development and retention of local services and community facilities to meet local needs and to promote social wellbeing, interests, interaction and healthy inclusive communities.

Development proposals that would result in the loss of community facilities and services will only be supported where it can be clearly shown that:

- appropriate alternative provision of at least equivalent suitability and accessibility, particularly by foot, will remain, and;
- in the case of pubs, shops and other commercially run services and facilities, the existing use is no longer viable and is incapable of being made viable or adapted to retain a viable service or facility including as a community run enterprise. A robust marketing exercise will be required to demonstrate that the use or premises is unviable in accordance with separate guidance published by the Council.

In considering development proposals for the loss of local services and community facilities, the Council will have regard to whether a site or facility is registered as an Asset of Community Value.

Town centres

- 6.69 Town centre uses include retail development, offices (including flexible 'office-hubs') leisure, entertainment, arts, culture, tourism development and intensive sport and recreation uses. The evidence in our retail needs assessment and town centre surveys has identified that the main town centres of Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton, Burford and Woodstock are generally vibrant with low vacancy rates.
- 6.70 The 'high street' however faces a number of challenges, not least from changing consumer behaviour including increasing competition posed by the internet and competing centres such as Oxford. Therefore, strategies which support our high streets are even more vital.
- 6.71 Witney is the largest and strongest performing town centre, accounting for 47% of the District's retail distribution sector. It has a strong convenience goods offer (e.g. food and groceries) and comparison goods offer (e.g. clothes, jewellery and electrical items) that attracts shoppers and visitors from a wide area. The construction of Marriotts Walk and extension of the Woolgate centre have further enhanced the role of Witney town centre as the primary shopping and leisure destination.
- 6.72 Carterton town centre acts as an important centre serving the south of the District, particularly providing a convenience and service offer. It has been a long term aim to improve Carterton's shopping and leisure offer and this is now being progressed, although there remains considerable scope to improve this further.
- 6.73 Chipping Norton which serves the north of the District was identified as a centre which could benefit from further food store provision and this has now been advanced through recent permissions including an extension to the Co-op and a new Aldi store.
- 6.74 The main centres are supported by a number of smaller town, village and neighbourhood shopping centres. The historic market towns of Burford and Woodstock are designated rural service centres and have a relatively large number of shops and facilities for their size reflecting their historic and tourist roles. Like the three main service centres, Burford and Woodstock therefore have defined Town Centre boundaries.
- 6.75 All of these centres are potentially vulnerable to out of centre proposals and changing consumer habits. Our objective is to protect their vitality and viability in line with national policy and to ensure continued investment in the town centres to enhance their shopping and leisure offer to meet residents' and visitor needs. This will be achieved primarily through the application of Policy E6.
- 6.76 The other rural services within the District including Eynsham, Charlbury, Long Hanborough and Bampton whilst playing an important role in serving the day to day needs of local communities are more modest in nature, sporadic in form and less well-defined. This is also likely to be the case for the proposed Garden Village which will form a new rural service centre once established. The services and facilities within these centres are therefore protected through Policy E5 in recognition of their local role and the importance of retaining the existing level and variety of services and facilities. Attempts to define boundaries more precisely may result in peripheral sections affording no protection and therefore this is not an appropriate approach.
- 6.77 Our retail evidence²³ examines the consumer spending capacity to support significant additional shopping development over the plan period. Although well served at present, the assessment identifies capacity to support additional shopping floorspace in Witney in the medium and longer term and recommends that this strategy starts to plan for a phased extension to the town centre to accommodate new investment.

23 West Oxfordshire Retail Needs Assessment Update
November 2012

- 6.78 In Carterton there is significant capacity to 'claw back' trade that is leaking to other town centres and whilst increased food store provision in the town helps to achieve this, there remains a need to enhance the centre's comparison shopping and leisure offer.
- 6.79 Recognising their ability to support significant new town centre development, town centre strategies have been prepared for Witney and Carterton (see Section 9).
- 6.80 The retail evidence also suggests there is some capacity to support additional (non-food) retail floorspace in Chipping Norton in the period to 2029.
- 6.81 To support our town centres we will seek to direct significant proposals for new shopping and town centre development including office space, which provides for more than day to day needs, to our town centres wherever possible. Such proposals must follow the 'town centre first' approach established through national planning policy whereby the availability, suitability and viability of town centre sites to accommodate new town centre development should be fully explored, before edge of centre sites, and lastly out-of-centre sites are considered.
- 6.82 New town centre development should be in accessible locations and appropriate in nature and scale to the role of the centre where it is located. Developments which are likely to attract customers from a significantly wider area than the centre's existing catchment may be considered out of scale with the role of that centre and may be better located within or adjacent to a larger centre.
- 6.83 The impact of proposed new town centre uses on the vitality of existing town centres and planned measures to improve them must also be fully considered. The Council's²⁴ latest retail study identified that due to the small scale of the centres in West Oxfordshire, impact assessments will be required for proposals over 500m² net sales floorspace where they are not in a centre or in accordance with a local or neighbourhood development plan
- This threshold will help protect the town centres from medium and large out of centre food stores and other shops which could have significant impacts. Proposals which will have a significant negative impact on the vitality and viability of town centres will not be supported.
- 6.84 Primary and secondary shopping frontages have been defined in Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton which form the Primary Shopping Area. Primary shopping frontages have a high proportion of shops and are core frontages to protect and maintain the attractiveness and coherence of the centres. Where permission is required we will refuse the change of use of shops in these areas unless the criteria listed in Policy E6 can be met in full.
- 6.85 As the trend in 'remote working' is predicted to increase, there is an opportunity for the town centres of Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton to cater for those working remotely by providing spaces such as cafes, coffee houses, libraries and more flexible shared spaces. This will help ensure the town centres are more resilient to changing work practices.
- 6.86 In recognition of the importance of complementary uses in town centres, secondary shopping frontages have been designated to support shops and other uses which complement the shopping and leisure role of town centres including cafes, restaurants and other leisure and cultural uses including those that support the evening economy in appropriate locations. However, care will be taken to avoid excessive concentrations of single uses which reduce variety and could cause amenity issues and affect the vitality of the area. In assessing whether proposals result in an excessive concentration of uses, these will be considered on a case by case basis by evaluating the context of the area, including the current mix of uses in the locality, the character and sensitivities of the street scene and built environment and the relationship between the buildings. Proposals should be considered against the relevant policies within this plan, with particular reference to Policy OS4 (High Quality Design) and Policy EH9 (Historic Environment).

²⁴ West Oxfordshire Retail Needs Assessment Update
November 2012

- 6.87 Burford and Woodstock are smaller centres where the defined town centres encapsulate the primary shopping area and the definition of primary and secondary frontages is not appropriate. The change of use of shops and other town centre uses will be refused throughout these town centres where permission is required, unless the criteria listed within Policy E6 can be met in full. Care should also be taken to avoid excessive concentrations of single uses within these centres.
- 6.88 The Council will continue to work with communities to promote and enhance the attractiveness of all town centres addressing, where possible, issues of publicity, security, parking and accessibility, and improvements to the public realm. Enhancing the character and improving the environment of town centres is an important part of strengthening their role. 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. The conservation, enjoyment and enhancement of their historic environment is a significant consideration.
- 6.89 The Council's current policy approach of providing free parking is a significant attraction to shoppers and assists in maintaining the vitality and viability of the town centres. The application of time management controls and enforcement seek to ensure that adequate levels of short-stay spaces are available to meet the needs of shoppers and other visitors to the area and helps to support retailers and the local economy.
- 6.90 Car parking capacity is however nearing capacity in the town centres and the Council have prepared a District-wide Parking Strategy to investigate whether parking provision is meeting current needs and will meet future parking requirements.
- 6.91 As a predominantly rural area where our town centres attract shoppers from a wide area, a continuing supply of available car parking space will remain of importance if the shopping centres are to continue to flourish in the face of competition from internet retailing and larger centres out of the District. Opportunities to increase car parking in our town centres are however limited and solutions such as decking may be required. Development proposals which will significantly increase car parking demand in town centres will be expected to make appropriate provision for increased public car parking and access to them, whether through direct provision or financial contributions.
- 6.92 There are several garden centres and farm shops within the District which also provide shopping facilities to which our town centre policy will apply. The impact of the expansion or new provision of such shopping facilities on our town and village centres needs to be considered. Farm shops should be a genuine outlet of local farm produce and our approach is set out in Policy E2.
- 6.93 Garden centres do not need to be located in open countryside and the most suitable locations will be adjacent to medium or larger settlements where traffic generated can be more easily absorbed by the road network. The goods to be sold should be genuinely associated with horticulture and gardening and planning conditions will be applied limiting the amount of sales floorspace and type of goods sold.

POLICY E6: **Town centres**

Town centres will be supported as the focus for shopping, leisure, community facilities and services. The Council will work with local businesses, residents, parish and town councils to ensure town, village and neighbourhood centres remain vibrant, accessible and meet local needs.

The following town centres are defined on the proposals map:

Principal town centre:	Witney
Primary town centres:	Carterton Chipping Norton
Town centres with a significant tourist role:	Burford Woodstock

The Council will apply the sequential and impact tests set out in the National Planning Policy Framework to new shopping and other town centre development proposals, including office development. Impact assessments will be required for significant proposals (over 500m² net sales floorspace) where they are not in a centre or in accordance with a local or neighbourhood development plan.

Primary and secondary shopping frontages are defined on the proposals map in Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton.

Within primary shopping frontages development resulting in the loss of shops (A1 use) will be refused unless the criteria set out in this policy can be met in full.

Within secondary shopping frontages, development proposals for shops and other town centre uses, such as restaurants or cafes, will be allowed where they would complement and enhance the shopping offer of the defined shopping frontage. Development resulting in the loss of town centre uses in these frontages will be refused unless the criteria set out in this policy can be met in full. Concentrations of single uses will not be allowed where this would be likely to cause issues of amenity or affect the vitality of the area.

In the town centres of Burford and Woodstock development resulting in the loss of shops and other town centre uses will be refused unless the criteria set out in this policy can be met in full. Concentrations of single uses will not be allowed where this would be likely to cause issues of amenity or affect the vitality of the area.

Where development resulting in the loss of shops or other town centre uses is proposed contrary to this policy it will need to be satisfactorily demonstrated that:

- following a robust marketing exercise the site or premises are not reasonably capable of being used or redeveloped for these uses; or
- the alternative use will positively contribute to the function, vitality and viability of the town centre.

The Council will work in partnership to promote and enhance the attractiveness of all town centres addressing where possible issues of publicity, security, parking and accessibility. Improvements to the public realm will be sought through high design standards which will apply to all town centre development.

Development proposals which significantly increase car parking demand in our town centres will be expected to make appropriate public car parking provision or equivalent financial contributions in accordance with Policy T4 (Parking provision) of this plan.