

Full Council

Date:	13 February 2024
Title:	Joint Local Plan 2041 – Preferred Options Consultation
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Background

1. South Oxfordshire adopted its 2035 Local Plan in December 2020. In order to ensure that the District continues to lead, rather than react to development proposals they must renew the Local Plan before it is five years old.
2. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils share many common interests as their major economic and social infrastructure sits across their mutual border. This has led the two authorities to agree to a Joint Local Plan. A Call for Land and Buildings Available for Change was held in autumn of 2021, and an “Issues” consultation was held in May 2022.
3. The two Councils are now consulting on their Regulation 18, Preferred Options document. This is a largely complete draft of their intended Plan showing proposed site allocations for identified housing and employment needs. The document contains “options” for policies, with the Councils explaining their preferred option for each topic covered. Accompanying the draft is a suite of appraisals and evidence base studies that have been used to inform the Options, topic papers for housing, retail and Climate Change, etc. and a draft Policies Map.
4. The purpose of this report is to draw attention to the matters the Town Council might wish to formally respond to. It is advised that Members consider the outcomes of proposed policies rather than focus on their anticipated effects. The consultation closes on 26 February 2024.

Approach

5. The first active chapter of a Local Plan is commonly chosen to make the local authority’s main priority clear. The Councils’ choice is “Climate change and improving environmental quality”. This theme is reflected throughout the document.

Vision

6. The Vision is used to capture the Community’s ethos, to make sure it is reflected through the Plan. The Vision seeks a carbon neutral future, where nature and people thrive, have easy access to their daily needs and are safe from pollution, flooding and the effects of climate change. The role of the Science Vale is promoted to provide valuable jobs, clean technologies and to play its role in solving global issues.
7. The Vision has led to Objectives that seek carbon neutrality, strengthening resilience to climate change through the implementation of nature-based solutions (where possible), helping nature recover, focusing development on well-located brownfield sites, help achieve more healthy and active lifestyles, plan for “enough” new homes and infrastructure, etc.

8. Most of the above is uncontroversial, but Members may wish to consider what is missing, and the impact of the objectives and how they could be applied to Thame.

Climate change and improving environmental quality

9. The main approach is to reduce the energy and carbon used by and within buildings and build in resilience to climate change (such as through more severe rainfall events, risk of overheating, etc.). The main themes are:
- Reducing, conserving and harvesting water
 - Reducing risk of overheating and the heat island effect
 - Having net zero carbon buildings, without fossil fuel use
 - Reduce embodied carbon in buildings through the re-use of materials and retention and retrofit of buildings
 - Set standards for heating and the total energy use of a building
 - Buildings to generate their “own” energy and have developers investigate energy storage, distribution systems, etc.
 - Encourage retrofitting for sustainability to improve energy efficiency and adaption for climate change
 - Encourage extensions as a means to trigger a “whole building” approach to energy efficiency, and give compliant schemes greater weight
 - Encourage renewable / low carbon energy generation across all scales, including at the domestic level
 - Encourage solar and wind generation in areas (to be) identified on the Policies Map, and community-led renewable and low-carbon initiatives.
10. Many of the above proposals are sensible; reducing the urban heat island effect, for example, will help avoid heat stress in the very young and the elderly as well as in our natural environment. Some are virtuous in themselves, and would save residents energy and therefore money, but could lead to a change in the look of many familiar buildings and streets.
11. Other policies in this chapter mostly cover improving the quality of the collective environment, such as air, water, etc.

Spatial strategy and settlements

12. Thame is identified as having a housing requirement of 143 homes as of 1 April 2023. Neighbourhood plans are encouraged to meet bespoke local needs. It is identified as a Tier 1 settlement, where a presumption in favour of sustainable development is in place within the built-up area through brownfield, infill, backland development, replacement dwellings and sub-division.
13. Members may wish to consider the impact on Thame of the proposed change in focus towards redeveloping land and changing the use of buildings. This should be seen against the background of the Plan’s other draft policies, including the proposed minimum density requirement for the market towns.

Housing

14. The District Council is proposing to move to the Standard Methodology for calculating housing needs. The District would have to continue to build out the quantity of Oxford’s

unmet needs agreed through the 2035 Local Plan. While the housing and tenure mix is still being developed, other proposals are to:

- Aim for 50% of homes to be delivered on-site as affordable housing and introduce an overage clause, where the 50% is not thought deliverable
- Use open book viability assessments with developers
- Require a proportion of specialist elderly accommodation to be provided as affordable homes
- Require a proportion of build to rent homes to be made available as affordable homes
- Introduce a “target” for sheltered and Extra care housing (both owned and rented) on strategic sites and higher tier settlements
- Introduce a policy allowing some affordable housing to be provided as self or custom-build housing, with a mechanism to ensure they are kept affordable in perpetuity
- Introduce Rural, First Home and Community-led housing in line with the National Planning Policy Framework. Allowing a proportion (up to 25%) of market homes on site to fund these, where necessary

15. Councillors would be advised to consider if or how the policies within this chapter could positively influence affordability or the availability of housing in Thame for those on less than median incomes.

Jobs and Tourism

16. The District Council has allocated 25.8ha of employment land to existing and new sites within Science Vale and the Grenoble Road urban extension site.

- For existing employment areas, it is proposed that ancillary use designed to provide for users of the employment site would be allowed, as long as it did not affect the vitality / viability of any town or local centre or village.
- Affordable workspace provision will be supported across all settlements to assist start-ups, the community, artisans, creative and arts sectors. “Normal” commercial uses will be encouraged to include an element of affordable workspace, and these or financial contributions will be sought on larger schemes.
- Introduce the need for Community Employment Plans for major sites, looking at using local supply chains, apprenticeships, etc.
- Considering removing PD rights where farm buildings have been converted to avoid their replacements being similarly converted
- Encouraging dual use of facilities, particularly those near tourist attractions.

17. There are no allocations for employment land for the market towns. Members will need to consider (against the background of Thame’s own Employment Allocations Evidence) the proposed approach for Thame.

Site Allocations and Garden Villages

18. The District is working to save and update the “old” allocations and does not believe it needs any new major sites to provide for its housing requirement. While most of this chapter is believed to be uncontroversial or not apply to Thame, Members may wish to consider if the proposed threshold below which a prescribed list of evidence base documents would not be required is appropriate, at 200 homes / 4 hectares or more and 1,000 sq.m. of commercial floorspace / 2 hectares or more of employment land.

Town Centres and Retail

19. The draft Plan's approach is to establish "an appropriate" mix of retail and main TC uses, with applicants encouraged to repurpose buildings before considering new development.
- The current impact test threshold will be retained (500 sq.m.gross).
 - An additional threshold is proposed for applications to town centre uses within 800m of a defined local service centre boundary, with above 300 sq.m. gross of floorspace.
 - Where permission is required, retail uses at ground floor level within primary centres would be protected
 - No convenience floorspace has been proposed for the market towns. Instead, a town centre-first approach will be taken to proposals, which will be judged on their merits. Preference would be given to redevelopment sites.
20. Councillors may wish to consider the impact of having no foodstore floorspace allocated to Thame as this appears to be leaving such floorspace provision to the market. It is not clear why this change has been made, although the most recent retail study believes (against a growing population) that the need for foodstore floorspace will decrease over the Plan's period.

Design

21. The lead policy now includes a need to design in the "forgotten" elements of buildings at the start of the process, as per the TNP's Policy ESDQ27.
- There is a need to consider climate and sustainability to ensure development is sustainable and resilient
 - Reduce energy consumption
 - Use local or ethically sourced materials
 - Be built to last
 - Have landscape leading Sustainable Drainage System solutions.
 - Major sites would need a masterplan and a design code, produced alongside the local community
 - Major sites may be taken before a Design Review Panel, where there are sensitivities in terms of heritage, landscape, public realm redevelopment, etc.
22. Policy DE4 proposed that housing densities are optimised to take account of local character and context. There is, however, a presumption that Tier 1 settlements (like Thame) will have densities "higher than 45 dph" unless there are other matters that justify a different approach. As written, it would not be possible to develop below 45dph, meaning that either Thame must accept that all development will happen at that higher density or, where local conditions warrant less than 45 dph, the application must be refused.
23. Members, with their local knowledge of Thame's character areas, will need to consider the above approach and comment appropriately.

Recommendation:

24. Other matters not listed above warrant examination. Given that the policies within the Joint Local Plan could supersede some revised Thame Neighbourhood Plan's policies, it is recommended that Members work with the NPCO in preparing a carefully considered response to the Options consultation.