Background Paper C(iii): Oxford's Biodiversity

1 Introduction

1.1 Oxford is rich in wildlife, with many important habitats and species being present. New development provides both opportunities to enhance biodiversity and also potential threats, which in many cases can be overcome by careful design. Climate change might mean that some species and habitats are particularly vulnerable, so it is particularly important that the impact of new development on biodiversity has no negative impacts and as many positive impacts as possible.

1.2 Oxford City Council, as planning authority, requires all planning applications to take wildlife into account. The City Council's aim is that new developments should maintain, enhance, restore or add to biodiversity and geological conservation interests. To ensure that Oxford's biodiversity is not gradually diminished the City Council will ensure that compensation is made for any features lost.

1.3 This paper includes more information on how biodiversity will be protected and enhanced in Oxford, and explains the background to Core Strategy Policy CS14.

Meeting Government guidance

1.4 Policy CS14 lists the types of sites that are protected in Oxford for their biodiversity interest. Designated sites are all shown on the Proposals map. The policy protects these sites. Designated sites in Oxford range in a hierarchy from internationally designated sites to nationally and locally designated sites. In the case of international and national sites, it is made clear that they must be protected from any development that may have an adverse impact. In the case of locally designated sites the policy allows for development that has a significant adverse impact only in exceptional circumstances, and only if it is possible to compensate for damage caused. This is compliant with PPS9[1], which states in paragraph 5 (i) that LDFs should indicate the location of designated sites of importance of biodiversity and geodiversity, making clear distinctions between the hierarchy of international, national, regional and locally designated sites." This paper gives more detail about designated sites and how they will be protected. Policy CS14 also recognises that species and habitats of importance for biodiversity are found across Oxford, and not necessarily designated. These must also be protected from harm.

1.5 PPS9 includes, as a key principle (in paragraph 1): "Plan policies should promote opportunities for the incorporation of beneficial biodiversity and geological features within the design of a scheme." PPS9 notes that development proposals provide many opportunities for building-in beneficial biodiversity or geological features, and says that when considering proposals, planning authorities should maximise such opportunities, using planning obligations where appropriate. In compliance with this, the first part of

[1] *Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and geological conservation* (Aug 2005) ODPM

Policy CS14 requires that, where there is the opportunity, development will be expected to enhance Oxford's biodiversity. The types of opportunities for enhancing biodiversity are outlined in Section 4 of this paper.

1.6 PPS9 states in paragraph 5(ii) that Local Development Frameworks should: "identify any areas or sites for the restoration or creation of new priority habitats which contribute to regional targets, and support this restoration or creation through appropriate policies." Policy CS14 lists briefly some particular opportunities that may be available to enhance important habitats across Oxford. These opportunities may apply to developers, and planning conditions or obligations may be imposed. The opportunities may also be taken where there is no planning application, by landowners, the city or county councils and wildlife groups. The City Council is committed to working with these groups to continue to recognise opportunities and have input into work carried out. This commitment is acknowledged in the implementation box at the end of the climate change section of the Core Strategy proposed submission document.

2 Protected Sites

2.1 Policy CS14 sets a local policy framework for the consideration of planning applications that might affect protected sites. Oxford has one internationally designated site, which is the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This area includes Port Meadow, Wolvercote Common, Wolvercote Meadows and Pixey Mead. It is designated by the European Commission under the European Habitats Directive (1992) as being of European importance for its biodiversity interest. It is one of only 608 SACs in the UK. SACs are afforded the highest possible degree of protection.

2.2 Oxford also contains 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which are designated by Natural England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for their national ecological or geological importance. These are:

- Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill;
- Hook Meadow and the Trap Grounds;
- Iffley meadows;
- Littlemore Railway Cutting (Geological);
- Lye Valley;
- Magdalen Grove (Geological);
- Magdalen Quarry (Geological);
- New Marston Meadows;
- Pixey and Yarnton Meads;
- Port Meadow with Wolvercote Common and Green;
- Rock Edge (Geological);
- Wolvercote Meadows.

2.3 Many sites also have a local nature conservation interest. These sites are currently designated as Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs) or as wildlife corridors. Sites have been designated locally in successive Local Plans, based on local

knowledge and information gathered from surveys of the sites. Information about these sites is available from the City Council.

2.4 When a planning application is submitted for development that could potentially have an adverse impact on a protected site, it is important that a biodiversity survey and an appraisal of the likely impact of development is carried out by independent ecological consultants. This should also assess whether any adverse impact could either be avoided or mitigated.

2.5 In the case of the Oxford Meadows SAC, an Appropriate Assessment must be carried out for any proposal that could potentially have an adverse impact. When undertaking an appropriate assessment, all features of European importance need to be considered. The SAC is designated as a lowland hay meadow and conains unique vegetation communities that reflect the influence of long-term grazing and hay-cutting on lowland hay meadows. It is also one of only two known sites in the UK containing creeping marshwort (Apium repens).

2.6 Any development proposed in a planning application that may directly or indirectly affect an SSSI will be carefully assessed by the City Council to ensure that it will not have an adverse impact. Details of the features that have lead to these sites being designated as SSSIs are available from Natural England.

2.7 Proposals for development in the vicinity of a protected site will also be carefully considered. In particular, major developments and developments on previously undeveloped land could have impacts on the protected site, particularly if the site's interest is dependent on a supply of unpolluted ground or surface water or the habitat/species present could be adversely affected by increased recreational pressure. These planning applications may also provide the opportunity to enhance the protected site, by restoring, enhancing or adding to the protected habitat.

3 Protected Species

3.1 Policy CS14 indicates that species as well as habitats will be protected from harm. Oxford contains a number of protected species, including: various species of Bats; Great Crested Newts; Water Voles; Badgers; Slow Worms; Common Lizards; Grass Snakes; Creeping Marshwort; Kingfishers and perhaps Barn Owls and Black Redstarts. Some of these species will be found on sites that are not protected for their wildlife interest. Buildings can frequently support bat roosts or bird nests. Unless a site consists of close mown grassland, has crops grown on it or is covered by concrete or tarmac it has the potential to support protected species. Developers should always consider whether protected species could be present on the site and be affected by a proposed development.

3.2 In order to ensure that the City Council takes proper account of the impact on protected species, in compliance with both legislation and Government advice,

surveys for protected species will usually be required where an application site includes any of the following:

- Stream/river/canal/ponds or other wetland habitat and nearby areas;
- Areas of unmanaged grassland, allotments, derelict land;
- Mature trees/scrub;
- Buildings proposed for demolition;
- Alterations to barns/historic buildings and other alterations to buildings/structures, particularly to roofs, that potentially could support bat roosts.

3.3 Surveys must be carried out at the right time of year. In many cases species cannot be surveyed during the winter months because they are in hibernation. The results of surveys should be made available to the planning authority.

4 Other Opportunities For Biodiversity Enhancement and Protection

4.1 There are features of biodiversity interest throughout Oxford; they are not found solely on protected sites or restricted to protected species. There are also opportunities for biodiversity enhancement and habitat creation across Oxford. The enhancement of habitats and protection of species important for biodiversity should be considered in all developments. Where possible, features should be conserved and incorporated within developments, and enhanced where there is the opportunity.

Positive habitat enhancement on development sites

4.2 New development provides a particular opportunity for habitat enhancement, restoration and the creation of new areas of habitat. This is emphasised in PPS9, which states in paragraph 14 that:

> "*Development proposals provide many opportunities for building-in beneficial biodiversity features or elements as part of good design. When considering proposals local planning authorities should, as far as practical, maximise such opportunities in and around developments, using planning obligations where appropriate.*"

This pro-active approach is supported by Policy CS14 (the last bullet point in particular).

4.3 Habitat enhancement can take many different forms. Even small developments can enhance biodiversity by, for example, providing nest boxes for birds, bat boxes and using native plants characteristic of the area in new planting schemes, or when non natives species are used, choosing those that are beneficial for wildlife such as buddleia for butterflies and berry bearing shrubs for birds.

4.4 One of the best ways of benefiting wildlife is to take advantage of what is already there and enhance, restore and add to this resource. On larger sites, the opportunity can also be taken to create larger areas of new habitat and this can form part of the open space provision required under Core Strategy Policy CS23. This is particularly useful where there is a shortage of ecologically important habitats, where sites adjoin

an area of ecological importance or there is an opportunity to create linkages between sites of wildlife value.

Conservation target areas

4.5 The Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre has identified areas of Oxfordshire where there are particular opportunities to enhance concentrations of wildlife rich habitats. Conservation target areas are identified as important areas for wildlife conservation, where targeted conservation action will have the greatest benefit. To determine the areas of importance, information was used such as concentrations of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitat and rare species, areas with concentrations of archaeological features, important areas for UKBAP and rare species and potential for restoration. Many areas therefore include SSSIs.

4.6 Parts of Shotover and the Thames and Cherwell at Oxford Conservation Target areas fall within Oxford, although they are principally in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse respectively

4.7 The target areas represent the main locations in Oxfordshire that can be viewed as both areas of significant ecological constraint as well as potential areas of ecological opportunity. The target areas have defined boundaries but it is important that there is a degree of flexibility in the interpretation of these boundaries. Land adjacent to or in the vicinity of target areas may have similar potential for habitat restoration or as a buffer for important habitats. Conservation action will depend on the interest and willingness of landowners and those in the vicinity of the target areas will be encouraged to take action to enhance biodiversity. In terms of planning, this means raising awareness of these areas and ensuring that planned development takes relevant action to enhance the biodiversity of these areas. Policy CS14 draws attention to these conservation target areas, and states that opportunities to enhance these areas should be taken. Any developments in these areas should give particular consideration to the opportunities for habitat restoration, enhancement and creation.

4.8 The identified habitats of importance for biodiversity interest at Shotover are heathland, lowland mixed deciduous woodland, lowland meadow, acid grassland, fen, parkland and eutrophic standing water (a body of water that is nutrient-enriched, and highly productive which can result in periods of it being Oxygen poor). Targets for the area are for heathland and acid grassland management and restoration, lowland meadow management and restoration, parkland/veteran tree management and restoration, woodland management and management and restoration of fen habitat.

4.9 The identified habitats of importance for biodiversity interest in the Thames and Cherwell Meadows at Oxford area are lowland meadows and wet grassland/fen/swamp/reedbed. Targets for the area are the management and restoration of lowland meadow habitat, management of wet grassland, fen, swamp and reedbed and creation of new areas of reedbed.

Other opportunities for habitat creation

4.10 There are opportunities for biodiversity enhancement and habitat creation in other parts of Oxford, such as along the Lye Valley and Boundary Brook corridors, where there is rare fen habitat, woodland and grassland, and along the Littlemore/Northfield and Bayswater Brooks, which are important for water voles. Oxford is part of an area identified as a Strategic Opportunity for Biodiversity Improvement in relation to wetland habitats.

4.11 Oxford contains a number of UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats including ancient/species rich hedgerows, fen, lowland meadows, wood pasture and parkland, reedbeds, and wet woodland. Targets for the creation of new areas of these habitats are included in the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan and the draft South East Plan. During the twentieth century there was a massive loss of many of these habitats. By taking advantage of opportunities to create new areas of these habitats developers can help to achieve the Governments target of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010, and in the long term leading to the restoration of some of the rich biodiversity resource that has been lost.