

Sustainability Assessment (SA) Scoping Consultation Response

Joint South and Vale Local Plan 2041

Bioabundance Community Interest Company

23rd June 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overall conclusions

Without the major changes to the SA that we set out in this document, the Local Plan will not deliver on the Climate and Ecological emergencies, and the Local Plan process will (unintentionally) not be transparent. These conclusions come despite many good objectives and analysis in the SA scoping.

These are big claims so we have set out subject-by-subject our detailed analysis and reasoning, alongside the changes needed to deliver those pledges and improve transparency and fairness.

We recommend testing policies first against Climate and Ecological objectives.

This will ensure that all policies and strategic allocations fit in with the Districts' carbon budgets, climate adaption, and action to halt and reverse the ecological emergency; fail on them and we have failed to deliver a future to our children.

We therefore propose that any policy that results in a net increase in carbon emissions, preventing the Districts from meeting their carbon budget allocations (for example through increases that cannot be linked to reductions in emissions elsewhere, or through creating knock-on impacts on transport emissions) is **Red Flagged** as not sustainable and be ruled out. We propose a similar approach for water quality, food security and key measures of ecological recovery.

The SA, to tackle the Climate and Ecological emergency, needs new baseline information and objectives to test policies against.

For example the objective on carbon emissions needs a clear result that can be measured. We recommend it is changed to: **Limit net carbon emissions resulting from policies to a level that enables the Districts to achieve its carbon budget.** Amazingly the SA does not have the District carbon budgets:

The Tyndall Centre says for South Oxfordshire to make its 'fair' contribution towards the Paris Climate Change Agreement, it needs a Paris aligned carbon budget:

1/ The CO₂ budget is 5.6 million tonnes (Mt CO₂) by 2100. At 2017 emission levels, South Oxfordshire would use this entire budget by 2027.

- 2/ It should immediately start reducing CO₂ emissions, cutting at least 13.4% per year. These annual reductions in emissions require national and local action, and could be part of a wider collaboration with other local authorities.
- 3/ It must reach near zero carbon no later than 2041 (5% of the carbon budget of 5.6 Mt CO₂, is within budget at that stage).

To be transparent and enable full discussion, the way housing need is assessed needs to be clearer and put in context, *and alternatives considered*.

The SA in the ‘baseline section’ presents housing need only as extrapolated from housing-allocation projections. The Joint Plan Vision Document fails to reveal that Councillors in Vale and SODC will be voting on the housing-need target set for Districts in Oxfordshire Plan 2050. Nothing is set now. There is a valid argument that the SA should use the latest ONS figures and projections, using a housing-need assessments based on the latest projected household numbers (Table 1). These projections *are significantly lower* than housing-allocation based numbers. Essentially, 2026-2041, only 4000 new homes would be required in South Oxfordshire. Indeed, taking a longer timeframe 2011-2041, none would be needed.

Table 1. 2020 Office for National Statistics Projections for South Oxfordshire based on 2018 data							
	2020	2030	Rise		2026	2041	Rise
Population	142,000	146,000	3%		145,000	149,000	3%
Households	57,000	61,000	6%		60,000	64,000	7%
<i>All estimates rounded to nearest thousand</i>							

Changes in central government’s interpretation of the NPPF on housing need, and its new instructions to the Planning Inspectorate mean that it should be possible for Vale and South 2024 Plan to have these lower figures. (See the Population Section for details)

While we believe the Strategic Appraisal Framework, if used as intended, will guide the Local Plan process, the process could be made more transparent and more likely to be correctly applied.

- 1/ Change the objectives and extend the baseline information:** currently key objectives and baseline information are missing; wording of objectives should be strengthened to meet the key challenges.
- 2/ For each objective, make clear the criteria and evidence (including the quality of the evidence) used to judge if the policy will help or prevent delivery of the objective.**
- 3/ Make it an explicit rule that users should not aggregate the + and – scores to identify the relative sustainability of policy options.**
- 4/ Have a clear rule that two objectives cannot be combined in any use of the Framework, thereby obscuring significant negative impacts.**

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT (SA)

Page 11 Air Quality

The PPP Section makes worrying reading since the targets are all rather lenient and worse than the WHO levels

The baseline section needs

- interpretation of the significance of the data and
- a statement of the gaps in data and/or understanding of the impact of air pollution.

Recent research is linking closely air pollution to learning in children and dementia in adults.

One example of interpretation needed is that the background rate of 9.64 micro g per m³ PM2.5 is associated with 3.5% of deaths

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/16/proposed-air-pollution-limit-england-environment-act>

The objectives can only be effective with much better baseline information and targets that deliver significantly better air quality. Relying on existing mechanisms and targets is not working.

Page 22 Biodiversity

We want to see significant changes to the Objectives because they will not halt and reverse decline in biodiversity.

Both the '*Relevant plans, projects and programme*' (PPP) section and the *baseline section* are comprehensive. However they fail to set out the effect of the gaps in policies and baseline information. There are also some additional gaps we want to mention.

The *key challenges* section fails to include all the challenges that flow from the policies and baseline sections and the additional gaps we identified.

The *objectives* chosen fail to cover the key challenges (both given in the document or those that should be there, considering the PPP section and baseline information and gaps). One objective in the SA scoping must be removed as it uses a mechanism (net gain in biodiversity) which cannot on its own guarantee the landscape-scale action needed to deliver nature recovery of biodiversity in the Districts

We suggest new objectives reflecting the universal priority given to reversing ecological decline, and the national policy emphasis on landscape-scale action, ecological networks and large-scale habitat creation.

The PPP and baseline section need to make clear that the Districts lack key policies and baseline information, and needs clearer policies on the impact of light and noise, dog faeces enrichment and nearby major development on Priority habitats.

The baseline section needs to highlight that the two Districts together lack evidence on:

- **supporting national planned targets on habitat creation:** to contribute to the national goal of 500,000 ha, and woodland habitat creation of 180,000ha by end of 2042. In proportion to the two-Districts' area, that is 1,746 ha of new woodland habitat by 2042, and 4,800 ha of new wildlife habitats.
- **making wildlife flourish in the Green Belt and giving access to nature for urban dwellers** (in the Environment Plan and the PPP section of the SA scoping).
- **delivering Green infrastructure at a District level.** The NPPF says the Councils should have a strategic approach to Green infrastructure including across borders, and PPG on Plans recommends a Green Infrastructure framework for development site based green infrastructure to link into.
- **protecting and promoting both national and local ecological networks** (nature recovery networks). Saying that the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network proposal has little weight in Planning is not enough - Districts have a duty to have their own local recovery network and take into account the National Network. The NPPF is clear the Districts need to map ecological networks. The PPG on Plans states Districts need to take into account national nature recovery networks.
- **tackling the threats to biodiversity thrown up by recent research:** that we have underestimated the impact of noise and light and dog interference on wildlife, and on the impact of major development within 1 ½ miles of sensitive habitats (due to visitor pressure including dog faeces enriching soil).

The Challenges section must be extended to cover the policies and baseline information more fully and respond to the extra points made above:

Add to the second challenge the list of possible secondary impacts,.

- 'Protect...all biodiversity assets...from direct and indirect impacts including through air and water pollution, water quantity and timing, noise, light, excess visitor (and dog) pressure, and soil enrichments from dogs.

Set out new challenges:

- Achieving protection and enhancement of National and a Local Nature Recovery networks, including contributing to national habitat creation targets.
- Achieving increases in the population, extent and resilience of Priority species
- Achieving significant increases in wildlife value of Green belt, while providing enhanced public access
- Achieving strategic network of Green Infrastructure that links up with Green Infrastructure in development sites

The objectives section needs to be changed to reflect changes to local and national policies on biodiversity. Objectives need to relate to the overall goals of biodiversity policy and not to only one single mechanism, that is, 'biodiversity net gain'. The current proposed objectives fail to cover all wildlife assets, and protection and enhancement for priority species that could be found anywhere in the Districts.

We need objectives that reflect the new focus of Plans, Programmes and Projects to act at a landscape-scale. Just applying the hierarchical approach (as the current objectives do) of most protection for the best biodiversity sites has failed to stop the decline.

We recommend a new Objective:

To achieve nature recovery at a landscape-scale, by:

- protecting and enhancing National and Local Nature Recovery Networks
- achieving the fair share of new substantial areas of natural habitat, for both Districts
- achieving flourishing wildlife in the green belt

As priority species are found all across the Districts, not just in natural habitats, they need their own objective.

A new objective

For Priority species increase their resilience to climate change and risk of local extinction, by:

- delivering protection of their habitats: their feeding, breeding and overwintering places
- achieving larger populations over an increased range

We need an objective that reflects the Government's pursuit of the mental and physical health benefits of being in nature through Green infrastructure and the green belt:

A new objective

To deliver the health benefits of being in nature, by:

- creating district frameworks and local provision of Green Infrastructure
- securing access to flourishing wildlife in the Green Belt for urban dwellers

Objective 5 in the SA scoping document should be broadened out to cover all biodiversity assets to reflect the SA's own assessment of the challenges to deliver biodiversity policy:

Modified Objective Five:

To protect, and where possible, enhance the status of all wildlife assets, including SACs and SSSIs, local wildlife sites and priority habitats.

We recommend *removing* Objective 4 (10% net biodiversity gain of development) because on its own cannot guarantee adequate or strategic allocation of spending to deliver nature recovery. The test of whether the plan is supporting nature recovery is the protection and enhancement of National and Local Nature Recovery Networks, substantial increase in natural habitat, wildlife flourishing in the green belt, and growing and expanding populations of Priority Species.

Page 58 Climate Factors

Baseline information

We are concerned that this section needs to work out what carbon budget can be allocated to development can if the District is to meet its carbon budget goal.

This will require understanding the likely contribution of renewable energy production, the scope for carbon sinks and modal transport change (the County is now modelling this), as well as scope for retrofit of domestic houses.

Only then will development have a carbon budget and the SA can make judgements whether the policies in the Local Plan will deliver the carbon reduction to limit climate change to 1.5 degrees. Timing will be a key part of this- for example if retrofit takes longer, then new housing will have to be delayed.

As the UK the highly reputable Tyndall Centre says this about South Oxfordshire (<https://carbonbudget.manchester.ac.uk/reports/E07000179/>):

“Based on our analysis, for South Oxfordshire to make its ‘fair’ contribution towards the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the following recommendations should be adopted”:

1. A CO₂ budget of 5.6 million tonnes (Mt CO₂) by 2100. At 2017 emission levels, South Oxfordshire would use this entire budget by 2027.
2. An immediate CO₂ emissions reduction plan, with cuts of at least 13.4% per year, to deliver a Paris-aligned carbon budget. These annual reductions in emissions require national and local action, and could be part of a wider collaboration with other local authorities.
3. Reach near zero carbon no later than 2041 (5% of the carbon budget of 5.6 Mt CO₂, is within budget at that stage).

We also think the baseline needs to look at water supply issues so that development will not result in a reduced resilience to drought for existing residents, with long periods of standpipe only use. Timing here is important because of the lead time for the provision of a new reservoir or long distance pipeline. Again this will delay the provision of new development.

We think you should add the embodied carbon in houses and roads when assessing the emissions of development

We support your list of challenges but would add the challenge of 1) providing fresh water to existing and future residents and 2) maintaining our capacity to produce food by protecting the best agricultural land, especially as climate change kicks in and global breadbasket failures occur.

We would like to see a change in wording for two of your Objectives on Climate Change:

Objective 6 needs a major rewrite to make it clear that the policies and development allocated in the Local Plan have to limit carbon emissions to a level that enables the Council to meet its carbon budget. A possible wording would be:

Change objective 6

Limit net carbon emissions resulting from policies to a level that enables the Council to achieve its carbon budget, taking into account likely reduction in carbon emissions from existing carbon emitters.

Objective 5 we believe needs to make clear that policies have to combine a carrot and stick approach to move journeys from the car to active travel and mass-transit network. A possible wording would be:

Change objective 5

Achieve a mode change from journeys by car to walking, cycling and public transport. Facilitating actions include siting services and facilities within active transport journey distances, providing a mass-transit network. Deterring car journeys would involve giving other forms of transport priority through junctions, making road access longer, reducing both road space and parking for cars.

We think that there needs to be an objective here on water supply - as highlighted by your own baseline section and stated under your Flooding section. However the wording needs to be changed to make it clear that new development should not worsen the water supply for existing residents (resulting in extended use of standpipes):

Add and change Objective Eighteen:

To achieve secure sustained water supply for existing communities and new developments in the face of climate change. This can be done by maximising efficient use of water and water-collection for grey water use.

We also want to see protection of the best agricultural land for food production; this is vital for food security as climate change hits:

Add new Objective

To protect our food production capabilities by maintaining our best soils in agricultural production.

Page 89 Human Health and Wellbeing

PPP section: please include the mentions about access to nature and Green Infrastructure in the NPPF and the Environment Plan.

Baseline: Please give baseline information on access to nature and tranquillity, as well as a strategic approach to Green Infrastructure, or identify any gaps that need to be filled.

Challenges need to include

- Please add **making wildlife flourish in the Green Belt and give access to nature for urban dwellers** (in the Environment Plan and the PPP section of the SA scoping).
- **delivering Green infrastructure at a District level.** The NPPF says the Councils should have a strategic approach to Green infrastructure including across borders, and PPG on Plans recommends a Green Infrastructure framework for development site-based green infrastructure to link into.

Objectives

Please add the objective about human health and nature:

To deliver the health benefits of being in nature, by:

- creating a district framework and local provision of Green Infrastructure
- securing access to flourishing wildlife in the Green belt for urban dwellers

Page 118 Population

PPP section: please add the paragraphs in the NPPF that allows the reduction in housing need numbers where there are environmental and other constraints.

Baseline section

We welcome your use of these independent data sources for the current and future trends on population characteristics.

We believe the SA needs to use the ONS date for setting the housing numbers to achieve the sustainable social and economic objectives. We would like to see those figures in the Baseline section.

	2020	2030	Rise	2026	2041	Rise
Population	142,000	146,000	3%	145,000	149,000	3%
Households	57,000	61,000	6%	60,000	64,000	7%

All estimates rounded to nearest thousand

We believe there is no logical reason for using the housing-led population numbers. The SA should not use them because:

- They are very misleading as SODC has not been able to build all the houses it allocates in its Local Plans
- ONS and the latest Housing Need Assessment give lower housing need
- We are facing a unforeseen deep recession with high costs and limited supply of building workforce and materials, that will reduce demand and supply of built homes

We also believe that the use of the housing-build target-led estimate of population is a political decision that should be taken by all councillors because:

- All districts have reserved the right to set housing targets in relation to the Oxfordshire Local Plan 2050 (do check with the team in County Hall)
- A majority of councillors were elected on a platform of lower, environmentally sustainable growth
- There is scope for the councillors to decide lower housing figures because of changes announced by the Secretary of State Mr Gove at the second reading of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill in parliament where he said:

- He (Mr Gove) was re-instating the power of local communities to reduce housing targets where there are environmental and other constraints. It is in the NPPF but has been rejected by Inspectors and the SoS in the past.
- He was instructing the Planning Inspectorate not to impose higher housing figures on to local communities and on their Local Plans
- SODC and Vale politicians should not be bound by the Oxford City Council decision to pursue a very high growth rate above that through natural growth

Therefore the housing-led growth should not be used unless the politicians decide to use it.

Objectives

We agree with your objectives

Page 134 Soils

Introduction

This should state the importance of best agricultural land, to reflect all the policies in the policy section, and the fact that food security is vital with Climate Change

PPP section and baseline

We are concerned that importance of the best agricultural land needs to be explored more in the Baseline section considering Climate Change induced uncertainty in food supply and the need for keeping the best land in agricultural in all circumstances.

We think there is a good argument that in an unstable world set to become more uncertain with Climate Change that securing the highest food production for our population is an essential sustainability measure - if we don't eat we die. The baseline section needs to reflect this.

We also believe that the current targets on air, water and soils are not ambitious enough to be sustainable and that the SA should set a higher bar based on current research.

We agree with the **Challenges** section that states the importance of best agricultural land and contamination. How about the other problems of soils: compaction, loss of organic matter etc. identified in the Baseline section?

Objectives

We think it is vital to add an objective on protecting best land. It is perverse that after all the Policies and the key challenges stating the importance of best agricultural land, there is no objective covering it.

New objective:

To protect our food production capabilities by maintaining our best soils in agricultural production.

We would want to see the Objective on pollution to set the reduction to lower targets; t to a level reflecting current research. It is clear that the targets are lagging behind our knowledge, and the SA regulations do require an assessment to take into account up-to-date knowledge. And we need mention of physical damage to soils through compaction and loss of organic matter:

Changed objective

To reduce pollution to safe levels, and reverse the compaction and loss of organic matter of the Districts' soils, based on best current knowledge.

The Objective on sustainable management for land for 'multiple benefits' needs explaining: it comes out of the blue. How does it relate to baseline information in the PPP section? How does it meet the challenges you have identified?

Changed objective

To support sustainable management for land that delivers multiple benefits for flood control, soil condition, biodiversity, landscape, access to nature and carbon sequestration.

Page 148 Flooding

Baseline

We think this section needs to have some information and assessment on the impact of Surface and groundwater flooding, and on the risk from heavy sustained downpours of rain made much likely by Climate Change; awaiting the County Council plan to deal with this may not be sufficient to meet the SA regulations.

Objectives

We welcome the inclusion of an objective on water supply. However the wording needs to be changed to make it clear that new development should not worsen the water supply for existing residents (resulting in extended use of standpipes):

Add and change Objective Eighteen:

To achieve secure sustained water supply for existing communities and new developments in the face of climate change. This can be done by maximising efficient use of water and water collection for grey water use.

Page 152 Sustainability Appraisal Framework

We can see that the Framework is a useful tool to focus and guide the SA process and identify where policies need mitigation or further scrutiny. However from experience when this framework was used in previous Local Plans and following our analysis of the objectives, we believe application of this Framework will be very detrimental to a sustainable outcome without major changes:

Changes that we think are necessary are:

1/ Use of climate change and biodiversity objectives as Red Flags. If the policy or strategic allocation negatively impacts these objectives it does not go forward, even if there are strong positives for other sustainability objectives:

Red Flag climate change objectives:

- Limit net carbon emissions resulting from policies, to within the Council's carbon budget,
- Achieve modal change from journeys by car to walking, cycling and public transport
- Achieve secure sustained water supply for existing communities and new developments in the face of climate change.
- Ensure new developments are resilient to the effects of climate change, and that proposals do not weaken existing communities' and businesses' resilience to climate change.
- Support the development of appropriately scaled, and well-designed renewable energy schemes, through strategic planning

Red Flag ecological emergency objectives

- Achieve nature recovery at a landscape-scale
- Increase Priority Species' resilience to climate change and minimise risk of local extinction
- Protect, and where possible, enhance the status of all wildlife assets, including SACs and SSSIs, local wildlife sites and priority habitats.

2/ Change objectives and baseline information used to reflect our detailed arguments set out above under subject headings. The main reasons for changes in objectives are to put right omissions of key objectives, and the weakness of the wording to meet the key challenges.

A key change to baselines is the basis of assessing meeting housing need; setting aside housing-allocation based growth-targets because they a) are unrealistic and b) based on outdated housing needs assessments, and c) do not reflect ONS data.

3/ For each objective, make clear the criteria and evidence (including the quality of the evidence) used to judge if the policy will help or prevent delivery of the objective.

Currently the scoping document does not provide enough baseline information. It also fails to make clear how consideration of baseline information informs how the projects will be assessed against the objectives, leaving the Framework lacking openness in its decision making.

4/ Make an explicit rule that users should not aggregate the + and – scores to identify the relative sustainability of policy options. It is clear from your paragraph 14.3 that this should not happen, but from our experience with other SAs and Local Plans this is exactly the approach used.

5/ Have a clear rule that two objectives cannot be combined in any use of the Framework.

We have direct experience of this where Protecting best agricultural land (which a strategic allocation scored very badly on) was combined with another objective that the allocation had a strong positive effect, with the result the District lost 25ha of Grade 2 land.