



WOODCOTE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN 2013 - 2035

Establishing a Settlement Boundary for Woodcote

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Section One: Introduction

1.1 Woodcote

Woodcote is a highly nucleated settlement surrounded and washed over by the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It is situated on the escarpment overlooking the Goring Gap. There are long views over the river Thames into the North Wessex Downs AONB from the parish and, equally, long views from the North Wessex Downs AONB across the Goring Gap into the parish.

The parish of Woodcote has one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the County. The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study¹ Biomap uses six 'biobands', ranging from a **Low** to **Very High** biodiversity value to illustrate the extent to which areas in the county of Oxfordshire support wildlife. A bioband which is classified as very high tends to support a wider range of wildlife habitats including some which may be of national or international importance. Woodcote is assessed as one of the most important locations for wildlife in the county with the habitat significance of some 60% of the parish being classed as **Very High** with another 25-30% being classed as **High**.

The Planning Challenge

Woodcote's position in both an AONB and an area of prime biodiversity importance requires that significant weight be given to conservation of the landscape and its associated ecology when considering any development in the parish.

1.2 Planning Context

1.2.1 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF gives great weight to conserving and enhancing the landscapes of the AONB and enhancing biodiversity. Specifically:

- i. paragraph 174 requires that '*Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:*
 - (a) *protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan); and*
- ii. paragraph 176 requires that '*Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads. The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited.*
- iii. paragraph 177 requires that '*When considering applications for development within National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest*'.

1.2.2 South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035

The South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 contains a very strong commitment to enhancement and conservation of the AONB:

- i. Page 14 highlights the statement that '*The North Wessex Downs and Chilterns Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty will be protected and enhanced*';
- ii. The Plan Vision includes (paragraph 2.6) the statement '*Through careful management of the Oxford Green Belt we will have made provision towards Oxford City's unmet housing needs whilst protecting the important setting of Oxford and also making appropriate provision for housing, business growth and urban and rural regeneration. The North Wessex Downs and Chilterns Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty will be protected and enhanced, whilst also allowing for appropriate and sustainable growth in places. Our rich and varied history is celebrated, protected and enhanced for the benefit of residents and visitors*'.
- iii. Plan Objective 7 covering the Natural and Built Environment includes objective 7.1 to '*Protect and enhance the natural environment, including biodiversity, the landscape, green infrastructure and our waterways, placing particular importance on the value of the Oxford Green Belt, our two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the River Thames. OBJ 7.2 Conserve and enhance our rich and varied historic assets and their settings, celebrating these as some of our strongest attributes*'.
- iv. Plan chapter 7, the Natural and Historic Environment, notes that '*South Oxfordshire has a beautiful natural and built environment, which makes the district an attractive place to live and work. This environment also attracts visitors who contribute to the local economy*'.
- v. Plan Policy ENV1: Landscape and Countryside begins with the policy statement
 1. *The highest level of protection will be given to the landscape and scenic beauty of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs):*
 - *Development in an AONB or affecting the setting of an AONB will only be permitted where it conserves, and*

¹ <http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk>

where possible, enhances the character and natural beauty of the AONB;

- Development in an AONB will only be permitted where it is appropriate to the economic and environmental wellbeing of the area or promotes understanding or enjoyment of the AONB;
- Major development in an AONB will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest; and
- Development proposals that could affect the special qualities of an AONB (including the setting of an AONB) either individually or in combination with other developments, should be accompanied by a proportionate Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

AONB Management Plans will be a material consideration in decision making.

1.2.3 Chiltern Conservation Board Management Plan

The Chiltern Conservation Board's management Plan is, as noted in Policy ENV1 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, a material consideration when determining applications for development in the AONB.

This Management Plan opens with the statement 'The primary purpose of designating an area of countryside as an AONB is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of its landscape. In this sense, the term 'natural beauty' refers not only to the scenic qualities of the landscape but to all those other elements which together produce the special character of the AONB. These elements include wildlife and man-made features such as its archaeological and built heritage.' In support of this the Management Plan includes:

- i. Policy L8 *Landscapes close to existing and new areas of development should be maintained and enhanced to conserve, enhance and extend: natural capital; green infrastructure; character and amenity; biodiversity; and opportunities for recreation.*
- ii. Policy L10 *The cumulative impact of development and land use change should not adversely affect landscape quality and character.* The Management Plan notes that often approval for new development is given on its own merits and the cumulative impact it represents is given a much lower level of consideration. The effect over time can be negative by creating a more crowded landscape with an array of associated, often unplanned or even unforeseen, features and structures. Some forms of development, in particular housing, can have an impact on the use of surrounding land, for example, making it harder to farm or manage woodland because of the public pressure. This effect is particularly prevalent in the urban fringe where valued rural character can quickly be lost

1.2.4 Other Considerations

Woodcote parish Council is also aware of the welcome given to the Glover Report, *Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs*, the proposals from Natural England to extend the Chilterns AONB to increase the amount of England's beautiful landscapes under protection, and to strengthen Management Plans that are backed up by stronger status in law. In support of this Councillors from South Oxfordshire District Council noted that:

- i. The AONB is a vital part of life here in South Oxfordshire. As a natural asset it enhances the beauty of the area and provides real health and wellbeing benefits to people across our community. It is also a significant economic resource for the district, as many people who come here from outside the area will also spend time in our towns and villages and enjoy our local shops and hospitality; and
- ii. We must all play a role in protecting and being custodians of our great natural resources and wonderful landscapes and these are commitments we've set out in our Corporate Plan. These extra protections and additional funding will help to guarantee that the area will be protected from inappropriate development and will be here for many generations to come.

1.3 The Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan Challenge

Woodcote is entirely surrounded and washed over by the Chilterns AONB. The challenge for the Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan is to plan positively for sustainable local development whilst meeting the clearly expressed requirements of the NPPF and South Oxfordshire Local Plan to give the highest level of protection and enhance the designated landscape of the AONB. Development that requires the loss of greenfield land in the AONB can degrade the quality of the landscape and result in the loss of habitat supporting high levels of biodiversity.

Woodcote Parish Council consider that the definition of a settlement boundary is a spatial planning tool that can be used to direct development to the most sustainable locations in the parish, whilst protecting the very special character of the AONB and the setting of the village whilst addressing the concern expressed in the Chiltern Conservation Board's Management Plan in respect of the impact of cumulative development.

1.4 Document Purpose

To identify a settlement boundary that would enable the Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan to meet the challenge identified in Section 1.3.

Section Two: Settlement Boundary

2.1 Definition

Woodcote Parish Council use the term 'settlement boundary' as the dividing line, or boundary between the developed or built-up areas of the parish (the settlement) and the non-developed areas, open countryside of the AONB.

The settlement boundary is a line that is drawn on a plan around a village which reflects its built form and guides development to sustainable locations. In general, there is a presumption in favour of development within the settlement boundary although it should be noted that inclusion of land within a settlement boundary does not mean that all land within the boundary is automatically suitable for new development. There may be areas of land within the settlement boundaries that are not suitable for development due to other constraints, for example, tree preservation orders, land protected as Local Green Space or listed buildings. A settlement boundary does not preclude all development outside of the boundary line but would be regulated by the stricter planning policies governing new development (particularly housing) in the open countryside of the AONB.

It must be noted that the settlement boundary is a planning designation only and has no other administrative relevance. Settlement boundaries do not necessarily reflect land ownership boundaries, parish boundaries or the exact curtilage of dwellings.

2.2 Why Establish a Settlement Boundary?

The benefits of establishing a settlement boundary for Woodcote are as follows:

- i. ensure development is directed to more sustainable locations, both in terms of accessibility to, and support of, existing services and transport, and in terms of landscape and habitat;
- ii. protect the special character of the AONB from encroachment of land uses more characteristic of built-up areas;
- iii. reduce the risk of loss of landscape quality from ribbon development;
- iv. ensure a more plan-led and controlled approach to potential development in the parish;
- v. provide greater certainty to communities, landowners and developers over where certain types of development could be acceptable in principle; and
- vi. assist with a consistent approach to the determination of planning applications

There are disadvantages. A settlement boundary can:

- i. lead to an increase of land value within the settlement boundary;
- ii. impact the character of properties and the village by encouraging development within the gardens of homes within the settlement boundary, although this is one of the reasons that a number of larger gardens have been split by the settlement boundary;
- iii. result in development being crammed into every available parcel of land within the boundary and reducing the landscape quality and character of that village, although this is why the Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan designates Local Green Spaces within the settlement boundary; and
- iv. increase the 'hope' value of countryside adjoining, but outside, the boundary.

Section 3: Establishing a Settlement Boundary

3.1 Introduction

There is no single established methodology for defining settlement boundaries. The Locality Neighbourhood Plans Roadmap Guide has neither guidance on, nor references to how to define settlement boundaries within the production of a Neighbourhood Plan and there is little formal guidance available. In that absence Woodcote Parish Council drew on existing examples and methodologies to determine that the methodology employed should:

- i. Have regard to national planning policy and, in particular, will it contribute to sustainable development in the parish;
- ii. uses a robust process that is clear, easy to understand, replicable and based on well-defined criteria; and
- iii. produces an unambiguous boundary that can be applied by South Oxfordshire District Council in the day-to-day operation of the development management process.

3.2 Regard to National Planning Policy

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) restricts the circumstances under which settlement boundaries can be used, stating that blanket policies restricting housing development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence. Woodcote parish Council considers that its location within an AONB and associated NPPF requirement to enhance and conserve the landscape provides robust justification for setting a settlement boundary and requiring different policies for development outside the boundary.

3.3 A Robust Methodology

A five-step process was used to determine an appropriate settlement boundary:

Step 1. Desk research to understand the methodologies adopted by others to establish their settlement boundary. The Parish Council has drawn on a range of published studies relating to the establishment of settlement boundaries. These include designated areas (a National Park and an AONB), and smaller communities that including two with made Neighbourhood Plans in South Oxfordshire.

Step 2. Use of existing evidence including the South Oxfordshire Local Plan and Landscape Assessments, the Chilterns AONB Management Plan and evidence gathered for the Woodcote Neighbourhood Plan.

Step 3. A desktop study, supported by aerial photographs, of the parish to assess the existing built form, land-use, landscape character, woodland cover, field pattern and natural features. .

Step 4. Site visits, conducted alongside those required for the production of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, to collect visual data relating to land form, land-use, and field or other natural boundaries.

Step 5. Establishment of principles and supporting criteria.

3.4 Existing Evidence

The following evidence has been used as background information to inform the definition of a settlement boundary:

- i. **The South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment (2017)**
This document was produced as part of the evidence base for the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035. It contains detail on the landscape character areas within which each settlement is situated.
- ii. **Existing statutory designations**
Woodcote is entirely within and washed over by the Chilterns AONB.
- iii. **Chilterns AONB Management Plan (2014 - 2019)**
The Management Plan, although not a statutory plan, has policies that are used to influence decision-making in the AONB area. It sets principles for development within the AONB area and is a material consideration when making planning decisions in the AONB and thus Woodcote.
- iv. **The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study**
The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study² Biomap for South Oxfordshire which shows the parish of Woodcote to have one of the highest levels of biodiversity in Oxfordshire.

² <http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk>

- v. The **State of Nature in Oxfordshire** report³ which describes the two Conservation Target Areas (CTAs)
 - the Chilterns Escarpment South Central CTA
 - the Chilterns Escarpment South CTA
 that are partly in the parish outside the built-up area.
- vi. The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre⁴ has designated three locations in the village area as ‘**Local Wildlife Sites**’: Upper Covert, Dean Wood, and Langtree House Bank. Local Wildlife Sites are essential to conserving wildlife in the UK and to halting the loss of biodiversity. Although non-statutory sites the Neighbourhood Plan should seek to protect them.
- vii. Planning History. South Oxfordshire District Council planning decisions on applications for development outside the built-up area of the parish.

3.5 Criteria and Rules

3.5.1 Rule 1 – Inclusion Criteria

The settlement boundary will include:

- i. all properties physically linked to the main (built-up) part of the settlement except those, such as operating farms, that principally functionally relate to the surrounding countryside.
- ii. all developed and undeveloped areas of existing planning consents relating to the settlement.
- iii. all sites designated for housing or other development.
- iv. existing employment sites.
- v. important amenity areas that form part of the character of the settlement and contribute to the built form
- vi. hard surfaced school playgrounds and playing fields within, or on the edge of a settlement
- vii. as a general rule, all residential curtilages subject to the exclusions noted in section 3.5.2.
- viii. sites on a boundary that are almost completely surrounded by built development noting that, in some circumstances, such an area is extensive enough to potentially become developable. In these circumstances, to avoid creating a presumption of availability for development before any site allocation process by creating developable “infill” or “rounding off” voids along the settlement boundary the boundary will be drawn tightly to the building line to exclude them initially for consistency.
- ix. sites that are so damaged by visual intrusion as to be unworthy of designation in the open countryside beyond subject to their inclusion not creating unintentional “infill” plots that would degrade the surrounding landscape or habitat. In some circumstances, therefore, plots that are significantly, though not completely, surrounded by a boundary line may continue to be excluded from the settlement.
- x. buildings and associated land that make up the village form. In some edges of the developed area the boundary may be drawn to include small areas of land and/or buildings which offer the opportunity for improvements to the entrance of the village or ensure infrastructure improvements or a general enhancement to the village.
- xi. agricultural buildings may be included in development boundaries if they are well related in terms of scale and positioning to the rest of the settlement. Account will also be taken of the availability of defensible boundaries and how established the building is in the settlement.
- xii. Community facilities within the boundary or with permission to be built adjacent to the boundary.

3.5.2 Rule 2: Exclusion Criteria

The settlement boundary will exclude:

- i. properties separated from the main body of the settlement by areas of open land not forming a residential curtilage.
- ii. isolated development which is clearly detached from the principal built-up area and/or not well related visually to the settlement.
- iii. small developments located outside settlement boundaries considered to be part of the 'open countryside' in planning terms.
- iv. single depth development (ribbon development) along roads leading out of settlements unless they are physically well related to the settlement.
- v. open spaces, sports and recreational facilities which stand on the edge of the built form of settlements except (where permitted under countryside policies)
- vi. utility buildings, such as electricity sub-stations, pumping stations or sewage works, that are on the edge of the built-up
- vii. sections of large curtilages of buildings (including gardens) which relate more to the character of the countryside than the built form. Where possible and to maintain continuity, exceptionally long gardens will follow the boundaries of adjacent properties with smaller curtilages. Large and long gardens, including landscaped areas ancillary to commercial sites, at the edge of settlements will therefore be excluded from settlement boundaries. Gardens are an important part of the setting and attractiveness of settlements in the AONB, softening the

³ Wild Oxfordshire 2017. www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk

⁴ <http://www.tverc.org>

transition of the built-up edge and marking the edge of the developed area in what is generally an attractive way, softening the appearance of built-up areas from the countryside and containing vegetation which shields new development.

- viii. community facilities clearly outside the settlement such as public houses, sports pavilions and peripheral playing fields, paddocks and allotments, cemeteries and churchyards and car parks.
- ix. designated wildlife sites and woodlands.
- x. open gaps between developed areas where the built-up area is fragmented.
- xi. agricultural farmsteads which are considered characteristically rural and part of the countryside and provide both the historical connection between the settlement and their agricultural origins and a visual link to the rural context beyond. Therefore, where farmsteads are situated on the edge of the built form of settlements, they will be excluded as they relate more to the rural context.
- xii. other developments adjacent to the boundary that are considered to relate more to the countryside than to the settlement. This would include equestrian developments; housing for agricultural or forestry workers; garden centres and nurseries; and extensive community facilities such as hard surfaced sports grounds (including pavilions) and car parks.
- xiii. roads, tracks and public rights of way running along the boundary

3.5.3 Rule 3: Definition

The boundary will be defined tightly around the built form of each settlement and where possible will follow defined features such as walls, fences, hedgerows, roads, field boundary, building and woodland or other feature that is visible on-site and on an OS plan. If, in the case of residential gardens, the curtilage of the property is not well defined or so large that it appears to form part of the countryside surrounding the settlement, the boundary will be defined to protect the landscape setting of the settlement.

Section 4: The Settlement Boundary

The Settlement Boundary established using the criteria above is shown on the map below.

