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West Berkshire Vision – Local Plan Review

Baseline Report

Iceni Projects Limited on behalf of
West Berkshire District Council

February 2022

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ON BEHALF OF WEST
BERKSHIRE DISTRICT
COUNCIL

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West Berkshire Vision – Local Plan
Review
BASELINE REPORT

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PURPOSE

1. This Baseline Report has been drafted to support the preparation and examination of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review (LPR) 2021 – 2037, in particular responding to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2021) requirements of Paragraph 22:

“Strategic policies should look ahead over a minimum 15-year period from adoption, to anticipate and respond to long-term requirements and opportunities, such as those arising from major improvements in infrastructure. Where larger-scale developments such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns form part of the strategy for the area, policies should be set within a vision that looks further ahead (at least 30 years), to take into account the likely timescale for delivery.”

2. The findings of the baseline report will be used to inform the creation of strategic visions and will support relevant policies contained in the LPR. As a result, this will offer a clear spatial steer as to where growth in Newbury and Thatcham might go over the longer term. The visions will draw upon, and compliment, the existing overarching vision contained within the LPR.

2. REPORT STRUCTURE

2.1. The report summarises the outcome of a comprehensive review of desktop material, site visits, an initial client discussion, along with qualitative and quantitative data analysis. As a result of the baseline review, the report formulates a thorough understanding of West Berkshire, corporate aims and objectives informed by those who live and work in the area, and an overview of the policy position for the future of Newbury and Thatcham towns.

2.2. The report has been prepared by Icen Projects on behalf of West Berkshire District Council in support of the LPR 2021 - 2037. Due to the nature of the report which covers a variety of issues and topics, it has been produced by a multidisciplinary team at Icen Projects spanning the disciplines of Planning, Engagement, Design and Sustainability.

2.3. The aim of the report is to provide a useful reference document, setting out the current baseline and projected aims and objectives for Newbury and Thatcham under the following structure:

- Settlement Overview
- Planning Policy Context
- Population and People
- Housing
- Employment
- Retail
- Transport
- Social Infrastructure
- Natural Environment
- Design
- Summary - Next Steps

3. SETTLEMENT OVERVIEW

West Berkshire District

- 3.1. West Berkshire lies on the western fringe of the South East region, centrally located, at a crossroads where the South East meets the South West and where the south coast comes up to meet the southern Midlands. As such, the district lies at the convergence of two key road arteries in the south – the M4 and the A34. Both provide direct road links in all directions, with all the key urban centres in southern England.
- 3.2. The district has good rail links, with London less than an hour by train and further connections, via Reading, to all the mainline routes throughout the country. The area also has very good links to international transport hubs: Heathrow and Southampton airport are 40 miles away, as are the ferry terminals in Southampton and Portsmouth, providing links with the continent.
- 3.3. The district is primarily made up of chalk Downlands, loosely centred along the lower reaches of the River Kennet, which rises in Wiltshire and flows through to join the Thames at Reading. Most people within the district live within this valley. The majority of the district lies to the north of the Kennet. This is an area of gently rolling, chalk Downlands, classified as part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 3.4. The population of West Berkshire population as is approximately 158,500 (ONS population projects 2020). 73% of people live in settlements along the Kennet Valley and in the suburban areas just to the west of Reading borough. The largest urban area in the district is Newbury and Thatcham, where around 67,000 (43%) of West Berkshire residents live. 16% of residents live in the suburban area adjoining Reading borough. Other significant towns in the district are Hungerford and Theale. The remainder of the population are dispersed in small rural settlements across the district.
- 3.5. The two largest groups of commuters travelling into the district originate from Basingstoke and Deane and Reading; whereas West Berkshire residents mainly commute to Reading and London.

Newbury

- 3.6. Newbury is a traditional market town and the largest settlement in West Berkshire. It provides significant employment opportunities as well as retail and leisure facilities. It is the main focus of growth in the adopted Local Plan.
- 3.7. Newbury's accessibility in terms of access to rail and the strategic road network means that it remains a key focus for business investment and development in the Local Plan Review.

- 3.8. The Sandleford Park draft strategic site allocation, to the south of the town, is proposed to be rolled forward as an allocation in the LPR as it has yet to be delivered. The site, which is expected to deliver approximately 1,500 new homes is the subject of a planning appeal which is currently being determined by the Secretary of State.

Thatcham

- 3.9. Thatcham is an historic market town approximately 3 miles west of Newbury. Since the 1970s, the town has grown significantly, by 40% from 1971 to 1980 and by another 50% from 1981 to 2001.
- 3.10. As the new developments were low density and car-orientated, Thatcham did not see a growth in self-containment but instead services became concentrated in Newbury. The town was severely affected by flooding in 2007 and over 1,000 homes were flooded.
- 3.11. While Newbury is the main focus for growth in the adopted Local Plan, the LPR seeks to focus strategic growth on Thatcham with the delivery of a circa 2,500 home urban extension to the north east of the town along with associated infrastructure. This presents an opportunity for increased investment in the town as a whole.

4. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

National Planning Policy Framework

- 4.1. The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the supporting Planning Practice Guide (PPG) was updated by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in July 2021.
- 4.2. The NPPF sets the planning policy context in which local plans are prepared, with paragraph 14 requiring local planning authorities to positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area.
- 4.3. Core planning principles set out in the NPPF include that planning should:
- Be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, with succinct local and neighbourhood plans setting out a positive vision for the future of the area. Plans should be kept up to date, and be based on joint working and cooperation to address larger than local issues.
 - Take account of the different roles and character of different areas, promoting the vitality of our main urban areas, protecting the Green Belts around them, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it;
 - Contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution.
 - Actively manage patterns of growth to make the fullest possible use of public transport, walking and cycling, and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable;
 - Take account of and support local strategies to improve health, social and cultural wellbeing for all, and deliver sufficient community and cultural facilities and services to meet local needs.
- 4.4. Amongst other matters, the NPPF advises that local plans should:
- indicate broad locations for strategic development on a key diagram and land-use designations on a proposals map;
 - allocate sites to promote development and flexible use of land, bringing forward new land where necessary, and provide detail on form, scale, access and quantum of development where appropriate;
- 4.5. As has been stated, the NPPF was updated in July 2021 to reflect the requirement to produce a vision for strategic sites with paragraph 22 now stating:

“Strategic policies should look ahead over a minimum 15 year period from adoption, to anticipate and respond to long-term requirements and opportunities, such as those arising from

major improvements in infrastructure. Where larger scale developments such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns form part of the strategy for the area, policies should be set within a vision that looks further ahead (at least 30 years), to take into account the likely timescale for delivery.”

Local Plan

- 4.6. West Berkshire District Council is currently working towards the adoption of a new Local Plan to cover the plan period of 2020 -2037. Until the point of adoption, development in the district is led by a suite of documentation that includes the following:

West Berks Core Strategy

- 4.7. The Core Strategy was adopted in July 2012 and sets out the Council’s overall planning strategy to 2026. It explains the vision for the area, and how it will be delivered. It also provides a framework for more detailed policies which are contained in the Housing Site Allocations (HSA) DPD.

West Berks Housing Site Allocations

- 4.8. The HSA DPD was adopted in May 2017 and implements the framework set by the Core Strategy by allocating non-strategic housing sites across West Berkshire. It also allocates sites for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople, sets out residential parking standards and policies to guide housing development in the countryside.

West Berks Local Plan 1991-2006 saved policies

- 4.9. The Core Strategy and HSA DPD replaced a number of the saved policies however some saved policies of the West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991 - 2006 still form part of the current local plan.
- 4.10. Aligned with the timetable for the new Local Plan, West Berkshire Vision 2036 has been developed as a corporate strategy for the council area. The document sets out 5 vision statements of which all other corporate strategies, plans and policies must align with and seek to deliver upon:

- **A West Berkshire where everyone has what they need to fulfil their potential**
- **A West Berkshire with a housing mix with something for everyone**
- **A West Berkshire that welcomes business, enterprise and industry into a productive, growing and dynamic local economy**
- **A West Berkshire where the health and wellbeing of residents of all ages and backgrounds is good**
- **A West Berkshire with beautiful, historic and diverse landscapes and a strong cultural offering**

4.11. Building upon this, a number of corporate strategies, policies and plans have been developed, each with their own relevant set of visionary aims and objectives, but all aligned with the 2036 vision. These include:

- Council Strategy 2019-2023
- Environment Strategy 2020-2030
- West Berkshire's Housing Strategy 2020-2030
- Economic Development Strategy 2020-2023
- West Berkshire Cultural Heritage Strategy 2020-2030

4.12. For example, within the Council Strategy 2019-2023, the 6 key objectives for West Berkshire are:

- Ensure our vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes
- Support everyone to reach their full potential
- Support businesses to start, develop and thrive in West Berkshire
- Develop local infrastructure, including housing, to support and grow the local economy
- Maintain a green district
- Ensure sustainable services through innovation and partnerships

4.13. The key objectives of the Council Strategy 2019-2023 have then shaped the Strategic Priorities of the Local Plan Review and resulted in 11 cross-cutting topic areas:

- Climate Change
- Housing
- Sustainable and Quality Development
- Economy
- Town Centres
- Culture
- Heritage
- AONB
- Green Infrastructure and Healthy Living
- Transport

- Infrastructure

4.14. As a result of applying these themes and priorities to the local context, the draft Spatial Strategy emerging as part of the Local Plan Review, establishes the following key principles:

- Direct development to areas of lower environmental value
- Optimise the use of previously developed land and
- Optimise the density of development to make the best use of land whilst conserving and enhancing the distinctive character and identity of the built, historic and natural environment

4.15. These guiding principles have helped shape the latest masterplan document for Newbury (2021), setting aspirations for the town to be:

- **Inclusive & Welcoming:** walkable, easy to navigate and safe
- **Social & Cultural:** a place that encourages interaction
- **Historic & Progressive:** values market town identity and heritage assets, placing them at centre of modern civic and community life
- **Green & Healthy:** Addresses physical/mental health and climate emergency
- **Independent & Entrepreneurial:** promotes local, ethical and independent traders, and where start-ups and innovation thrives
- **Local & Regional:** community focused, high quality of life for all residents and those in rural areas that depend on it

4.16. Already established before the Local Plan Review Process, Thatcham is guided by the objectives set out in the Town Centre Design Appraisal (2009):

- Reinforcing Thatcham's identity as an independent, thriving market town;
- Reducing the need for residents to travel elsewhere;
- Improving the look and feel of the town.

5. POPULATION AND PEOPLE (OVERVIEW)

- 5.1. According to the Council Strategy 2019-2023, West Berkshire had an estimated population of 158,450 in 2019. By 2036, this is expected to decrease by 1%. Demographic change during the life of the strategy will drive an increased focus on housing for older people, residents who need support to live independently, and for those with specialist care needs, as well as smaller homes to accommodate smaller household size. The Council's Housing Strategy (Housing Matters: 2020-2036), projects that the cohort of people aged over 85 will double, while those residents aged over 75 will increase almost by 46.9% over the same period.
- 5.2. Conversely, the total number of households, standing at 66,000 in 2021 is expected to increase by 6% in the period up to 2043. This would suggest that households in the district will become smaller, with the number of one person households increasing by 21.9% by 2043.
- 5.3. Within the 16- to 64-year-old bracket, a higher-than-average ratio of jobs per person (1.2) and percentage of people who are economically active (84.4%), currently exists within West Berkshire. This is in comparison to the Southeast and Great British averages according to the Council Strategy (2019). This strong labour market is matched by a highly qualified workforce, with 65.7% of 16 – 64 year olds qualified at level NVQ3 and above, again better than the South East (62.1%) and Great Britain (58.5%) averages.
- 5.4. Based on ONS population estimates, Newbury has followed a different growth trajectory to Thatcham and seen stronger relative population growth since 2011. Newbury has seen 8.3% population growth between 2011-20. In comparison, Thatcham's estimated population growth has only been 0.5% and indeed its population appears to have fallen slightly since 2015, this is expanded upon in the corresponding socio-economic baseline report.
- 5.5. The Healthy Life Expectancy at birth in West Berkshire stands at 70.1 years for females, and 66.4 for males, both higher than the English Average. This reflects the general life expectancy at birth which is 84.5 for females and 81.1 for males according to the West Berkshire Housing Strategy 2020-2036.
- 5.6. The West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Board (2021) sets an aim for the district in 2036 to be one of the best places to be a woman, one of the happiest places in England, providing the best residential care and with 3 working age residents per retiree.
- 5.7. Whilst good health and employment prospects are a characteristic of West Berkshire, these indicators are not experienced by all residents. The Council's Housing Strategy notes that 1,659 older people and vulnerable adults were accessing long term support in 2021 and 151 children were in care with 840 children in need. Additionally, as the average monthly cost of private renting has increased by 10% between 2015-2019, 1,533 homeless

approaches were made in 2020 alone and 9 people were sleeping rough in the district. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the rate of homelessness was reduced to zero.

6. HOUSING (INCLUDING KEY GROWTH)

Current Status

- 6.1. The West Berkshire Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report (2020) states that at least 10,000 homes are required during the current plan period of 2006-2026. A five-year supply of housing land can be demonstrated with a supply of 7.75 years for the period April 2020 to March 2025.
- 6.2. Over the last decade, housing completions have remained relatively stable in West Berkshire. As noted in the accompanying socio-economic report, a total of 617 homes were built in the period 2020-21, similar to the peak of 2015-16. Over the last decade, a total of 4,835 homes were built in West Berkshire, including 1,620 affordable homes. In terms of affordable housing, the average proportion has increased from a low supply in 2011-13 and now stands between 15 and 30% depending on the year.
- 6.3. In 2019/20 57% of residential completions were on previously developed land, which is significantly below the average of 83% over the plan period so far. Development on greenfield land is expected to be higher in the second half of the plan period as greenfield allocations begin to deliver housing, and as the limited supply of vacant and brownfield land has been built-out.
- 6.4. In relation to housing completion and commitments in Newbury and Thatcham, the 2020 Monitoring Report states that:
- 6.5. *Newbury*
- completions (2019/2020) – 145
 - commitments (including prior approval sites 2020) – 2,924
- 6.6. *Thatcham*
- completions (2019/2020) – 103
 - commitments (including prior approval sites 2020) – 278

Future Need

- 6.7. West Berkshire Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) (2020) highlights that there is capacity to provide 20,418 dwellings from 2020 to 2037 in West Berkshire district. When considered against identified need, this means there is a no shortfall up to 2037.
- 6.8. Applying the Standard Approach, the West Berkshire HELAA (2020) notes a minimum housing need figure of 513 dwellings per annum. The Council however intends to identify its requirement as a range, rather than a single figure, stating 520-575 dwellings per annum.
- 6.9. The West Berkshire Updated Housing Needs Evidence Report (2020) shows a projected growth in those aged 65 and over of 14,500 persons over the 2018-36 period, representing 49% growth. The evidence also shows a projected 27% increase in those with a long-term health problem or disability over the period to 2036. An increase of 1,200 in people with dementia; and over 4,000 in those with mobility problems is expected. A need for around 500 wheelchair user homes in West Berkshire is identified in the period to 2036 – equating to about 5% total housing need.
- 6.10. Acknowledging the strategic and cross-cutting importance of housing, the West Berkshire Housing Strategy 2020-2036 highlights,

"The presence of a balanced housing market across West Berkshire is critical to ensuring that residents' health and well-being is safeguarded" and states the following as an objective, "Supporting people to buy or rent their own homes; preventing homelessness, improving options for older people and protecting the most vulnerable."

Affordability

- 6.11. The West Berkshire Updated Housing Needs Evidence Report (2020) has shown notable affordability issues in the district, with average house prices far outstripping average earnings.
- 6.12. Median house prices have increased significantly between 2011 and 2018, growing from just under £250,000 to now closer to £350,000. Prices have always been higher than the South East and UK averages, although the gap between West Berkshire and the South East has tended to widen in absolute terms, aside from 2020 where the figures were inverted according to the supporting socio-economic report.
- 6.13. In terms of relative house prices between Newbury and Thatcham, Land Registry data from the last two years indicates that Newbury has seen higher average house prices (based on sales over the last two years). Average house prices in Newbury stood at £403,911 in 2021 in comparison to Thatcham which stood at £391,185 in the same period, a 3% margin of difference.

- 6.14. Across West Berks, planning policy requires affordable housing to be delivered on all sites in excess of five homes, with up to 40% of homes required to be provided as affordable housing on large green field sites.
- 6.15. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) sets out the need for affordable homes of different sizes and tenures with an emphasis on the delivery of smaller affordable homes. In order to meet housing need, the SHMA recommends new developments in West Berkshire to provide an affordable mix comprising 70% social rented and 30% shared ownership homes and to ensure that smaller homes are fit for the future they should also be designed with double bedrooms wherever possible.

Newbury

- 6.16. With a projected increase in the need for affordable, smaller household properties, the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre (2021)' sets an objective to create a more liveable town centre, with a greater diversity of living options and a priority given to identifying innovative forms of housing.
- 6.17. The draft Local Plan Review (LPR) 2020-2037 states that Newbury will be a focus for housing development. A new urban extension on greenfield land to the south of Newbury, at Sandford Park will provide a new residential neighbourhood with supporting facilities and green infrastructure (Policy SP16). Smaller scale developments will include redevelopment of previously developed land where possible.

Thatcham

- 6.18. In relation to Thatcham, the draft LPR 2020-2037 marks the town as a focus for regeneration, for new housing and for improved provision of services and facilities. A new urban extension to the north east of the town will provide a new residential neighbourhood with supporting facilities and green infrastructure (Policy SP17).

7. EMPLOYMENT (KEY GROWTH)

Current Market

- 7.1. The Council's Economic Development Strategy 2020-2023 states that West Berkshire is the most productive regional economy outside London and effectively blends the economic strengths of the South East with a wide range of environmental assets often more associated with the South-West.
- 7.2. The district has a successful local economy with unemployment low, economic activity high and both resident and workplace wages higher than the region, this is according to the Council's Employment Land Review (2020) and correlates with the accompanying socio-economic report which states average earnings by place of residence are higher in West Berkshire and stood at a comfortable 9% above UK average in 2021.
- 7.3. The corresponding socio-economic report notes that West Berkshire started the previous decade, following the global financial crisis and the subsequent economic recession, with unemployment rates ranging from 4-5%. This was well below national unemployment figures. Unemployment levels decreased between 2011-2015 (to levels of near full employment) and remained fairly stable until the global Covid-19 pandemic hit Britain and unemployment rates increased nationally. This demonstrates that West Berkshire has consistently been below the national unemployment average and benefits from a higher resilience to economic shocks.
- 7.4. An indication of West Berkshire's relative entrepreneurialism is the number of businesses seen in relation to the working-age population (the area's business density). There is a clear higher density in West Berkshire compared to the South East as a whole and this brings positive economic outcomes.
- 7.5. In relation to levels of deprivation, West Berkshire is split into 97 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), out of which 25 are ranked within the top 10% of 'least deprived' (i.e. most prosperous) areas in the country. Conversely, there are no concentrations of acute deprivation in the District, this is documented in the supporting socio-economic report.
- 7.6. Information Communications, Technology and Logistics are key sectors and reflect in part the district's excellent physical and digital connectivity. The Centre for Cities' report 'Talk of the Town' singles out Newbury, West Berkshire's biggest town, as a rare example of a town with a strong and self-sufficient economy which does not rely on links to a neighbouring larger town. Newbury has also been recognised by the Financial Times as a European city of the future as well as the most business friendly small town in the UK and is noted in the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' (2021) as having a number of large, high-profile employers present in the town.

7.7. The current economic market is not without its challenges. some of the underlying causes of these challenges have the potential to become exacerbated in future years if not addressed. These include:

- **Reduced rate of population growth** – around half that seen over the last 30-40 years.
- **Reduction in resident working population** as an increasing number of residents retire;
- **Labour shortages** - a growing number of jobs with a reducing number of people to fill them may cause labour shortages or potentially increased inward commuting assuming workers are available and willing to come to West Berkshire to work.
- **Skill shortages** - also a potential risk and are already evident in some sectors;
- **Economic inequality** - West Berkshire's prosperity not felt by all those who live in the district. Whilst the area has some of the highest economic activity rates in the country, the activity rates within some disadvantaged groups remain very low. Educational attainment shows a similar pattern. Economic inequality and social mobility are real concerns;
- **Productivity** - West Berkshire has a highly qualified workforce but recent research has highlighted issues with underemployment which if significant will have an impact on productivity within the district.
- **Availability of affordable housing** – Remains acute issue and for some employers is a restriction on future growth.
- **Climate Change** - Physical impacts and transitional risks associated with new technologies/ ways of working likely to become a factor if not planned for.

Employment Land Availability

7.8. The West Berkshire Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) (2020) notes future employment land needs based upon current projections. These are:

- **Offices:** There is capacity to provide approximately 16,137 sq.m to 65,127 sq.m of offices in West Berkshire between 2020 and 2037.
- **Industrial and Warehouse:** There is capacity to provide approximately 229,474 sq.m to 288,867 sq.m of industrial and warehousing space in West Berkshire between 2020 and 2037.
- In the case of industry and warehousing, it is considered that there may be scope for considerable on-site expansion within the existing employment areas which has not been fully considered by the HELAA process.

7.9. The West Berkshire Employment Land Review (2020) identifies the following narrative on the office and industrial market in the district:

Office/Industrial:

- 7.10. The accompanying socio-economic report states that it is clear Newbury is the major office market in the area with a total of over 1 million sqft of office let in the last 10 years, at an average of £12.27 per sqft. Thatcham on the other hand has seen much fewer deals, amounting to a 10-year total of 85,000 sqft let, at a 10-year average price of £10.91 per sqft. Office space in Thatcham is focused on SME occupiers.
- 7.11. Newbury is also the major industrial market in the area with a total of over 1.2 million sqft of industrial let in the last 10 years, at an average price of £7.16 per sqft. Thatcham on the other hand has seen much fewer deals, amounting to a 10-year total of 500,000 sqft let, at an 10-year average price of £6.75 per sqft.
- 7.12. Vacancy rates for both offices and industrial stock are low, which suggests more land/ space is needed than implied only by the net job growth.
- 7.13. The existing designated employment sites are either fully built out or have planning permissions on the last remaining land parcels and the sites offering redevelopment and intensification opportunities.
- 7.14. The pipeline of supply for new office is extremely low, and although there is some supply in the pipeline for new industrial, this is not enough to meet forecast demand.
- 7.15. The Call for Sites (HELAA) identified only one possible office site in the East of the District and saw nothing at all promoted in Newbury town. The Employment Land Review (2020) suggests the likelihood is that sites are instead being promoted for housing. Over time the office market should continue to recover in line with the forecast positive job growth. But this confidence has not as yet translated to those promoting sites to the Council – hence the lack of new office land.
- 7.16. For both markets the Council needs to consider if additional land can be identified. For offices this should ideally be through town centre redevelopment and the redevelopment of the London Road estate.
- 7.17. If redeveloped, the current industrial activity on the site will need to be re-accommodated elsewhere – further increasing the need for additional Newbury industrial space. This could potentially be met through mixed-use allocations to include an element of housing and employment (small scale light industrial and/or trade counter) and/or through a new focused call for specific Newbury related industrial sites. It is a recommendation of the Employment Land Review (2020) that all Preferred Employment Areas require safeguarding going forward.

Future Policy Direction

7.18. Working towards the 2036 West Berkshire Vision, the Council Strategy sets out the policy position under the theme of 'open for business'. The strategy has developed actions in the four areas seen to have the most relevance locally. These are:

- **People** – good jobs and greater earning power for all in West Berkshire;
- **Places** – creating prosperous communities across West Berkshire;
- **Infrastructure** – future-proofing West Berkshire's infrastructure;
- **Business Environment** – making West Berkshire the best place to start a grow a business.

People

7.19. Inclusive Growth:

- Empower everyone to enter the workplace
- Tackle underemployment

7.20. Skills:

- Encourage the uptake of apprenticeships
- Support Newbury College's University Centre
- Help partners to become training providers to meet skills needs
- Grow digital skills
- Work with partners to improve Careers Advice
- Put employment and skills at the heart of all we do
- Ensure environmental stewardship is integral to the school curriculum

Place

7.21. Thatcham

- Focus on town centre masterplanning and seek external investment. Ensure that infrastructure and town centre facilities upgraded to meet the demands and ambitions of Thatcham Town Council, residents and businesses.

7.22. Newbury

- Recognised as having more economic potential than any other UK small town, will continue to be a major focus for development in the district up to 2036 with the re-development of Market

Street and the regeneration of London Road Industrial Estate to increase the vibrancy of the town.

- This is facilitated by the town centre masterplanning exercise, the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' (2021), undertaken by independent consultants in conjunction with the local community. Work in collaboration with the Newbury Business Improvement District (BID), the LEP and Newbury Town Council to deliver sustainable, attractive projects of which the district can be proud. The final report is imminent.

Infrastructure

- Improve green infrastructure and create low carbon future for WB
- Future-proof digital infrastructure
- Redress housing mix
- Enhance transport infrastructure;
 - *developing intelligent transport systems, including roads and bridges and public EV charging points*
 - *Improvements to our railway stations*
 - *Expand cycle infrastructure*

Business Environment

- Create an environment that helps businesses to start up
- Ensure existing businesses are able to grow
- Promote West Berkshire as an inward investment destination
- Be a business-friendly council
- Foster relationships and networks

Newbury and Thatcham

7.23. At the local level, Newbury and Thatcham will remain the focus for business development. The draft LPR 2020-2037, states Newbury will be the main focus for office development and that designated Employment Areas will play a vital role in meeting the existing and future economic needs of the district.

7.24. The West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Board (2021) wishes to build upon Newbury's strength in particular as a 'top tech' town and has set an aim for 2036 for the town to become an internationally recognised hub in this field, playing a core part of the Thames Valley 'turbo economy'.

7.25. An objective is also established in the draft Newbury Town Centre (2021) visioning document to create opportunities for businesses going forward, including need for more office and incubator space for start-ups, small businesses and occasional flexi workspace.

8. RETAIL

- 8.1. Retail vacancies in West Berkshire were slightly elevated relative to the five-year average during the first quarter, this is corroborated in the accompanying socio-economic report, and they increased modestly in the past 12 months. The rate also comes in below the region's average. Meanwhile, rents have collapsed in the past year, tumbling 4.5%. That is the weakest performance observed over the past five years.
- 8.2. The Thatcham Town Centre Design Appraisal (2009) identified that the town's size was not reflective of its role and that it serves a much more local catchment than would be expected. This is largely due to the close proximity of Newbury town which competes directly in terms of leisure, employment and retail offering. As a result, Thatcham is dominated by convenience goods retailing.
- 8.3. In 2021, West Berkshire Council produced a draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' (2021), which found that whilst Newbury experiences a high-level of retail investment, particularly in comparison to Thatcham, it still faces a range of challenges largely reflective of the wider market. This has been most acutely demonstrated via recent high-profile losses, such as John Lewis Home and Debenhams, which have left a visible impact in the town centre's retail offering.
- 8.4. According to the West Berkshire Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (2020), 3 sites have been promoted for retail use that are considered to be potentially developable or potentially developable in part. The results of the Retail and Leisure Study were that there was a need for an increase in up to 23,500 sq m. However, this was very much identified as a maximum.
- 8.5. To become more resilient, the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' notes that a greater balance needs to be struck in the future between Newbury's shopping, cultural and leisure offering. Working towards this, the document sets out the following key objectives:
- increase the number of independent shops and local markets in the town
 - improvement in the food and drink offering to include an increase in local cafes and independent restaurants.
- 8.6. Finally, in order to increase dwell-time in the town and to attract a younger market, the document recommends the following objective:
- increase the amount/quality of open, public and green space in the town to ensure it remains an attractive destination for all.

9. TRANSPORT

9.1. Known as the strategic crossroads of Southern England, the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' (2021) notes that the town benefits from immediate access to the strategic road network and excellent rail connections. This high level of connectivity has helped to create a strong, balanced economy, however it is notably reliant on several major transport arteries, most notably the M4 and A34, which often creates heavy traffic congestion.

9.2. In order to address this, significant investment in infrastructure has been made over recent years, which according to 'West Berkshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan – Up to 2037' has included:

- New Wharf Bus Station, Newbury
- National Cycle Network Route 422 from Newbury through to the boundary with Reading
- New access to London Road Industrial Estate from the A339, Newbury
- A339 Bear Lane junction improvements linked with A339 / Cheap Street / Market Street changes to road layouts and addition of new access point to Newbury town from the north.
- A4 Thatcham Intelligent Transport System (ITS)

9.3. That said, it is recognised that sustainable travel infrastructure needs further investment and should be supported by programmes that encourage behavioural and cultural change locally. This is considered necessary to cater for a growing and changing population and to ensure the integration and creation of sustainable communities.

9.4. This ambition is supported by the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' masterplan which sets out a series of objectives, with one in particular focused around increasing attractive travel options. This includes:

- Developing viable travel options for two subgroups (those living in surrounding neighbourhoods and those more dispersed in rural areas)
- Encouraging more walking by addressing potential barriers such as the A339 and improving the 'gateways' to the town at London Road and Bartholomew Street.
- Investment in cycle infrastructure, including the need to ensure routes terminate in desirable locations with appropriate facilities
- For public transport, journey times needing to be attractive and compete with private cars.

9.5. In relation to strategic sites within the wider district, the West Berkshire Draft Infrastructure Delivery Plan sets out the following recommendations:

Sandleford Park:

- The strategic housing site for the delivery of up to 1,500 homes is required to be supported by a package of transport infrastructure.
- Details seen in a background document to the IDP and covers improvements to walking and cycling routes, bus services and connections with rail, junction improvements and a car club.

North East Thatcham:

- Specific transport infrastructure to ensure the site is well integrated into existing networks and can be delivered to support sustainable access to services and facilities for its residents.
- Important to ensure good route and access to the rail station and appropriate facilities at the station to support the growing population in Thatcham.

9.6. It is an aim of the West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy (2021) to reduce the current 1-hour drive to Heathrow to a target of less than 1 hour drive or train by 2036.

9.7. Going into further detail on specific future road improvements, the draft Infrastructure Plan outlines the following to meet projected growth:

- Kings Road Link Road (Sterling Industrial Estate) in Newbury
- Improvements to Robin Hood gyratory and A4 Faraday Road junction in Newbury
- Sandleford Park access improvements and link road to the A339 in south Newbury
- Package of infrastructure improvements to be delivered to support Sandleford Park, south Newbury
- Package of infrastructure improvements to be delivered to support North East Thatcham housing development
- Other key new links or transport packages to assist with future proposals in line with the Local Development Plan.

10. SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY

- 10.1. The West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Board states that “*West Berkshire is a thriving district in Southern England which boasts both the economic advantages of the South East and the excellent lifestyle opportunities of the South West.*”
- 10.2. Significant investment in recent years has resulted in high levels of connectivity in West Berkshire, both physically and digitally. This has created a prosperous and desirable local economy that is supported by attractive statistics in relation to education, health and employment opportunities. For example, the corresponding socio-economic report notes that in West Berkshire, the population’s education level is higher than the national average across each category. The share of population with no qualifications is almost three times lower than the UK average (2.6% vs. 6.4% for the UK).
- 10.3. Whilst growth exists across the district, certain areas have shown the need for greater service provision due to localised demographic differences. According to the West Berkshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan (2021), current primary and secondary school growth is greatest in Newbury and north Newbury in particular. In response to this, the impact will need to be mitigated with a mix of temporary and permanent expansion of existing schools according to the Plan, as although there is a need, the scale of growth doesn’t warrant new provision and the period of growth is expected to be finite. This is in effort to ensure the West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy (2021) aim of improving the current 95% of schools rated ‘good or outstanding’ is raised to the 2036 target for all schools to be rated good or outstanding.
- 10.4. Within Newbury, the local quality of life is positively shaped by the provision of regular events, including those of national profile, as well as its’ historic core and high-quality parks. Complementing this, local markets, independent retailers and well-respected cultural organisations result in a town that has a strong identity and a high level of community pride, according to the draft ‘Vision for Newbury Town Centre (2021)’.
- 10.5. Whilst Newbury might be well catered for in terms of its’ cultural offering, West Berkshire has developed a ‘Cultural Heritage Strategy 2020-2030’ to set out the future vision for the wider district. It states,

“By 2030 we will have a sustainable, resilient and thriving cultural heritage sector which continues to contribute to the local economy, increases its contribution to the health and wellbeing of residents (through improved access to cultural heritage and cultural education and learning) and that our precious historic environment is protected and better understood for the enjoyment of all.”

- 10.6. In an effort to deliver upon this vision, six strategic themes with related objectives have been developed:

- **Sustainability:** Ensure our cultural and heritage organisations are sustainable and thrive.
- **Economic Development:** Increase domestic and international tourism to generate income, investment and increase economic resilience.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Contribute to the improvement in the health and wellbeing of all our residents.
- **Access:** Improve access to cultural heritage and activities.
- **Education, Training and Employment:** Improve access to cultural education, training and employment opportunities.
- **Heritage and the Historic Environment:** Protect and promote our unique cultural history, heritage, and historic environment.

10.7. A golden thread that links each of these themes and objectives together is that of partnership-working. By developing partnerships and programmes across cultural, heritage, landscape and tourism, West Berkshire Council hopes to deliver experiential opportunities for all. These experiences are not just for visitors to the district, but the Cultural Strategy has even recommended social prescribing - the prescription of creative and cultural activities by health care professionals, and other referral services, to people experiencing anxiety, stress-related symptoms, depression or other mental and physical health problems is now an established initiative with seven social prescribers working across the district.

10.8. This is all linked to a corporate aim for inclusive growth in the district, where everyone sees the advantages of West Berkshire's economic success in every aspect of their lives; whether it is in their health outcomes, their educational opportunities, their job prospects or their quality of life.

11. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT (ASSETS)

11.1. According to the Council Strategy, West Berkshire covers an area of 272 square miles of which almost three quarters is classified as part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Added to this, 51 sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) make West Berkshire an area of national importance for animals and plant life and nature conservation.

11.2. Partly in order to secure sustainable, longterm protection of these important environments, West Berkshire Council declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019 and committed to the creation of a strategic plan to work towards carbon neutrality in the district by 2030.

11.3. One of West Berkshire's biggest strengths is its strong, balanced economy. This is, however, reliant on the district's several major transport arteries, most notably the M4 and A34. These two roads alone account for over 50% of all the CO2 generated from transport activity each year, and around 30% of the district's total CO2 emissions. In response the Council's Environmental Strategy 2020-2030 set out the following key targets to deliver the vision for the environment:

- **Aim to reduce annual total emissions (within West Berkshire's scope of influence) to less than 350 ktonnes by 2030**
- **Carbon Neutrality will be achieved by a range of local energy generation and carbon sequestration projects equivalent to the projected emission level of 350 ktonnes.**
- **The Council will be a carbon neutral operation by 2030.**

11.4. The draft Vision for Newbury Town Centre (2021) seeks to deliver upon these targets and acknowledges the public's awareness of environmental matters. As a result, the document sets out an objective to improve access to open space within Newbury, including existing parks and the canalside, as well as providing more green space and social space for youth in the town centre for longterm

12. DESIGN

The National Design Guide as a method of assessment

12.1. The national design guide sets out 10 characteristics of well-designed places and demonstrates what good design means in practice.

12.2. It is a useful tool in that it allows an understanding of the physical nature of the place. It can ensure that stakeholders and decision-makers give due consideration to the function of places over time.

12.3. The 10 characteristics are:-

- **Context**
- **Identity**
- **Built form**
- **Movement**
- **Nature**
- **Public space**
- **Uses**
- **Homes and buildings**
- **Resources**
- **Lifespan**

12.4. We have used the National Design Guide to form the basis of a high level review of West Berkshire at three scales: the borough, the two main towns of Newbury and Thatcham, and the identified growth areas, whether currently being built out or promoted. Each scale of review contributes to our overall understanding of West Berkshire and how this can inform a plan up to 2050.

12.5. The design assessment has been undertaken through a site visit where possible and a review of available online data.

Context

12.6. The district is made up of two market towns within an extensive rural hinterland – Newbury the larger, Thatcham the smaller. Both towns are built up over a long timespan following canal, road and rail trading corridors.

- 12.7. Late 20th century traffic movement has emphasised the cross-roads north-south and east-west: The A4 then the later M4, representing east-west routes. Northbrook Street, then the later A339 and A34, representing the north-south routes.
- 12.8. Undulating topography has influenced where settlement has occurred, with the Kennett and Avon Canal forming a valley floor for the two towns to grow.
- 12.9. The North Wessex Downs characterises the majority of the borough. As an Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, it contributes one of the many constraints to future growth, along with nuclear off-set zones, flood, ancient woodland, an ancient battlefield site, scheduled ancient monuments and historic listed landscapes, limiting the potential growth areas.

Identity

- 12.10. West Berkshire as a whole is largely made up of rural villages based around farmsteads. Two exceptions to this are the towns of Newbury and Thatcham which form two distinct identities.
- 12.11. Newbury the larger market town, is built around extensive mixed-use frontage located on the historic cross-roads of the north-south, east west highway, Northbrook Street and London Road. The town centre also straddles both sides of the Kennet and Avon Canal, itself providing a cross-roads identity.
- 12.12. Thatcham the smaller market town is built solely on the east west highway, Cheap Street and Chapel Street, with Broad Street branching off to the south.
- 12.13. Both town's follow tradition market street forms but due to their locational characteristics, they are historically of very different scales. Late 20th century housing and employment growth have changed much of the original fabric and could give any impression of similar scale settlements however Thatcham's town centre has remained small through time.
- 12.14. Growth and change of the two towns could now give the impression of one urban area, however, their identities will remain quite different. Despite there being only a narrow open space between the two towns, their separation is sufficient to plan for each based on their own unique needs.

Built form

- 12.15. Each period of urban history is evident in Newbury's townscape: medieval, Victorian, Edwardian, mid and late 20th century.
- 12.16. Thatcham has a larger proportion of late 20th century growth in relation to its size. This in turn has contributed to how the built form of the two towns differ. Late 20th century growth has typically been built around highway standards, with many residential cul-de-sac streets

that are poorly connected for pedestrians. Much of this pattern of townscape forming the more recent urban fringe for the two towns.

- 12.17. This is a particular issue given the importance of walkability with regard to urban extensions; and the potential for this to be compromised by the existing urban fringe.

Movement

- 12.18. The draft Local Plan rightly identifies the design principle of enhancing:

“the way an area functions in practical terms through a mix of land uses, by ensuring the development is well connected, accessible, safe and easy for people to find their way through and around”.

- 12.19. However, the existing fabric is an initial obstacle to this. When visiting the two towns of Newbury and Thatcham, the existing urban areas appear to be based on a ‘Cars First’ principle, with the previous zoning of land uses having contributed to the promotion of cars first.
- 12.20. This leave pedestrians and cyclists less well catered for. There are a number of policy and national guidance documents that aim to change how people move around existing and new urban areas including the revised Highway Code, Local Transport Note 1/20, Active Travel and Putting Health into Place; all these documents put walking and cycling ahead of car use.
- 12.21. There are some specific traffic and movement issues to be addressed such as the impact of race days, however, there is much to build on including leisure walking routes, combined cycle – footways and the existing rail infrastructure providing the opportunity to create further sustainable methods for people to move about.

Nature

- 12.22. The flood zones that follow the main water course contribute to the sense of living in a natural environment. These together with the extent of ancient woodland, create a richness and diversity with its own merits, but they also provide a positive contribution to the overall quality of life and sense of place for West Berkshire.
- 12.23. Conservation and enhancement is evident, supporting a rich and diverse range of biodiversity, which will increase through Biodiversity net-gain and a number of protection policies.
- 12.24. When designing for growth in West Berkshire, managing the interface between urbanisation and nature is obviously critical, particularly where natural features cross the urban ones, such as at the Newbury Leisure Park centre (currently closed) and the Nature Discovery Centre.

12.25. These and other natural places, can contribute to the quality of a place, and to local community's quality of life and well-being.

12.26. Proposed new urban growth has the ability to prioritise nature so that diverse ecosystems can flourish to ensure a healthy natural environment. It can also provide attractive open spaces in locations that are easy to access, with activities for all to enjoy.

Public space

12.27. Civic spaces are based around the two centres of Newbury and Thatcham.

12.28. The emerging Town Centre Vision 2022 for Newbury identifies:

- **The canal is an important accessible area of public open space;**
- **The Wharf which provides the main opportunity to relax and enjoy the waterfront;**
- **Victoria Park is the most significant green space in the town centre;**
- **Northcroft Park to the west as an important recreation and leisure area; and**
- **The Market Place as a key area for activity.**

Uses

12.29. Uses across the urban areas stem from the historic core of mixed uses typical of markets towns and follow the line of trading routes. Uses have also responded to environmental characteristics such as topography and flood. This has led to the growth of employment, concentrated generally to the east following the A4 and the railway line/canal.

12.30. Other commercial and campus style uses have followed the urban fringe north and south of Newbury anchored on the old north south route of the A339; now redundant as a national highway due to the introduction of the A34.

12.31. Late 20th century residential neighbourhoods are mostly housing with supporting amenities of schools and supporting local centres.

13. SUMMARY

- 13.1. West Berkshire lies on the western fringe of the South East region. Centrally located at an important crossroads, the district provides direct road links in all directions, with all key urban centres in southern England. The majority of the district is classified as part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 13.2. The largest settlement in West Berkshire is Newbury. The town is a main focus of growth in the adopted Local Plan due to its high levels of connectivity, by road and rail, and also via digital infrastructure. These factors mean Newbury will remain a key focus for business development, attracting investment and new individuals to the area. Sandleford Park strategic site allocation, to the south of the town, is proposed as an allocation in the LPR, delivering approximately 1,500 homes.
- 13.3. Thatcham, a historic market town, has undergone significant growth in recent decades, although much of this has been low density and car-orientated. Due to its constraints, strategic growth will be limited to the delivery of 2,500 home urban extension to the north east of the town.
- 13.4. In relation to planning policy, the NPPF establishes the national context and its' 2021 update includes a requirement to produce a vision for strategic sites via paragraph 22. Until a time that the new Local Plan has been adopted, development in the district is led by the West Berkshire Core Strategy, Housing Site Allocations and 1991-2006 Local Plan Saved Policies. The more recently published 'West Berkshire Vision 2036' outlines the Council's corporate strategy for the district and sets the tone for a series of strategies, policies and plans that have since been developed.
- 13.5. Demographic change during the life of the strategy will drive an increased focus on housing for older people, residents who need support to live independently, and for those with specialist care needs, as well as smaller homes to accommodate smaller household size. Existing good health indicators and employment prospects, based upon a strong labour market and highly qualified workforce, form the basis of the Council's aim for 2036 to be one of the happiest places in England and a destination that provides the best level of residential care.
- 13.6. Housing is seen as a cross-cutting and strategic issue for the district, with the Council acknowledging its' impact upon residents' health and well-being. This is particularly relevant as it has been shown there are notable affordability issues in the district. In Newbury, creating a more liveable town centre with a greater diversity of living options and a priority given to identifying innovative forms of housing is a key focus going forward. Within Thatcham, the housing baseline position is proposed to be improved via new housing, improved services, facilities and green infrastructure, particularly to the north east of the town.

- 13.7. The district has a successful local economy with low unemployment, high economic activity with both resident and workplace wages higher than the wider region, with Newbury in particular highlighted as a business development success story. That said, certain challenges, of both local, national and international scale, need to be addressed if the district is to remain resilient in the future. To address this, the future policy position relating to employment is focused around 'people, place, infrastructure and business environment' topics. According to the future policy position, Newbury town is recommended to remain the focus for office development, in an effort to become internationally recognised as a 'top tech' hub and important part of the Thames Valley 'turbo economy'.
- 13.8. The baseline shows that due to its close proximity with Newbury, Thatcham serves a more local catchment than would be expected. Newbury competes directly in terms of leisure, employment and retail. Going forward, the draft vision for Newbury is one of greater balance between shopping, cultural and leisure offering with increased quantity and quality of green space in the town.
- 13.9. Although benefitting from good transport connectivity and investment in recent decades, the baseline notes heavy traffic congestion in Newbury and Thatcham. To address this, future efforts should be focused on supporting programmes that encourage behavioural and cultural change in relation to sustainable travel options. This must be integrated into strategic site design and development.
- 13.10. To diversify the local offering in the district for both visitors and locals, the Council's Cultural Heritage Strategy sets out the vision for the future. A sustainable, resilient and thriving cultural sector that supports the economy and contributes towards the health and wellbeing of residents whilst preserving the historic environment is key for West Berkshire.
- 13.11. Acknowledging the importance of planetary health as well as individual citizens' health and wellbeing, the West Berkshire declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. The Council have since set key targets to deliver the future vision for the district as outlined in the Environmental Strategy, aiming ultimately for carbon neutrality.
- 13.12. Partnership working will be the golden thread that weaves together the various strategies for the future of West Berkshire. Collaborative programmes seeking greater social, economic and environmental outcomes will be a significant driver and enabler of change.
- 13.13. Looking beyond this Baseline Report, the findings will be tested with local stakeholders, seeking engagement to shape the next steps of the process. This will include setting local aims and objectives in an effort to offer a clear spatial steer as to where growth in Newbury and Thatcham will take place in the years ahead. These visions will draw upon, and compliment, the existing overarching vision contained within the LPR.