

**WEST OXFORDSHIRE
LOCAL DEVELOPMENT
FRAMEWORK**

**WITNEY LANDSCAPE
ASSESSMENT 2007:
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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INTRODUCTION

- ES1.** This report has been prepared by Amanda Hopwood Landscape Consultancy (AHLC), on behalf of West Oxfordshire District Council. Its aim is to update and expand previous studies of land on the fringes of Witney, in particular the Key Settlement work of the West Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment (WOLA), in order to establish a sound evidence base for the West Oxfordshire Local Development Framework.
- ES2.** The surroundings of the town are divided into areas, A to H, based largely on those in the WOLA, but divided on a topographical as well as geographical basis.

THE LANDSCAPE SETTING OF WITNEY

- ES3.** Historically, Witney grew up as a valley settlement, based near crossing points over the River Windrush, which flows through the town.
- ES4.** Witney is surrounded on the east, north and west by higher ground. To the north, the ground rises quickly to above 100m, with North Leigh to the north east being above 120m. A ridge along the northern side of the Windrush encloses the town within the landscape and generally marks the extent of its visual envelope to the north, with the exception of development on the higher ground west of the town. The relationship of this ridge with the town is particularly marked, and close to the town centre, in the Cogges Hill area.
- ES5.** A number of small valleys run down from the higher ground to the north to the Windrush, creating a varied sometimes rolling topography.
- ES6.** To the west of the town, a dominant ridge rising to above 100m marks the southern side of the Windrush valley, and the dividing line between the Cotswold uplands and the Thames valley. There are long views from this ridge both to the Wychwood Uplands and across the Thames valley to the Faringdon ridge to the south, and, in places, looking along the Windrush valley towards Witney.
- ES7.** South of Witney, the Windrush flows through a broad, low-lying, gently undulating valley landscape to join the River Thames. An intermediate ridge runs south west of Ducklington, and encloses the town visually, separating it from the wider valley landscape. Occasional higher points, such as at Lew, are prominent in the landscape, with long views to and from the higher ground around Witney.
- ES8.** North of Witney, the landscape is quite well treed, with woods, copses, and many hedgerows and hedgerow trees, a landscape pattern was created by early assarting (clearing) of Wychwood Forest. There are fewer woods in the valley landscape, but there are many hedges and tree lined ditches, giving the impression of a treed landscape. The landscape west of Witney, on the higher ground, is more open, with few woods and poorer hedgerows.

AREA A: NORTH WEST WITNEY: SOUTHERN WINDRUSH VALLEY SIDE

- ES9.** In this assessment, Area A covers the southern (north facing) valley side, and does not include the higher plateau to the south, which is covered under Area H.
- ES10.** The topography of the area is a north facing mainly gently, occasionally steeply, sloping undulating valley side. The area is generally open with long views across the

valley and to the wooded Wychwood uplands to the north. This smooth, open valley side is typical of the Upper Windrush valley generally, which reads as a coherent largely unspoilt piece of landscape between Witney and Burford.

- ES11.** Area A is of high importance and sensitivity because of its prominent valley side landform, which results in high intervisibility to the north, including with the Cotswolds AONB; and the strong continuity of the area with the remainder of the Upper Windrush valley.

AREA B: NORTH WITNEY: VALLEY FLOOR

- ES12.** In this assessment, Area B covers the valley floor, with a small amount of valley side scarp to the south which is separated from Area A by a strong hedgeline. The northern valley side is covered under Area C1.
- ES13.** The topography of the area is flat, with a small amount of north facing scarp in the central southern part of the area. The area is former water meadow, now used as pasture for cattle and, mainly, horse grazing, with the fields often subdivided by fences.
- ES14.** The valley floor is strongly enclosed by the steep valley sides, but with long views along the valley except where blocked by trees. These characteristics are typical of the Upper Windrush valley generally, which reads as a coherent largely unspoilt piece of landscape between Witney and Burford.
- ES15.** Area B is of high importance and sensitivity as a flat valley floor within the flood plain, with its high intervisibility to both north and south and strong continuity with the remainder of the Upper Windrush valley. Its rural character is under threat due to the close proximity of the town.

AREA C1: NORTH WEST WITNEY: NORTHERN WINDRUSH VALLEY SIDE

- ES16.** In this assessment, Area C1 covers the northern (south facing) valley side, which is included under Area B in the WOLA.
- ES17.** The topography of the area is a south facing sometimes steeply sloping valley side, forming a distinctive promontory above the valley.
- ES18.** The area is generally open with long views across the valley to Area A and to the West Witney ridge to the south (Area H), and along the valley to the west. The smooth, open valley side is typical of the Upper Windrush valley generally, which reads as a coherent largely unspoilt piece of landscape between Witney and Burford.
- ES19.** In summary, Area C1 is of high importance and sensitivity because of its prominent valley side landform which results in high intervisibility to the south and west; and the strong continuity of the area with the remainder of the Upper Windrush valley.

AREA C2: NORTH WEST WITNEY: PLATEAU

- ES20.** In this assessment, Area C2 covers the western end of the WOLA Area C.
- ES21.** The topography of the area is a slightly undulating plateau, sloping very gently to the south east. It reads as part of the higher ground of the Wychwood Uplands. Where there are gaps in the hedges there are long views south across the valley to the West Witney ridge, and north west across the Wychwood uplands.

ES22. Area C2 is of moderate to high importance and sensitivity as a gently undulating plateau landscape with high intervisibility to the south and north west and a strong physical continuity with the Wychwood Uplands to the north. The rural gap between Witney and Hailey/Crawley is under pressure from suburbanising influences, and is particularly vulnerable to change given the scattered development along the B4022 between Witney and the modern edge of Hailey village.

AREA C3: NORTH WITNEY: SMALL SCALE VALLEYS

ES23. In this assessment, Area C3 covers the centre of the WOLA Area C.

ES24. The topography of the area consists of rolling small scale valleys, converging in the centre of the area to flow down to the Windrush valley. It reads as part of the higher ground of the Wychwood Uplands, and the land gradually rises to the high point of the New Yatt/North Leigh ridge which contains Witney to the north.

ES25. There is a strong sense of enclosure in the small scale valleys, but there are long views from the open higher ground. To the north, dispersed farmsteads of medieval origin, associated with woodland clearance, lie between the main village of Hailey (Middletown and Poffley End) and Witney. The perceived rural gap between Witney and Hailey is therefore very small, and easily eroded.

ES26. Area C3 is of high importance and sensitivity, because of its topography of rolling small scale valleys; its high intervisibility to the north (filtered) and south west from higher ground; its strong physical continuity with the Wychwood Uplands to the north; and its ancient landscape origins and rarity in a county context. The gap between Witney and Hailey is particularly sensitive given the ill defined gap due to the dispersed settlement pattern.

AREA C4: NORTH WITNEY: PLATEAU

ES27. In this assessment, Area C4 covers part of the western end of the WOLA Area D.

ES28. The topography of the area is quite flat, a small plateau between the small scale valleys of Area C3 and the Madley Brook valley to the south east. It reads as part of the higher ground of the Wychwood Uplands, and the land gradually rises to the high point of the New Yatt/North Leigh ridge which contains Witney to the north.

ES29. The area itself is open, but views are contained to the north west (Area C3) by a slight ridge and to the south and east by housing. There are longer views to and from the north along the A4095, but these are very limited from public footpaths to the north.

ES30. Area C4 is of low-moderate overall sensitivity, as a small plateau area between small valleys, with low intervisibility to the wider countryside. It is, however, important that the rural character of New Yatt Road should be maintained and enhanced.

AREA D1: NORTH EAST WITNEY: MADLEY BROOK VALLEY SIDE

ES31. In this assessment, Area D1 covers the eastern part of the WOLA Area D. Much of the western part of WOLA Area D is now built up, with the North East Witney development (Madley Park).

ES32. The topography of the area is an undulating valley side, the west facing slope of the Madley Brook valley which flows south from North Leigh to join the River Windrush in the Cogges area. This pronounced ridge is part of the higher ground enclosing the

town, which in this area and, especially, Area D2, comes close to the centre of the town.

- ES33.** There are long open views across the new housing area to the countryside to the west and north (AONB), and a strong sense of connection with the wooded Wychwood Uplands. The new housing does not block these views, being set low in the landscape.
- ES34.** Area D1 is of high importance and sensitivity because of its role as part of the ridge encircling the east and north of the town; and its high intervisibility across the countryside to the west and north. By contrast, the new housing area to the west is set relatively low in the landscape with very little impact on the wider landscape. The new road and planting associated with it form a strong boundary between town and countryside.

AREA D2: EAST WITNEY: EASTERN WINDRUSH/MADLEY BROOK VALLEY SIDE

- ES35.** In this assessment, Area D2 includes WOLA Area E, and stretches south across the A40. Areas D1 and D2 are part of the same important ridge enclosing the east of the town.
- ES36.** The topography of the area is an undulating valley side, the eastern side of the Madley Brook and Windrush valleys, forming the end of a very prominent ridge enclosing the eastern side of the town. The ridge comes particularly close to the historic cores of both Witney and Cogges at this point.
- ES37.** The area is generally open, and there are very long views north to the wooded Wychwood Uplands, west along the Upper Windrush valley, and south west to the low lying Lower Windrush valley. There are also fine views of Witney spire, from both north and south of the A40, and in places of Cogges church.
- ES38.** Area D2 is of high importance and sensitivity due to its role as a prominent part of the ridge enclosing the east of the town; its high intervisibility across the countryside to the south west, west and north; and its visual connections with the historic cores of both Witney and Cogges.

AREA E: EAST WITNEY: EAST FACING EASTERN WINDRUSH/MADLEY BROOK VALLEY SIDE

- ES39.** This area was not included specifically in the WOLA, though the eastern corner of WOLA Area D just clips it. It is included here, as Area E, for the sake of completeness as it is part of the ridge enclosing the east of the town.
- ES40.** The topography is an east facing undulating valley side, the eastern side of the prominent ridge enclosing the eastern side of Witney, and separating the Lower Windrush valley from the broader Eynsham (Thames) vale. A small valley runs east under the Shores Green junction.
- ES41.** There is no visual connection with the town from this area. There are instead long views east across the low lying Eynsham vale, with the wooded Wytham Hill, on the far side of the Thames valley, prominent on the skyline. Coming west along the A40, the smooth ridge to the north is a prominent landscape feature.
- ES42.** Area E is of high importance and sensitivity due its role as a prominent part of the ridge enclosing the east of the town; and its high intervisibility across the countryside to the

south east. The area is part of the rural Eynsham vale landscape with no connection with Witney. The introduction of lighting, in particular, to this area would be particularly damaging.

AREA F1: CENTRAL & SOUTH WITNEY: VALLEY FLOOR

- ES43.** In this assessment, Area F1 includes WOLA Area F, and stretches south beyond the A40.
- ES44.** The topography of the area is flat, with a small amount of river terrace in the south east. Area F1 marks the change between the narrow, deeply incised Upper Windrush valley north west of the town, and the broad Lower Windrush valley to the south.
- ES45.** There are long open views along the valley, interrupted at the northern end by new housing development on a former mill/employment site and in the south by the A40 on embankment.
- ES46.** Area F1 is of high importance and sensitivity as a flat valley floor largely within the flood plain with high intervisibility along the valley; and due to its character as a rural landscape running through the heart of the town and its location at a pivotal point between the Upper and Lower Windrush valleys. Its rural character is under threat due to the close proximity of the town.

AREA F2: SOUTH WEST WITNEY: VALLEY FLOOR

- ES47.** Area F2 was not specifically included in the WOLA, as the A40 was taken as the southern boundary of the study. It is included here for completeness, and to cover the area around the A40/A415 junction. It has topographical similarities with Area F1.
- ES48.** The topography of the area is a largely flat valley floor, with slight undulations. Just to the south of the area is a small ridge, very pronounced in the otherwise flat landscape, topped by woods of ancient origin, which contains views south from this part of the valley.
- ES49.** While there is the potential for long views within this area, in practice views are easily blocked by vegetation in the flat landscape. However, there are some long views across the valley from the higher ground to the north, including from within Witney, and from higher ground within the valley.
- ES50.** The area has a strong rural character and connection with the Lower Windrush valley as a whole, rather than with Witney, with the A40 clearly marking the boundary between town and country.
- ES51.** Area F2 is of moderate to high importance and sensitivity as a largely flat valley floor partly within the flood plain, with the potential for high intervisibility easily blocked by vegetation in the flat landscape though with views across the area from higher ground. In the area near the A40/A415 junction the strong contrast between urban (north of A40, east of A415) and rural (west of A415) is vulnerable to erosion.

AREA G: WEST WITNEY: MINOR VALLEYS

- ES52.** Area G extends the WOLA Area G west to include the minor valley north of Curbridge.
- ES53.** The topography of the area consists of two rolling small scale valleys, that to the east containing the Colwell Brook. The valleys flow east/south east into the low lying Lower

Windrush valley, and the area has a strong connection with this lower ground.

- ES54.** There is a contrast between open views from the higher ground in the area, and the strong sense of enclosure elsewhere in the area due to the topography and/or vegetation. The area has a strong connection with the valley landscape to the south, and plays an important part in softening views of the urban edge from the wider valley to the south. It is an important buffer between the west of Witney and the A40, the village of Curbridge, and the wider countryside.
- ES55.** Area G has high importance and sensitivity as an area of small scale valleys with a small scale field pattern and a strong structure of hedgerows/trees, forming a strong landscape edge to Witney.

AREA H: WEST WITNEY RIDGE

- ES56.** In this assessment, Area H extends much further west to include the whole area between Witney and Charterville Allotments (Minster Lovell), and further north to include land north of the B4047 which is part of the same ridge. This latter area was included as part of Area A in the WOLA. A considerable amount of development has taken place in this area since the time of the WOLA assessment.
- ES57.** The topography of the area is a plateau, part of the high ridge between the Upper and Lower Windrush valley. The area south of the B4047 slopes gently towards the south east.
- ES58.** Overall, Area H is of high importance and sensitivity as a high plateau, part of the prominent ridge extending west of Witney and with high intervisibility to both north and south from the highest ground. However, views back from the south are easily blocked by vegetation in the flat landscape, and development below the highest ground would have relatively little visual impact.
- ES59.** The large scale landscape with its generally weak landscape structure can accommodate built development on the lower ground in the south of the area within a new strong landscape structure without a damaging impact on the quality of the landscape, and without significant visual impact.

CONCLUSIONS

- ES60.** Overall, the landscape around Witney is of high sensitivity, a mix of open ridge, open valley side and valley floor.
- ES61.** There is generally high intervisibility between these areas, so development in one would have an impact on the others, as well as direct impact on the area itself.
- ES62.** There is also high intervisibility between the town, particularly higher ground in the west, north and east, and the wider countryside, including the Cotswolds AONB to the north.
- ES63.** These landscape and visual constraints mean that there are few areas which could accommodate large scale development without substantial adverse landscape and/or visual impact.
- ES64.** This study has found, however, that there are a few areas where development could be accommodated without significant landscape and visual impact, where the existing landscape structure is weak, and the existing urban edge could be improved. These are:
- Area C4
 - The lower part of Area H, reserved in the Local Plan for future development.
- ES65.** Other small sites within other areas may be capable of absorbing development, but would need further detailed study on a site by site basis.