

Background

1 Introduction

There has been a significant amount of recent research, which has resulted in an increasing awareness that the countryside and open spaces contribute significantly to people's well being, in terms of both physical and mental health, by improving the 'quality of life'. The industrial revolution brought with it a massive shift in the demographics of the country with migration from rural to urban settlements, and along with this the process of rural decline started. The majority of the population still reside in the urban settlements, but there is also a growing trend of migration from urban and suburban areas back to the countryside, with a net increase of 125,000 people a year doing so (Countryside Agency, 2004). At the same time there has been growing demand for recreation opportunities in the countryside. There are a number of reasons for this demand, perhaps the most important has been the success of conservation groups such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Wildlife Trusts, who have purchased significant tracts of land and promoted access to the countryside. Of course, the perceived increase in leisure time has also played its part in promoting the countryside with activities such as cycling and walking increasing, especially for short trips near the home, for the latter.

These mechanisms place increasing pressure on the landscape, wildlife and the infrastructure at a time when a more far reaching and potentially much more damaging process is underway – global warming. Global warming will have many negative effects¹ including an increase in cases of sunstroke and burning, an increase in water supply issues, higher pollution, a loss of natural assets, increased risk of damage to utilities and transport infrastructure, and a change in agricultural crop regime with effects on wildlife.

Many of these issues will affect the natural resource in North Wiltshire and people's ability to enjoy it.

¹ Impacts of headline climate change. UK Climate Impacts Programme.

After many years of decline the management of open spaces is, once again, high on the national and local agenda, with the realisation that open space is playing an increasingly important role. This may be especially the case in built up areas where it may act as a substitute for the wider countryside for people who are unable, or who have no wish, to access remoter areas. The term open space is open to interpretation and can include such diverse areas as semi-natural greenspace, allotments and cemeteries. The opportunities offered by these areas are as diverse as the space itself. Parks that are well managed and offer a variety of activities are always popular, and tend to be extremely busy on a sunny weekend day. With the increase in concern over the quality of food produced by modern agriculture, there has been a resurgence of interest in allotment holding, and these have other benefits apart from food production such as sustaining the local (and often hidden) economy, and providing wildlife habitats. And the areas of land left between development areas, which often consist of semi-natural vegetation, provide a refuge for wildlife, as well as a 'green lung' for the human population near by.

However, if these areas are managed badly, or are in an inappropriate place, then they will not realise their potential, and create problems rather than contribute to solving them. This creates a spiral of decline. It is essential then, that whilst recognising the huge potential benefits possible from the countryside and open spaces, resources are targeted effectively to ensure that conflicts between conservation issues and development are minimised, facilities are provided in the right place, are what people want, and at a cost that is sustainable.

National Government has recognised that there are pressures on the countryside and the need to be pro-active in developing policies that meet the requirements of the 21st century. Consequently, various working groups have looked at the issues and made recommendations as to how to work towards a better future.

North Wiltshire District Council has also responded to increasing public desire and supported various external initiatives for both leisure access, and recreational use of the countryside. These include the North Wiltshire Rivers Route and Cricklade Country Way (both of which form part of the National Cycle Network), restoration of the Wilts and Berks and Cotswold Canals, and several wildlife projects such as those centred around the Braydon Forest and, Cotswold and By Brook Valley, as well as the Cotswolds Water Park. However, these have been individual schemes, and have not so far formed part of any clear overall strategy.

This Strategy then, seeks to redress this. It will seek to ensure that wildlife, landscape and public open space are protected and enhanced, and that the community can attain the greatest benefits from them, but in a sustainable way.

The Council led the process of preparing Community Strategies for North Wiltshire and there is now a strategy for each of the Community Areas as well as an overarching Strategy. These strategies aim to improve the quality of life of local communities through action to improve the economic, social and environmental well being of an area and its inhabitants. It is intended that the Countryside and Open Space Strategy will play a part in addressing these objectives for North Wiltshire. A Wiltshire Local Area Agreement has recently been published which includes an environmental 'block'. This puts biodiversity and sustainability at the heart of the local decision making process.

The Strategy supports access to the countryside for all, including non-car methods, and measures that enhance biodiversity.

2 Vision and Rationale

The Countryside and Open Space Strategy is a 'working' document, intended to be used by the Council to guide its work in the District. There are several reasons why the Council has developed this Strategy:

- The Leisure Facilities Strategy 2001–2007 recognised that a Countryside and Open Space Strategy be developed for the District to ensure that a more strategic approach would be adopted for developing projects, rather than the more piece-meal approach being used;
- There is ever increasing pressure on the countryside and open space (for development purposes) which can, without any method of making an informed judgement, result in the loss or degradation of important local amenities;
- Ever increasing competition for limited financial resources make it more important to target that resource effectively. Supply led provision is far

less effective than demand led provision, but the latter is more difficult to achieve;

- There is a moral obligation to ensure that protection is given, not only to designated sites, but the wider countryside as well, to ensure that the landscape and nature conservation value of the District are enhanced, not degraded, and biodiversity increased whenever possible.

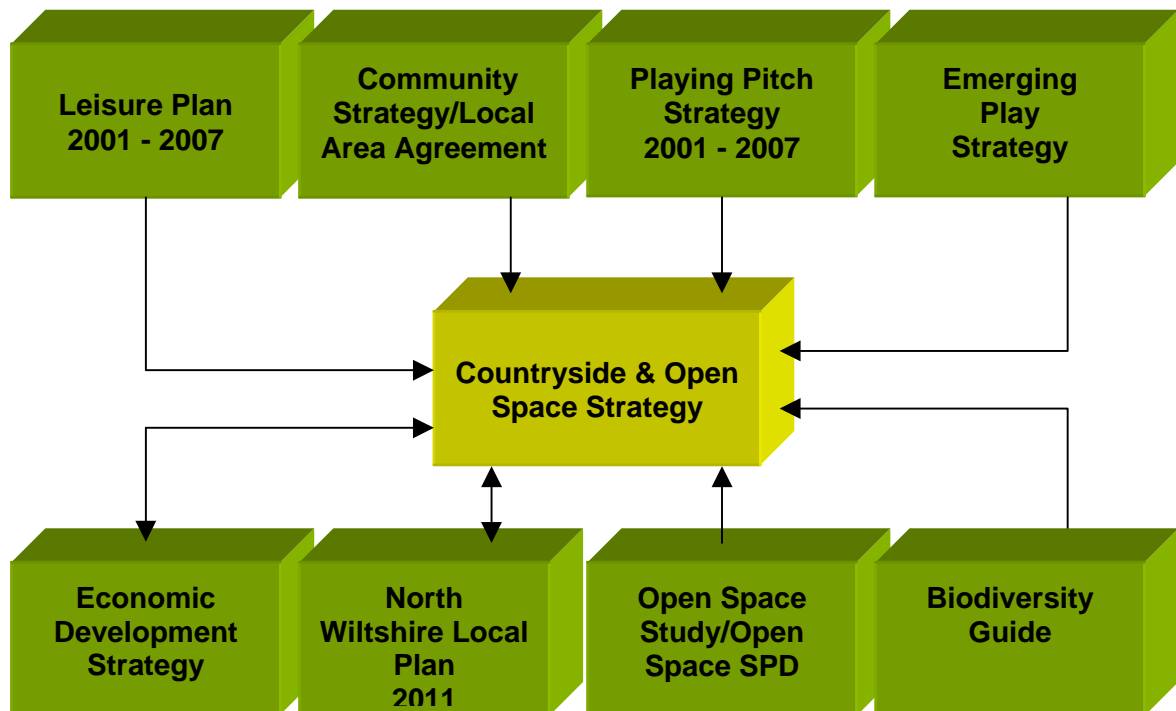
3 Aims and Objectives

The aims of this Strategy, therefore, are:

- To ensure that maximum protection is afforded to a valuable resource. This will be achieved by following the procedures and guidelines set out in PPG17 (Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation), PPG9 (Nature Conservation) and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 amongst other policies;
- To establish a framework for current and future projects, both within the countryside and open space, to allow optimal leisure use of the natural environment of the District, whilst protecting and enhancing its value for wildlife;
- To enable the direction of a limited financial resource, support funding applications to external sources, and benefit from planning gain;
- To link into the Community Planning Process so that the citizens of North Wiltshire have an input into the provision and management of countryside leisure facilities; and,
- To complement the Council's Economic Development Strategy, and other policies, regarding social well-being and the economy in rural areas. The relationship between this Strategy, and other key Council documents, is shown in the diagram opposite.

4 The North Wiltshire Open Space Study

The Council has completed a study of open space in the District, which is a task recommended by PPG17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation. This Study identified and audited publicly accessible open space including allotments, semi-natural greenspace, parks and gardens. A hierarchy of open space was developed and the open space audited classified within this. The spaces were also assessed as to their quality and given a rank based on the score. From the results it was possible to determine areas of deficiency of open space both in terms of accessibility and quality. The Study then makes recommendations for the planning and management of open space. The key recommendations are detailed in the Open Space section of this Strategy.



The Open Space Study will be updated during 2007 as it will form the basis of a new Supplementary Planning Document. There will still be a strong link between the two documents.

5 Scope

Open space is defined in the North Wiltshire Open Space Study, whilst for the purpose of this strategy, countryside refers to the landscape and wildlife (biodiversity) of the District. It should be borne in mind that within this Strategy there is a strong bias towards leisure and recreation, and this will have an impact on the resultant policies. One of the Council's key objectives is rural regeneration, and this is recognised in the Strategy – most of the policies will go some way to benefiting the rural economy. However, there is also a strong commitment to protecting the natural resource of North Wiltshire, and this Strategy aims to ensure that the leisure and recreation policies do not adversely affect this aspect. With this in mind, the Strategy has four key themes:

- Landscape;
- Biodiversity;
- Recreation; and,
- Open Space.

It is apparent that there are many overlaps between these categories, and many subjects could be discussed in two, or sometimes three of them. Where this is the case, subjects have been discussed in the most appropriate section.

The Strategy also needs to be considered with regard to the Council's statutory obligations, and within the planning framework. Whilst there is a legislative framework regarding landscape and nature conservation, there are little regarding the provision of leisure facilities or recreational opportunities. However, in line with the Local Government Act 2000, the Council is committed to ensuring that the residents of North Wiltshire have a good quality of life, and can benefit from the excellent natural resource that the District enjoys.

In many cases the Council is a partner, rather than the lead organisation in projects and initiatives.

The Strategy puts forward policies in five sections – General Principles, Landscape, Recreation, Open Space, and Biodiversity. The policies are linked to the relevant section by a system that identifies the subject. This system is explained below:

Subject	Identification (example)
General Principles	General Policy 1 (GP1)
Landscape	Landscape Policy 1 (LP1)
Recreation	Recreation Policy 1 (RP1)
Open Space	Open Space Policy 1 (OSP1)
Biodiversity	Biodiversity Policy 1 (BP1)