



ACCESSIBLE RURAL AREAS - case study of West Oxfordshire

Introduction

In general these settlements are expanding in terms of population growth (population turnaround) as a result of counterurbanisation. Key factors explaining these rural change include:

- improvements in transport – new roads lead to improved accessibility (increased car ownership)
- changes in technology and increased use of ICT
- increased standards of living promoting a desire to seek a good life in the country

Suburbanised villages

One of the greatest changes has been brought about by improvements in transport, both public and private. There is a definite relationship between the type and rate of change that is occurring in rural settlements and distance from large urban areas (*Fig. 1*). The most accessible villages have grown the most. Many villages have grown at alarming rates and have lost their original character, form, and function (*Table 1*). These are often described as **dormitory**, **commuter**, or **suburbanised villages** (*Fig. 2*, page 2).

Fig. 1 The relationship between accessibility from large urban centres, and rural change, e.g. the Oxford area.

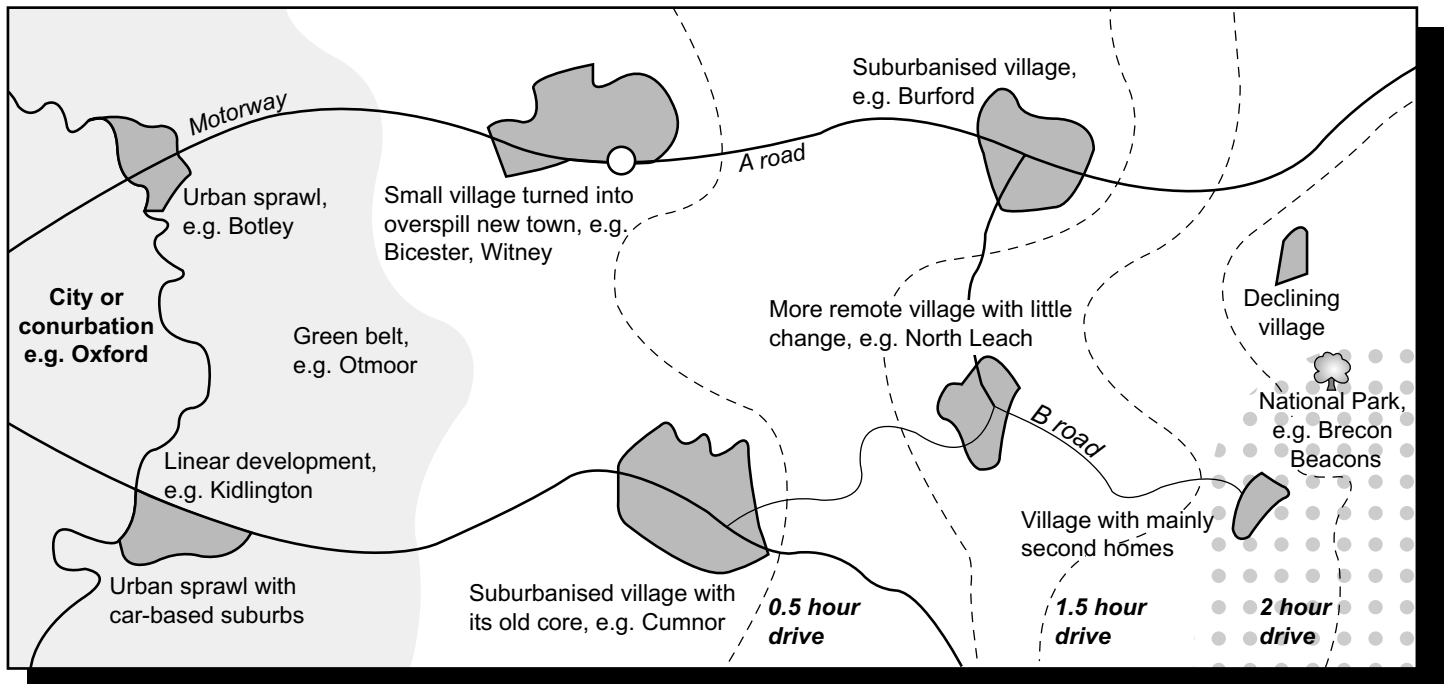
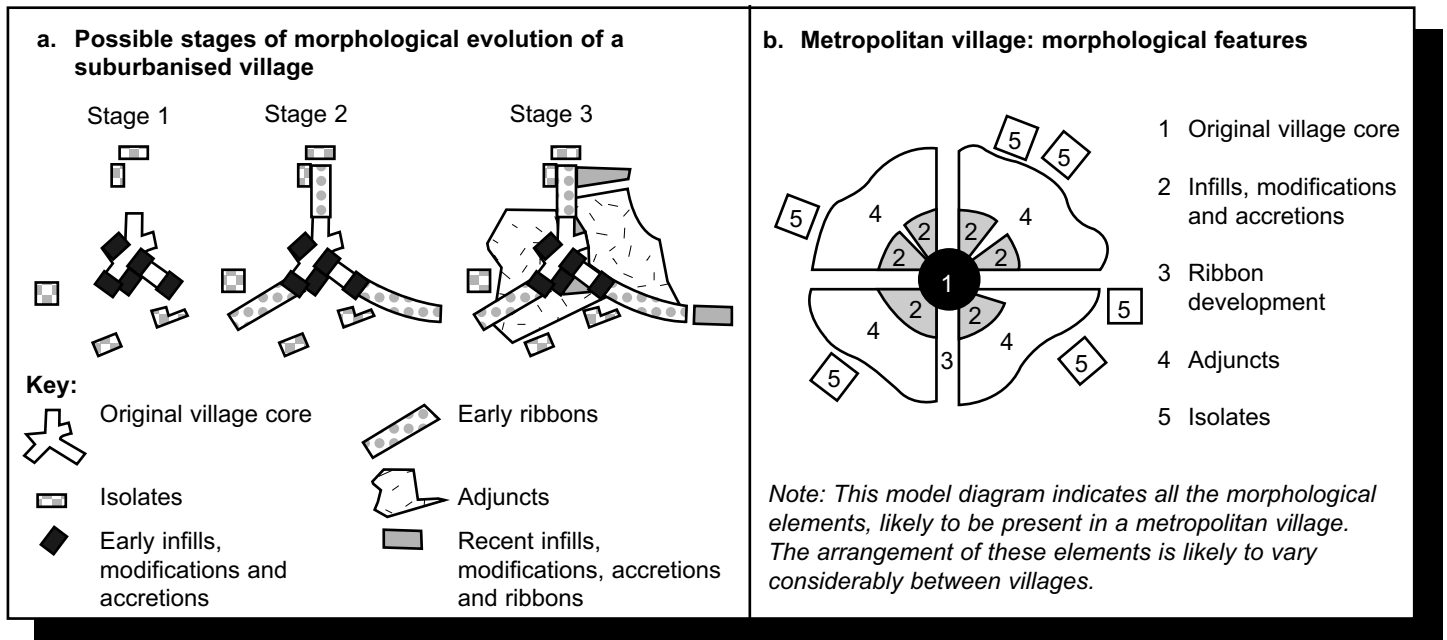


Table 1 Changes in the suburbanised village

Characteristics	Original village	Suburbanised village
Housing	Detached, stone built houses with slate/thatch roofs; some farms, most over 100 years old; barns.	New, mainly detached or semis; renovated barns or cottages; expensive planned estates, garages.
Inhabitants	Farming and primary jobs; labouring or manual jobs	Professionals/executives; commuters; often quite wealthy with families or retired
Transport	Bus service; some cars; narrow winding roads	Decline in bus services as most families have one or two cars; better roads
Services	Village shop, small junior school, public house, village hall	Closure of basic shops, some new specialised shops, enlarged school, modern public houses, and/or restaurant
Social	Small, close-knit community	Local community swamped; village may be deserted by day – ‘ghost village’
Environment	Quiet, relatively pollution free and open space	More noise and risk of more pollution; loss of farmland

Fig. 2 Model of suburbanised village.



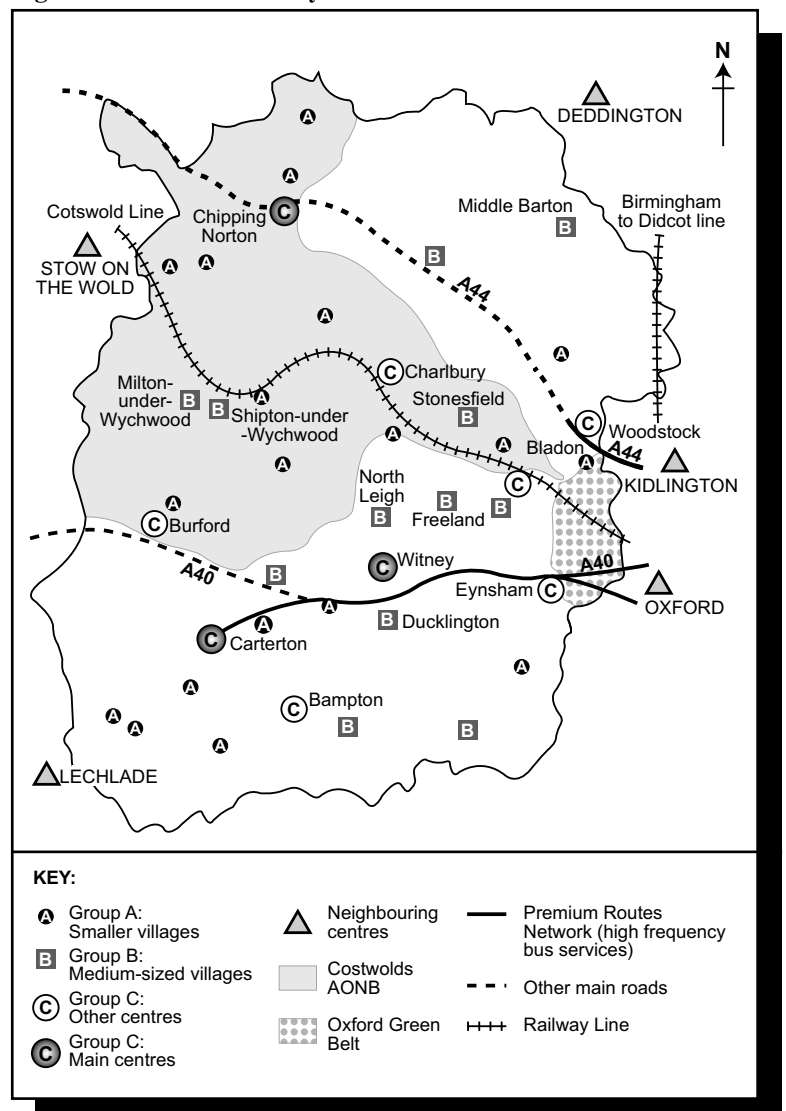
West Oxfordshire

The West Oxfordshire Settlement Sustainability Report was prepared as part of the Local Development Framework (LDF). West Oxfordshire covers the area to the west of the city of Oxford. The area has a population of about 100,000, the majority of which live in the market towns and larger villages. Witney is the largest settlement, a market town of about 25,000 people. Carterton, the second largest town, is home to RAF Brize Norton. Chipping Norton, a market town of about 6,000 population, serves the northern part of the District. West Oxfordshire is very much a rural area (Fig. 3).

Rural settlements in West Oxfordshire show great variety within a small area. This reflects differences in location, physical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. For example:

- **Yarnton** is close to Oxford and is a dormitory village.
- **Begbroke** has a residential function but also contains large high-tech firm, such as Solid State Logic and the new Oxford University Biotechnology (Nanotechnology) Centre; drawing workers from the surrounding region.
- **Bladon** has tourist function (being the burial place of Sir Winston Churchill) and used to contain many cottages that were used for workers on the Blenheim Estate; many of these are now rented.
- **Woodstock** is also an important tourist location; Blenheim Palace and Estate is located at Woodstock; in addition, the village is an important regional centre containing a secondary school, a doctors' surgery, chemist, and other higher order functions, serving local centres such as Long Hanborough, Wootton, Combe and Stonesfield. Woodstock is an historic town of national, if not international importance. The old part of Woodstock is a well-preserved example of a Georgian town. It is a Conservation Area and contains many fine buildings, almost 200 of which are listed buildings. However, there have been proposals to build a large housing development on the south-east part of the town.
- Settlements such as **Long Hanborough** and **Combe** contain railway stations and therefore have an important commuter function.

Fig. 3 Settlement hierarchy and location in West Oxfordshire.



The importance of the Duke of Marlborough as a landowner and an employer in the region cannot be underestimated. It is a good example of how a cultural factor (hereditary ownership of land) has affected settlement development. In most of the villages described, farming is no longer an important factor. The farmers generally live on their farms, away from settlements.

The main socio-economic features of West Oxfordshire include:

- **An aging population** - 16% of the District's population are over 65 years old. This is expected to rise to 18.7% by 2011.
- **High levels of home ownership** - 73% of households in the District are owner occupiers. Only 13% rent from the Local Authority or a Housing Association.
- **High level of detached properties** - over 36% of households in the District live in detached houses, 7% higher than the South East average.
- **High level of managerial occupations** - One in five people (22.6%) within the District aged 16-74 are employed within lower managerial and professional occupations (21.2% in the South East) and 6.2% in higher professional occupations.
- **High car use** - The rural characteristics of the District and limited public transport services compared to more urban areas mean that there is a high dependence on the use of a car. Over 70% of people either drive or are a passenger in a car or van to work.

Settlement functions and opportunities in West Oxfordshire

The 120 settlements within West Oxfordshire can be categorised according to size, character and role, in particular the number of services and facilities they offered (Fig. 4). This created four distinct groups:

- 9 towns and villages - **service centres termed Group C**
- 12 medium sized villages - **Group B settlements**
- 21 smaller villages - **Group A**
- About half of the total number of settlements are not included within Group C, B and A because of their size, lack of facilities and individual characteristics. These are the small villages, hamlets and isolated houses in open countryside.

The settlements were classified using a set of 30 indicators (Table 1). Indicators included:

- **'positive factors'** which show the availability of services and facilities such as schools, doctors, shops and public transport
- **'restraint factors'** which show a lack of local facilities, significant distance from local service centres and locations within an area of constraint such as the Cotswolds AONB or the Oxford Green Belt.

The indicators were reviewed in Parish Surveys undertaken by the District Council every three years since the mid 1970s and through monitoring of planning applications. The most recent survey was undertaken in early 2007.

Table 1 Sustainability matrix.

Settlement categories		Settlement categories										Positive indicators																			
		Green Belt	AONB	Conservation Area	<500 people (2001 Census)	>8km from a main service centre	No direct access to principal road	No shops open on daily basis	>1000 people (2001 Census)	<4km from a main service centre	Post Office	Shops*	Other non-food shops	Primary School	Secondary School	Community Building	Public house/hotel	Place of worship	Library	Doctors' surgery (full-time)	Fire Station	Police Station	Playing fields	Built sports facilities (public use)	Petrol filling station	Range of employment opportunities	Access to principal road	Railway station in parish	Good bus service		
		N1	N2	N4	N5	N6	N7	N8	P1	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9P	10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	P21	P22		
Group A Villages	Alvescot																														
	Ascott-under-Wychwood																														
	Bladon																														
	Brize Norton																														
	Cassington																														
	Chadlington																														
	Churchill																														
	Clanfield																														
	Combe																														
	Curbridge																														
	Filkins & Broughton Poggs																														
	Finstock																														
	Fulbrook																														
	Great Rollright																														
	Kingham																														
	Langford																														
Leafield																															
Over Norton																															
Stanton Harcourt & Sutton																															
Tackley																															
Wootton																															
Group B: Medium-sized villages	Aston																														
	Ducklington																														
	Enstone																														
	Freeland																														
	Hailey																														
	Middle Barton																														
	Milton-under-Wychwood																														
	Minster Lovell																														
	North Leigh																														
	Shipton-under-Wychwood																														
Standlake																															
Stonesfield																															
Group C: Service centres	Carterton																														
	Chipping Norton																														
	Witney																														
	Bampton																														
	Burford																														
	Charlbury																														
	Eynsham																														
	Long Hanborough																														
	Woodstock																														

Profile of the Service Centres – Group C

There are nine towns and villages in this category. It contains the District's key service centres of Witney (pop. 25,000), Carterton (pop. 14,000) and Chipping Norton (pop. 6,000); and other settlements which act as local service centres, such as Woodstock. Each place has a wide range of services, facilities and employment opportunities. Many are linked to Oxford by relatively good bus services. Most have experienced significant amounts of house building, with associated population growth.

Profile of medium-sized villages - Group B

There are twelve villages within Group B. With populations over 1000, Group B villages have larger populations than Group A. Many of the villages are located within environmentally sensitive areas.

In terms of facilities and services, all villages in Group B have a school, community hall and at least one pub. Many have experienced significant house building over the previous decades, but all experienced the closure of shops and the withdrawal of other services and facilities since the last Parish Survey was carried out in 2003.

Since 2003, Freeland has lost its post office and village shop. Ducklington and Freeland are the only villages in Group B to not have a shop open on a daily basis. Other closures include petrol filling stations in Freeland, Middle Barton, North Leigh and Stonesfield. Only 6 villages in Group B now have their own petrol stations. Stonesfield and Milton under Wychwood have both lost full time GP surgeries.

Since 2003, 5 villages in Group B have seen an improvement in bus services. All villages now have a daily bus service. Ducklington, Middle Barton and Milton under Wychwood are the only villages in this group that do not have a bus service which is more frequent than one an hour.

Profile of the smaller villages - Group A

There are 21 villages within Group A, of varying characteristics. All villages have populations less than 1000, with some less than 500. Two villages, Bladon and Cassington, are located within the Oxford Green Belt, nine villages are located within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and all but six villages include a Conservation Area.

Due to their location and limited range of local facilities provided within Group A villages, they are not viewed as suitable locations for significant new development.

Services and facilities

Nationally, increased population is not linked to expanding services. In West Oxfordshire there is more of a mixed picture. The number of local facilities varies within each village in Group A. Each village has a place of worship. Just over 60% of the Group have a post office. Most have a school and all but six have at least one shop. However, none have a GP surgery or library.

Since the Parish Survey was carried out in 2003, there have been a number of changes within the Group A villages. While some have seen an improvement in facilities and services, others have lost them. A replacement village hall has opened in Cassington. Cassington has also gained a post office, bringing the number of Group A villages with a post office to 13.

There has been a significant improvement to the local bus service with Group A villages. Since 2003, over three quarters of Group A villages have seen a more regular bus service. This is due primarily to the introduction of community bus services for the elderly and people with limited mobility.

The location of West Oxfordshire and its high environmental quality has helped sustain a high demand for housing. Since 1981 West Oxfordshire's population has grown by 25%.

The present housing stock in West Oxfordshire is estimated to be just under 40,000, of which 14,000 are in Witney and Carterton. The West Oxfordshire local government's objective in relation to housing is to:

1. identify sufficient sources of new housing including affordables
2. locate new housing where it will have the least adverse impact on the character and resources of West Oxfordshire
3. seek a range of new residential accommodation which provides a variety of sizes, types and affordability.

The Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2011 plans to develop 6,750 additional dwellings to West Oxfordshire by 2011. The plan steers the majority of new house building to Witney and Carterton, but also Chipping Norton, Woodstock and Bampton. These towns were chosen because they have:

- a wide range of existing services and facilities
- an existing employment base in excess of 1,000 jobs
- a reasonable level of public transport provision compared to the District as a whole.

Conclusion

Rural settlements show great variety and dynamism. Even within a small area such as west Oxfordshire, there is a considerable range of settlement fortune. Most settlements have experienced significant growth (and pressure for growth) while a few have seen population age and the number of services decline. Most of the growth has occurred within the larger settlements whereas most of the decline in services has been in the smaller settlements. West Oxfordshire is therefore very similar to much of accessible rural England, experiencing counterurbanisation.

Questions

Study the sustainability matrix (*Table 1*).

1. Identify the key constraints facing the group A and B villages in expanding.
2. Explain how positive indicators are less marked than in group C centres.

Acknowledgements

This Factsheet was researched by Garrett Nagle, a well-known author. Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Tel. 01952 271318. Geopress Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136