

# South Oxfordshire Core Strategy Examination

Hearing on Tuesday 8 November 2011

## **DIDCOT**

### Statement from the Keep Harwell Rural Campaign (KHR)

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*Keep Harwell Rural (KHR) is a residents' group independent of any statutory body. It was formed in 1998 to enable residents to express their views about changes that may affect Harwell, in ways that could augment and complement the views expressed by the Harwell Parish Council. KHR has inputs from a cross-section of villagers concerned about education, traffic and road safety, sustainability, the amenities provided by our nearest town, Didcot, and the preservation of the character of a village with a thousand year history.*

*KHR has participated in Examinations in Public on the Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2011, the Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2016, and, as a member of the Western Villages Alliance, on the Central Oxfordshire Section of the Draft South East Regional Plan. KHR also participated in the Public Inquiries on the most recent Local Plans for VWH and SODC, including the special Public Inquiry on Didcot in late 2004. KHR has also commented in detail during public consultations on other planning matters. ([www.KeepHarwellRural.org](http://www.KeepHarwellRural.org))*

October 2011

We in the village of Harwell are across the border into Vale of White Horse District Council, but are profoundly affected by SODC's plans for Didcot and its surroundings. In the last ten years we have seen the development west of Didcot now known as Great Western Park approved, bringing 3,300 new dwellings into the area between Harwell and Didcot, 700 of them in Harwell Parish. This was despite the EiP Inspector's recommendation to Oxfordshire County Council in 2000 that "*the most sustainable direction of growth for Didcot is to the north-east*"<sup>1</sup>.

Great Western Park is now being built on best and most versatile agricultural land and will reduce the rural gap between Harwell and Didcot from 1.25km to 0.5km. It will bring peak hour traffic increases through Harwell Village estimated to be at least 50% above current volumes with no mitigation beyond traffic calming, of no use other than slowing down traffic unless there is an alternative competing route, which there will not be for most travellers. This will be in addition to the traffic problems within Didcot itself that will make access to the town that much more difficult for villagers needing shops, medical and other facilities, perhaps especially since the shopping centre of Didcot, very welcome as it is, is now on the eastern side of the town.

It is probably fair to say that many people in Harwell, having rather not seen Didcot's expansion coming westwards, will nevertheless make its residents as welcome as they can, especially as some will become Harwell parishioners, both civil and ecclesiastical. Villagers will also no doubt use the common facilities of the new development as will the new residents use those in Harwell.

However, the prospect of the *further* growth of Didcot, almost doubling the current population by the end of the 2020s and, according to VWH's latest draft Core Strategy, filling in the gap between Great Western Park and the A34, threatens to destroy the remaining rural character of our 'Village of a Thousand Years'. More best and most versatile agricultural land will be lost, the remnant rural gap will virtually vanish, and the attendant extra traffic problems will only be solved by the building of expensive new link roads that themselves will need land and affect the quality of the environment.

We and others have argued that this scale and rate of expansion is beyond the reasonable capacity of Didcot and that in any case the greater housing need is closer to the employment magnet and better public transport infrastructure of Oxford. This argument has failed to convince planners, so we are faced with about 4,500 more houses at Didcot distributed over SODC and VWH. This should be looked at in an integrated fashion, but Didcot's expansion spans two District Councils whose plans are out of kilter. Moreover, the joint Didcot Area Action Plan, referred to on p.6 of the Inspector's document ID/19, does not exist and we are told will not exist or even start until after the SODC Core Strategy has been approved.

The comments in our statements below in answer to the questions in ID/19 have to be seen against this backdrop. Not only do the plans of the individual Councils give us grave concerns, but the ratchetting effect of one following another means that any case we (and others with similar concerns) make is taken piecemeal. This is a very unsatisfactory situation for getting local voices heard and must be contrary to the Government's Localism agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> The final words of the *Panel Conclusions and Recommendations*, Examination in Public on the Oxfordshire Structure Plan Alteration, January 2000.

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*(A) Does the CS make sound proposals for the substantial planned expansion of Didcot in terms of housing, employment, retailing, transport and other infrastructure? Do those proposals appropriately serve the particular needs and potential of the town and its contribution to the wider Science Vale UK area? Does the CS provide the forthcoming Joint Didcot Area Action Plan with appropriate core strategic guidance?*

It should be said first that we do not have the resources to challenge the voluminous evidence base of forecasting from the studies prepared for the Councils. Our evidence base is founded on observing what actually has happened and is happening on the ground, and on our local knowledge. It is based on the experimental evidence, not on the theoretical predictions.

The CS lacks soundness on several fronts. It is acknowledged that Great Western Park and other developments will result in stresses on the local infrastructure and services and its provisions will not solve all of them, such as traffic volumes in parts of Didcot and the villages. Until there is some experience of their effects it is surely unsound to commit to policies that plan yet more development at Didcot. Moreover the whole case for the further expansion of Didcot beyond 2016 is unrealistic in the face of several pieces of evidence from past and current experience. First, the recession is not likely to leave Oxfordshire unscathed in terms of job growth and general investment. Second, the housing needs case neglects how past forecasts have totally failed to be realised in practice, despite the pressing case for more affordable homes. As an example, the Great Western Park and Ladygrove East developments were to meet an anticipated need for housing by 2011. 2011 came and no houses were ready, and yet there is not a demonstrable flood of people queuing up to buy houses that come on the market in and around Didcot, and many remain unsold for a very long time. The pace of required development needed is therefore much slower than planned, and the Councils' track records on delivery do not make the proposals in this policy credible. If housing needs and growth in the local jobs market are closely linked it surely makes sense to test the success and effects of the currently committed large scale plans before embarking on further planned growth.

The SODC CS is based on a presumption of the plans for Didcot as a whole, including those of the VWHDC. This is an unsound and unfair procedure, since it penalises those such as we in Harwell who are vehemently opposed to the further westward expansion of Didcot that will use up more best and most versatile agricultural land (the importance of which will become increasingly relevant in the context of climate change and indigenous production of food) and will virtually remove the rural gap between Harwell and Didcot. When the South East Plan was debated we argued that a greater share of the Didcot housing to 2027 should be in SODC, to reduce the amount of housing in VWH and Harwell Parish. As we do not know the VWH proposals beyond presumptions, we do not know the consequences for our attitude towards the SODC figures in the CS. To follow our points above in isolation we should oppose the SODC proposals for 2,030 dwellings to the north east of Didcot. But if we do that we are risking an increase in the number in VWH whereas our case is for a large decrease. What we are certain of is that if there is to be any further expansion of Didcot on greenfield sites, it should be to the north east of Didcot, not to the south or west.

The CS is confused over the allocation of the 1,500 houses associated with New Growth Point status. In one place it states that SODC's housing figures include 750 of the extra 1,500 homes the Councils supported up to 2016 so that Didcot became a New Growth Point. In another place it says that as part of being awarded New Growth Point status, SODC is committed to providing an additional 1,500 new homes by 2016 at Didcot. One at least of these statements is unsound.

*(B) Is the identified strategic site allocation at North East Didcot 'justified' in terms of its location and size? Is it founded on a robust and credible evidence base? Is there a clear audit trail including appropriate SA/SEA (culminating in the recent schedule of changes to the December 2010 SA) and other evidence indicating the steps by which the selected site was chosen as the most appropriate when considered against the reasonable alternatives? Would development at the selected site be 'effective', in terms of being deliverable within the expected timetable?*

Of the sites around Didcot, that at North East Didcot is the most suitable for additional housing. It was thus assessed in 2000 and has been similarly favoured following subsequent option studies. If Didcot has to expand further, it is the only site that avoids a significant further destruction of BMV land and further blight to villages to the south and west of Didcot. It must be at least as deliverable as anywhere else.

*(C) If Chapter 9 is not legally compliant or sound are there appropriate changes which would make it so? If such changes were introduced, what would be the implications in terms of consultation and sustainability appraisal?*

The housing policy in Chapter 9 for Didcot should be deleted entirely and replaced by a policy that delays any further expansion of Didcot until a common single policy for Didcot is formally worked out with VWH and presented as an integrated whole to public consultation and scrutiny. An integrated Examination in Public into the plans for Didcot should be conducted, as was the case for the VWH and SODC Local Plan Public Inquiries in 2004.