

South Oxfordshire Core Strategy Examination

Hearing on Tuesday 8 November 2011

MOVING AROUND

Statement from the Keep Harwell Rural Campaign (KHR)

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)

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*"¹.

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.

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

A. *Does the content of Chapter 5 provide a sound transport strategy for South Oxfordshire to 2027? Is there a clear complementary relationship between the planned growth proposals of the CS and the policies in chapter 5? Do these together maximise opportunities for the planned development and transport improvements to interrelate in ways which best contribute to national aims in PPG13 (i.e. to promote more sustainable transport choices, encourage accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling, and reduce the need to travel by car)? Is it clear that future growth will be located in places best able to assist the future delivery of the 'premium' and 'second tier' bus links indicated in maps 5.4 and 5.5? How close will these be to 'turn-up-and-go' services? [The document headed 'Oxfordshire County Council Public Transport Paper' under the website 'SODC points for follow-up' is very relevant to this topic.]*

By causing SODC to remove reference to the Link Roads in VWHDC the inspector has made Question A of minor interest to KHR. **We reiterate however that the Link Roads are essential if Didcot develops as planned in the SODC CS, let alone in VWH.**

B. *How are Oxfordshire County Council and the South Oxon & VoWH Districts working together (and to what timetable) to devise and deliver transport schemes with cross-boundary significance to the growth plans for the Science Vale UK area? Is there a reasonable prospect of appropriate transport schemes coming forward for that purpose?*

There has on the whole been good joint working to devise schemes and the Councils have adapted these in response to constructive local criticism. The real issues are whether it is yet accepted that these schemes are essential and deliverable. We can do everything in our power to press for essential recognition. As far as deliverability is concerned we are sceptical because of what we see around us, for example the non-existence of a bypass to Marcham after 70 years of trying as a village with a busy A road running through it. There also seems to be a reliance on developer funding for schemes. This makes us even more sceptical. We have seen the developers of Great Western Park persuade the Councils in 2006 that they could reduce the percentage of affordable homes from 40% to 30% on the grounds that otherwise the development was not financially viable (and that was before the recession). The developer funding for transport schemes for GWP is well below what would be required 'to deliver transport schemes with cross-boundary significance to the growth plans for the Science Vale UK area'. The answer to the last part of Question B is therefore 'no': on the basis of past performance there is not a reasonable prospect.

C. *Do paras 5.14-17 provide sound coverage of issues concerning Thames Crossings? What mechanisms are being adopted by the relevant authorities to address cross-boundary issues and achieve appropriate solutions?*

There does not seem to be any plan for addressing the issues of the Thames Crossings in paras 5.14 – 17. The problems are described, but no solutions. Worse there is no specific mention of the problems of the crossings at Clifton Hampden and Culham that will surely grow with the expansion of Didcot.

D. *If Chapter 5 is not sound, are there appropriate changes which would make it so and, if such changes were introduced, what would be the implications in terms of consultation and sustainability appraisal?*

We modify our entry on the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy Publication Stage Representation Form of January 2011 to take account of the Inspector's ruling to remove reference to schemes in VWH and the subsequent changes to Chapter 5 of the SODC CS.

Add to (i) in Policy CSM1 Transport: "No housing development at Didcot beyond currently approved schemes will proceed until the transport infrastructure and measures relevant to it are delivered." Add to (iii, was ii) in Policy CSM1 Transport: "and delivers solutions to avoid traffic congestion on the Thames bridges before further housing development at Didcot beyond 2016 is allowed".

We would imagine that to address solutions to congestion at the Thames bridges would involve several stages of consultation and sustainability appraisal. An opportunity to address these issues was lost some years ago when the Didcot Intergrated Transport Strategy Steering Group was abolished. The difficult questions of dealing with north-south routes to Oxford seemed to die with it.