

Planning Application P14/V1663/FUL – Construction of 94 dwellings south of Blenheim Hill

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 responded to planning documents since 1998 and has taken part in Structure Plan and Local Plan Public Enquiries.

The Keep Harwell Rural Campaign objects to this Planning Application on the following grounds.

Location

The proposed development is in an area of the village that is currently an element of our rural gap, which enables the historic village of Harwell to retain a distinct identity as Didcot expands to the west. Valley Park, as proposed in the VHW Draft Local Plan, will extend the built environment from the east up to the A34, which is only 300m from the Blenheim Hill site.

Saved policy NE10 in the Draft Local Plan explicitly states that *“In the urban fringes and important open gaps between settlements, as shown on the proposals map, development or changes of use which would harm their essentially open or rural character will not be permitted.”*

This development would harm our essentially open or rural character and therefore should not be permitted.

We note that the *Planning Statement* prepared for the developers by Dijkman Planning, whilst arguing the case that the application is in accord with the current policy framework and planning situation in VWH, conveniently omits any mention of Policy NE10.

In our response of 2 April 2014 to the VWH Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Consultation Draft February 2014: *Housing Delivery Update* we pointed out that the housing plans would now erode the long-standing rural gap between Harwell and Didcot and suggested that at the very least the village envelope could be protected through some 'green ring'. The development at Blenheim Hill would not only be within any such green ring, but would create a precedent for significant development between the existing village envelope and the west side of the A34. It is also outside proposals that were in the draft Local Plan. If it is approved it would be a devastating blow to any hopes that Harwell can retain any genuinely rural character.

Transport

Traffic through Harwell village remains one of our concerns. The *Transport Assessment* prepared by WSP is weak on addressing sensitivity to its assumptions and on exposing the likely precision of its predictions. But taking it as read, Table 7.4 predicts that the development would add 6% to peak time loads through Harwell over and above the

increase expected from GWP. Another way of presenting the figures would though say that Blenheim Hill would provide 17% of the increase above baseline. As Blenheim Hill is not the only new development mooted around Harwell such piecemeal increments have to be viewed against the bigger picture, and can only be seen as undesirable.

There does not seem to be a real prospect that we shall live to see the construction of a (partial) Harwell bypass in the form of the proposed Harwell Link Section 1. We do not know however how this might or might not mitigate the behaviour of travellers from a development at Blenheim Hill. Neither do we know how it might affect traffic conditions through Harwell when adverse conditions such as accidents or flooding close off other local roads. Reality on the ground is often very different from predictions on paper, especially when our roads have built-in natural obstacles such as the sharp corners by the Hart of Harwell and near Wellshead on the High Street. Therefore we oppose the Planning Application on the grounds that the addition of Blenheim Hill will exacerbate unacceptably the traffic problems caused by the portfolio of other developments around Harwell. 17% is not negligible.

Section 7.7.4 of the *Transport Assessment* predicts no problems with the new junction from the development onto the B4493, but in Section 5.5 there is reference to a problem in flow caused by parked cars on Burr Street. There is accordingly a proposal to prevent this parking. Exactly what is proposed is obscure, but appears to ignore the reality that residents in Burr Street have no other places in which to park. This is unacceptable and unfair, and should not be allowed to pass without challenge.

Travel Plan

The *Travel Plan* refers to various cycle routes that potentially connect the development to the surrounding areas. Some parts of these routes as they currently exist are not safe routes for cyclists, especially children. The *Travel Plan* is therefore misleading in its contention that Blenheim Hill would be satisfactory from an accessibility point of view. As well as skating over problems with cycling routes (and indeed walking routes) it would be sited in a part of the village that is on the wrong side for easy access to the majority of village amenities such as the village hall, school and recreation ground.

Community Involvement

It is to the developer's credit that they have consulted residents about their plans as they have evolved, and that a leaflet about their Planning Application has been circulated with the August *Harwell News*. The summary in the *Community Involvement* document does not though reflect the fact that the vast majority of respondents in their consultation in April/May did not support the proposal. We also have realised one aspect since then. There is a need for more affordable homes for people in Harwell, and unfortunately efforts by the Parish Council some years ago to provide them did not materialise. Now that Alder View is going ahead with 26 affordable homes (and indeed GWP is not far away) it is likely that this local need will now be met. So seeing a significant extra number of affordable homes (38) at Blenheim Hill as meeting a local need, and therefore as favouring the development, is a questionable argument. The development might be more relevant if it provided a good proportion of housing that is suitable for an aging population.

Local Planning Context

The VWH Local Plan 2031 has been delayed by moving goalposts and by concerns about its content, including the >50% increase in housing numbers after the now queried Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). The proposed development at Blenheim Hill is outside even the extended housing zones proposed in the *Housing Delivery Update* of February 2014. It was considered (HARW06 in the SHLAA Appendix 12 for Harwell) and assessed as 'suitable in principle', but with concerns about access and proximity to a listed building ("so may therefore have an impact on character and landscape"). Another comment was that the site "doesn't relate particularly well to settlement for pedestrians". Even the Harwell Parish Council was not consulted about the merits of the various sites around Harwell and as far as we know this omission has not been rectified. It would therefore be perverse in the extreme if this development, with its deficiencies, were to be approved before it has been properly considered in this wider strategic and especially local context.

The *Planning Statement* argues that in the circumstances there would be no grounds for refusal against the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' of the NPPF. Notwithstanding the perversity mentioned above, we question the more or less automatic assumption that anywhere around Harwell is a sustainable location.

The NPPF paraphrases the original Brundtland definition of sustainable development as "*sustainable means ensuring that better lives for ourselves don't mean worse lives for future generations*". We contend that this development is very marginal for making better lives for 'ourselves' and has negative impacts on traffic that will compromise the quality of life of local people. Most importantly, it compromises the ability of future residents of Harwell to experience the rural environment that will probably be what attracted them to the village. Furthermore, the fact that this would be a further loss of Grade 2 agricultural land^(#), inconsistent with the strictures of Para 112 of the NPPF, is quietly ignored.

A 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' is thus at best not proven. The Planning Application should be refused. If the proposal has any merits it should be taken into the consideration of housing sites around and near Harwell that are part of the Local Plan, and be subject to the same tests, criteria and local knowledge as other candidate sites.

Dr A E Hughes (Chairman) for KHR 29.8.14

(#) See the table at the end of SHLAA Appendix 12 for Harwell.