

**Response to VWH Local Plan 2031 Part 1: Consultation Draft February 2014: *Housing Delivery Update*, from the Keep Harwell Rural Campaign (KHR)**

**Who we are**

*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.*

Contact:

Dr A E Hughes  
Chairman, KHR  
Kingswood  
2 King's Lane  
Harwell, Didcot  
OX11 0EJ

Tel: 01235 835301; Fax: 01235 832667; E mail: [a.hughes09@btinternet.com](mailto:a.hughes09@btinternet.com)

- 
1. Keep Harwell Rural came into being 16 years ago. For several years after that our Local Council, the Vale, seemed very supportive of our objective to maintain the rural character of our village, keeping a distinction between Harwell and the expanding Didcot, and balancing the proximity of our famous scientific 'campus' with the attractiveness of the local countryside and villages. These features have for many people been the reason why they have chosen to work and live here.
  2. This Plan will destroy this balance. The Vale has abandoned any claim to see the rural character of Harwell as something worth protecting. A village that has just over 1,000 years of history as a recognisable community will be surrounded by development and threatened by substantial increases in traffic.
  3. We recognise that the Vale must plan for new housing, and that there is an urgent need for more affordable homes. However, residents of Harwell are appalled at the magnitude and implications of the 'Housing Delivery Update'. In particular, we see:
    - The inexorable encroachment on the belt of land that keeps us the historic village we are. 45% of Parish land that is currently farmland or open countryside will be built over. About 80% of the Parish boundary will have buildings on one or both sides, compared with 20% now. Much of the farmland in question is best and most versatile agricultural land;
    - The failure so far to provide robust assurances that the roads and infrastructure will be in place to support these new homes - all we see are promises to 'investigate' and 'consider' the new roads, schools and utilities that will be desperately needed, and will need significant new funding;

- The breakdown in democratic localism that this plan represents. Residents feel disenfranchised and disillusioned, as it seems that any semblance of trying to develop the area in a way that people might want, balancing growth and quality of life, has been rather suddenly swept aside by top down requirements.
4. Keep Harwell Rural will deplore and formally object to many aspects of the submission version of the Vale Local Plan 2031 when it is published in a few months' time if it retains the housing plans in the current Update. In the meantime we comment on some specific issues in the Plan below, raise some questions, and make specific proposals in paragraphs 17, 22 and 23.

***The case for the housing numbers (Section 3.8 et seq. & related paragraphs)***

5. The Housing Update requires 20,560 new homes in the Vale between 2011 and 2031, 7,430 more than in the 2013 draft Local Plan. This is an increase of over 50%. This needs much clearer justification. The *SHMA Key Findings Summary* states (Figure 14, p.21) that to meet affordability criteria the Vale needs to build 683 houses a year for 2011 to 2031, a total of 13,660. This is almost exactly the same housing figure as was in the 2013 draft Local Plan. But to satisfy planned economic development Figure 14 gives a figure of 1028 per year, a total of 20,560 for 2011 to 2031. This is the figure on p.23 and elsewhere in the 2014 Housing Update. *So it would appear that the driver for the devastating increase is the assumption about growth in jobs.* In Section 2.15 on p.16 of the Update the very precise figure of 22,980 is given for the new jobs created by 2031. Whilst the derivation of this is discussed in specialised language in the *Oxfordshire Economic Forecasting Final Report 2014*, it does appear to be based heavily on the potential land available for business development at Harwell Oxford Campus and Milton Park, and the understandably bullish forecasts of those involved in the Enterprise Zone that businesses will come to occupy that land. The corresponding figure in 2013 was 14,300, so this too has increased by over 50% in a year.
6. The Vale has an obligation to its constituents who are going to be seriously affected by the Plan to explain much better and justify the status of the forecast of additional jobs (and hence the housing numbers). Is the jobs figure a central prediction? If so one would expect some idea of the range rather than just one precise figure, and a plausible explanation of why it has changed by over 50% in a year. If on the other hand it is a potential figure under a combination of 'favourable' or optimistic circumstances, this should be stated and an explanation given of why our representatives on the Vale Council believe that this is a justifiable approach.
7. Our area and the South Eastern Vale bear a very disproportionate share of the new housing requirement. How can we be convinced that there has been a public debate, or even one by our elected representatives, of whether this balance between dynamic economic development and destruction of the rural attractiveness of the South Eastern Vale is the right one?

***The provision of infrastructure (Sections 1.11, 2.18 – 2.20)***

Roads

8. Even the previous Plan accepted that infrastructure in the Didcot area, especially roads, would be under stress from the housing plans and substantial improvements and

investment would be required to make the plans deliverable. The current Plan involves a total of over 5,550 new houses in the Harwell area compared to 2,150 in the 2013 version. This is on top of the 3,300 houses being built at Great Western Park and over 2,500 planned by SODC for North East Didcot and Ladygrove East. It would seem that at least 600 of the extra Vale houses would be planned for the first 5 years to 2020. Moreover the Oxfordshire SHMA will surely require more houses from SODC than it has in its adopted Local Plan, and doubtless some of these will have to be at Didcot. All these figures raise a huge threat in the form of increased traffic in the Didcot area and particularly through Harwell village.

9. On the basis of the evolving transport information available to us, the two new Harwell link roads will be an essential minimum for these developments to be viable. The Local Plan must give a firm commitment to both roads and should answer the questions:
  - When will the Harwell EZ Link Road (phase 1) be built?
  - Without the Phase 2 section completing the link from the A417 to the Harwell Campus, traffic will merely be diverted from one route through Harwell to another (the A417) route through Harwell. When will Phase 2 be built?
10. If the Plan goes ahead in its present form we consider the early provision of both these roads to be vital, and the most important element of our case for fair treatment of the community in Harwell. The £17M cost of these two roads in Table 1 of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan should be given priority, certainly over the £35M quoted for the 'Science Bridge', which surely cannot be the most vital piece of infrastructure for the benefit of Didcot.
11. From the same transport information it would seem that the A34 will be at full capacity during peak hours. In practice that means that gridlock is very likely due to any minor perturbation. Improvements to the interchanges at Milton and Chilton are planned, but these aid access to the A34 and do nothing for the situation on the A34 itself. This must be addressed, because there is no alternative route for excess traffic or relief from hold-ups other than through local villages. The next version of the Vale Local Plan should include an up to date statement about the steps that the Highways Agency intends to make to enable the A34 to cope.
12. Unless the Vale can demonstrate conclusively that a viable road network is possible and its delivery promised, the housing plans are unsustainable.

#### Other infrastructure

13. Utilities are mentioned in the Site Templates in Appendix A, but what are the implications for their supply? In particular, how are water and sewerage provisions going to be met in an area that is said already to be at the limits of supply? These are crucial issues for 'resourcing the plan' without which it is not a credible plan.
14. If all these houses are built the populations of the existing Parishes of Harwell and Chilton will increase to about three and a half times their present size. If some of the new residents at Milton Heights and indeed the west of Didcot feel that they are within the 'catchment' of Harwell the factor will be higher. Whilst new schools and other civic facilities are promised within the larger developments with the theory that they could be self-contained, that will not help the ancient Parish churches of St. Matthew's

Harwell and All Saints' Chilton. These might just cope with an increase of regular churchgoers, but not with services at times such as Christmas and Remembrance, when the churches are already full. They will also have to cope with a much increased demand for weddings, baptisms and funerals. All this will present difficulties not just for the church facilities themselves, but also for the ability of the villages to cope in terms of safe access and car parking. These matters should be included under the 'Social and Community' part of the 'Key Objectives' in Appendix A so that developer funding is sought to contribute to expanding the churches and their associated local facilities.

15. The Site Templates should include a requirement to provide cemetery space to serve all new developments.

**Valley Park (Section 4.25 et seq.; Appendix A, Section 3)**

16. Valley Park has expanded and now includes the north west area towards Milton that we argued last year should be used instead of encroaching up to and beyond the B4493, which eliminates any rural gap between Harwell and Didcot. We oppose the increase for Valley Park: it not only removes any prospect of a *genuinely* rural gap between Harwell and Didcot, but exacerbates the infrastructure problems.
17. The least that could be done to mitigate the impact of Valley Park is to modify the first two bullet points under 'Landscape considerations' on p.48 of Appendix A by specifying that an open area resembling the current countryside should extend at least 300m either side of the B4493. Thus we propose changing the wording as follows.

Replace:

- *The boundary between the development areas and Harwell village will need to be carefully treated in order to protect the separate identity of these areas.*
- *Provide open areas and/or introduce increased vegetation each side of the B4493 to maintain, where possible, a sense of openness along this road.*

With:

- *The boundary between the development areas and Harwell village must be carefully treated in order to protect the separate identities of Valley Park and Harwell.*
- *An open area resembling the current countryside should extend at least 300m on both the north and south sides of the B4493 to maintain a sense of rural landscape along this road and to preserve a rural gap between Harwell and Didcot.*

This would be consistent with stated policies.

Without such a change, statements under *Core Policy 34 : Landscape* will prove to be meaningless.

In particular, from *Core Policy 34: Landscape*:

*The Vale's distinct landscape character and key features will be protected against inappropriate development and where possible enhanced.*

and

*Locally valued landscape and its features will be protected, maintained and where possible, enhanced, in particular: the landscape setting of settlements (item ii in the list).*

Furthermore last year's draft Local Plan also gives a list of policies saved from the Local Plan 2011, which was adopted in 2006. One of these is Policy NE10: *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.* As it stands, Valley Park violates this policy.

***East Harwell Oxford Campus (Section 4.25 et seq.; Appendix A, Section 3)***

18. This site near Chilton, but mostly within the Parish of Harwell, is a valued piece of the local countryside and within the North Wessex Downs AONB. It is argued that despite this the site is suitable for housing because it offers opportunities for people to live and work closely together and to provide a good range of services. If this is so the Vale should present evidence that these are attractions that outweigh a huge amount of housing within the AONB that will despoil the landscape and create a conurbation near Chilton three times the present size of the village. Traditionally most of the workforce on the Harwell campus has preferred not to live right next to the site.
19. We would like to know if this site has been surveyed for unexploded munitions. An unexploded shell was found at the turn of the century in one of the fields for the proposed site and we were led to believe that ammunition from RAF Harwell was disposed in these fields adjoining the airfield. What precautions will be taken to ensure the site is safe for foundations and services to be excavated? There are remains of a machine gun 'pill box' on the Holloway guarding the entrance to the proposed site. We are aware of the problems Chilton Primary School suffered when there were problems with munitions not being located properly in the airfield bomb dump.
20. The sewer from Chilton runs beneath the Holloway and down Broadway in Harwell where it frequently overflows due to blockage. The proposed site will therefore need completely new waste water and sewerage facilities (c.f. para. 13 above).

***West of Harwell (Section 4.25 et seq.; Appendix A, Section 3)***

21. The road access to this development can only be from quiet side lanes within Harwell village or from the unclassified Grove Road, which is already hazardous. Without clear and firm plans for good access this site is unsuitable for development. It is also good quality agricultural land. We will oppose its use for housing, but support the view of the Parish Council that it should work with the Vale to review possible sites around Harwell and try to identify others that might be less unsuitable. We deplore the fact that the Parish Council was not consulted over possible sites adjoining Harwell.

***The overall impact on Harwell – How can Harwell's identity and environment be protected?***

22. Our concern over many years has been mainly to ensure that the village of Harwell retains a separate rural identity from a growing Didcot to the east, and is protected from increases in traffic. If the Vale proceeds with this Plan it makes Harwell vulnerable to encroachment from the north, west and south as well as the east.
23. The factors that enable a community to retain its separate identity are complex, but are undoubtedly helped by the existence of clear boundaries and rural gaps. This is recognised in Core Policy 34 and saved policy NE10, but the only way to have any real assurance of maintaining rural gaps seems to be through the formality of a Green Belt or

of Local Green Space designation. We would therefore ask that as well as working with the Parish Council to review possible housing sites around Harwell (see paragraph 21), the Vale advises how the village envelope could best be protected through some recognised 'green ring'. This could be vital to the future of Harwell Village. For 70 years we have enjoyed and welcomed good and high quality employment opportunities, but do not want the next 20 years to mean the end of the things that make living here desirable for our descendants. The 2014 Vale Plan does not meet the true definition of 'Sustainability' in that respect.

---