

What's going on with the development of Didcot?

Proposals, plans, exhibitions and reporting in the media about the development of Didcot have been circulating for years. It has been a very confusing situation, so here is a brief summary of where we are today and how we got here, taken very much from the point of view of the East Hagbourne Parish.

What's the situation now? At the moment, major development is determined by the South Oxfordshire Local Plan that was adopted in January 2006 but which runs out in March 2011. Without a replacement for this, major new building would be driven by developers in those areas where they have agreements with the landowners. South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) has been working on a planning framework to take over from the current Plan for some time. The task has been complicated by the need to respond to guidelines from central government. However, these guidelines and requirements have changed as new initiatives and ideas have been handed down and with changes of government. For example, at present, general ideas like 'Localism' and 'The Big Society' are being explored, but their detailed applications to the planning process are largely unspecified.

If you have driven recently on the roads north of Didcot, you will have seen notices by the roadside objecting to the planned amount of new housing for Didcot. The main concern is traffic density and this concern is widely held by all the parishes around Didcot. As a result, a pressure group has been formed called DROP (Didcot Ring Of Parishes) aimed at getting the number of new houses reduced. East Hagbourne has been involved in some of the discussions, but is not a formal member of this group.

Why do we need a new plan? Without a Local Plan, SODC would have to decide on a stream of development proposals, some major, some competitive and some speculative, without reference to a regional planning framework to guide their evaluation. The planning process would be overwhelmed by the amount of work involved, resulting in a free-for-all, with many applications referred to central government and determined by the appointment of an inspector and a public enquiry.

As part of the decision on any major development, SODC needs to evaluate the contribution proposed by the developer towards part of the infrastructure and facilities needed to support the new community (such as with the roads, schools, medical facilities, recreational spaces, drainage, water supply, etc.). However, to provide the rest of the infrastructure, further funding is required involving different central authorities with different funding sources. If this cannot be found, any shortfall then becomes a drain on the facilities and infrastructure of the surrounding regions. An obvious and very intrusive example of this is traffic congestion if the surrounding road network is not improved.

A Brief History of the New Plan. The new plan really stems from a new planning framework that was set up more than 10 years ago with England being divided into 9 regions, each managed by a Regional Assembly, and Oxfordshire coming within the South East Region. Following literally years of analysis and committee work dealing with all the different aspects of living and working in the region, a draft plan for the South East Area was published in 2005, setting out a vision for the area up to 2026. In this, one of the most controversial aspects was the assignment of new housing numbers for the development of the region and, in particular, the growth of Didcot. Following a lengthy public consultation and the publication of a number of amendments to the plan, the number of new houses required has remained remarkably constant, except for SODC's lead in a bid to designate Didcot as a 'New Growth Point' that added another 1,500 houses to Didcot. This designation promised to come with additional funding from the government, some of which has been received, as well as access to or priority for other funding streams. However, the actual amount that can now be relied upon appears to be quite uncertain.

The new plan is called the Local Development Framework (LDF), consisting of many individual documents. At the heart of the LDF is the Core Strategy that includes decisions on where the new houses are to be built. Since 2007, various drafts of these documents have been published for consultation and the time has now come to bring the whole thing together in order to meet the timescale to replace the present Local Plan. SODC have recently completed their formal approval of the draft version and it has been published as the 'Proposed Submission Core Strategy' and is posted on the SODC website (www.southoxon.gov.uk/corestrategy). The time for consultation has now started and comments on it can be sent to SODC up to 4.30 p.m. on Friday 21st January 2011.

The total number of houses planned for Didcot is made up of those covered by the SODC Core Strategy, and those to be built in the Vale of White Horse District. In all, 8450 houses are planned for Didcot (for the years 2006 to 2027). The SODC component is 6,300 houses for Didcot and 5,187 for the rest of the District, with the Didcot allocation made up as:

- Completions that can be included	136
- Great Western Park	2,700
- Ladygrove East	642
- Vauxhall Barracks	300
- Other deliverable sites as at 31/03/10	192
- North East Didcot	2,030
- Orchard Centre Phase 2	300

In addition, the Vale of White Horse District Council plan a further 2,150 houses for Didcot (to the west of Great Western Park and south of the A4130). This new housing total of 8,450 for Didcot approaches doubling the size of the town.

Allocation of new housing to the north-east means that the threat of even more building to the south and west of Didcot has receded, and there will be no need for a link road through East Hagbourne, although a north-south relief road for Harwell is included in the plan, and this should also provide some relief for West Hagbourne

Should we be concerned about the housing numbers? One of the easiest and most direct conclusions that can be drawn from any development is that as you increase the number of houses, you need more and more infrastructure, not only within the development itself but also in the areas surrounding it. The growth of Didcot is still driven by the housing targets set years ago by the South East Area Plan, whereas the national and local economic circumstances have now changed significantly. Cuts in funding at all levels have been widely reported, with a direct impact on infrastructure funding. For sustainable development, there should be fully funded infrastructure to keep pace with the housing numbers. Our concern is that the housing development will go forward without the matching infrastructure, leading to overcrowded facilities and roads.

Does it matter where the houses are built?

- *Yes it does for the Hagbournes.* Parts of East Hagbourne, as well as areas in the south of Didcot, have been living under planning blight for years, ever since the options for the new housing sites and associated roads were announced. With the Strategic Plan showing future development going to the north east, this blight is removed. It should be noted that development to the north east does not impose planning blight on anyone since it is on the other side of the northern perimeter road and we support this strongly.

- *Yes it does for the Hagbournes.* East Hagbourne is the closest rural community to Didcot. With any major development to the south of Didcot, East Hagbourne would effectively become part of Didcot

and the identity and separate character of the village would be lost. Didcot Town Council has spoken clearly in support of protecting the Hagbournes and the green spaces that separate us from the town.

However, for the traffic, with increased housing and jobs in the Didcot area, people driving into and away from the town will increase the amount of traffic substantially through ALL the villages around the town. This conclusion is supported by a traffic analysis undertaken by SODC (Halcrow, Final Report October 2008) for east/west traffic movement in response to housing and employment growth (up to 2026) that showed the traffic problems were largely independent of where the new houses were built. This is an important conclusion meaning that unless there are significant improvements to the road network around Didcot, there will be a major increase in the traffic on all the major and minor roads that pass through the villages around Didcot. Unfortunately the government has just announced a large cut in the County Council transport budget that was an essential contribution towards the first phase of such road improvements.

What has the Parish Council been doing?

Over the past three years, SODC have published drafts of documents as they are being prepared for the new planning system, have organised public exhibitions as well as setting up a series of consultation meetings and workshops, particularly about the development of Didcot. Your Parish Council has been represented at all of the activities that appeared to be related to the development of Didcot and the interests of the Parish. In addition, we have carefully reviewed those background documents that address important issues for the Parish, such as on flooding, roads and traffic modelling. In many cases, we have discussed these directly with the SODC officers responsible for those areas, our District Councillor and neighbouring Parish Councils.

- We welcome the adoption of the SODC Core Strategy, because it provides a framework for further development of Didcot, and reduces the pressure for random house building driven by developer wishes.
- We welcome the decision that future housing should not be to the south of Didcot, because it removes the planning blight our Parish has suffered
- We are concerned that Didcot is growing very rapidly and that infrastructure may not be able to keep up. In particular, increased traffic is a concern for all villages surrounding Didcot, regardless of where new houses are built. We believe that the pace of development should be regulated in line with the funding available for essential infrastructure.

What should we all be doing now?

The Parish Council will be preparing comments on the Proposed Submission Core Strategy document in time for the deadline on Friday 21st January 2011. These comments, together with all the other comments sent to SODC by other parishes, developers and individuals, will be addressed by SODC and then forwarded to a Planning Inspector as part of the Examination in Public that will be held around the summer 2011. If the Core Strategy is found to be 'sound', then the present schedule shows it should be adopted early in 2012.

Those of you wanting to submit your own comments should be aware that they need to be submitted on the correct form. SODC has prepared a Guidance Note (Proposed Submission Core Strategy help-note) that is available on their website, or you can contact their Planning Policy Team via e-mail (planning.policy@southoxon.gov.uk) or you can phone their helpline on 01491 823823. Similarly, if you want to discuss any issues locally, you can contact your Parish Council.