

Society calls for 'strategic gap' designation

The Dever Society has called for the countryside between Winchester and Basingstoke to be officially designated as a Strategic Gap. Winchester City Council supports our call.*

The call comes in our official response to the public consultation on the draft South East Plan, the document that, when finalised, will provide the blueprint guiding all development in the region until 2026. The Plan includes policies on housing, transport, countryside and landscape, sustainable management of natural resources, and the economy.

Sub-regions and the 'rest of Hampshire'

The Plan identifies nine 'sub-regions' that cannot be dealt with by individual local development plans. Two of these are in Hampshire: the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley, and South Hampshire. Both are described as areas of economic opportunity. The remainder of the county is described, a little unimaginatively perhaps, as the 'rest of Hampshire'.

The South Hampshire sub-region stretches from Romsey in the west to Havant in the east, and to just beyond Eastleigh in the north, while the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley extends from the western edge of London right out to Swindon. Its south western boundary reaches Junction 7 on the M3 at Dummer, about four miles from Micheldever Station, where Zurich/Eagle Star wants to build its proposed new town.

The need for a strategic gap

The Plan states that 'there can be a need to identify and protect strategic gaps or corridors between settlements', and suggests that although these areas need to be officially designated by local plans, it would be helpful if potential areas were set out in the final version of the Plan.

The Society believes that the strategic gap should include the countryside from the northern boundary of the South Hampshire sub-region, near Eastleigh, up to the boundary of the Western Corridor, near Basingstoke, and including the area around Micheldever Station. The Society's call is supported by Winchester City Council, which in its own response to the draft SE Plan, has also said that it would like to see the area identified as a strategic gap.

* A Strategic Gap protects the setting and separate identity of settlements and avoids coalescence.

New settlements in central Hampshire

None of the proposals on housing identifies our part of central Hampshire as a focus for significant growth in housing. This is good news in our battle to save the area from Zurich/Eagle Star's plans for a 9,000-home new town at Micheldever.

We have pointed out in our response, however, that policies in the Plan could provide comfort to Zurich/Eagle Star. For example, one policy says that any new housing, regardless of whether it is on previously developed land or greenfield land, should be in locations which already have the necessary infrastructure, or where such infrastructure is planned. To avoid any confusion, we have said in our response that the Plan should provide a specific policy relating to 'new settlements' on greenfield land, making it clear that, in accordance with the so-called sequential test, settlements would not be considered unless and until it had been demonstrated objectively that there was **no other way** of providing the housing requirement.

Infrastructure and water resources

The Society's response includes two other important issues – first, the need for essential infrastructure to be provided alongside any additional housing allocations. Second, we say that far greater prominence needs to be given to the constraint imposed by the reduction in the region's water resources resulting from climate change. We believe it is irresponsible for the South East Plan to come forward with far-reaching proposals for new development, without first having confirmed that the necessary water resources can be made available with no adverse consequences for the natural environment.

The Assembly aims to agree the regional strategy at its plenary meeting in July 2005. Local authorities will be conducting public consultation on this work during the second half of 2005, and submitting their advice to the Assembly by December. Submission to government is expected in March 2006.

Battle against Eagle Star ‘only just beginning’

At the Society’s AGM on 31st January, chairman Richard Cowen told members that the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, wanted lots more houses to be built and that the proposed South East Plan provided an opportunity for Eagle Star to muscle in.

His warning was echoed by the Society’s president, Lord Ashburton, who said: ‘We have to remember it’s not just the government who wants more houses; a number of people long to live down here (in Hampshire). There is real demand, but we have every right to oppose the plans’.

The Regional Spatial Strategy (South-East Plan), which will eventually emerge from the South-East England Regional Assembly, would present Eagle Star with an opportunity to start pressing again in earnest for development at Micheldever Station. Our battle had only just begun, he said.

All members of the Executive Committee were re-elected (see below for tribute to retiring Treasurer, Brett Gill).

Difficult decisions facing Hampshire, senior city planner tells AGM

Guest speaker at the AGM was Nigel Green, Winchester City Council’s Major Development Area Planning Officer.

Outlining crucial development issues in Hampshire, Mr Green said that several major infrastructure problems requiring difficult decisions faced the county. Among them were: global warming, with parts of the county expected to disappear within the next 50 to 100 years as sea levels rose; waste disposal, particularly the question of how to encourage people to recycle more waste than the current 20 per cent; and transport, given that by 2026 large stretches of Hampshire’s roads would be running at 70 per cent above capacity most of the day. Then, of course, there was housing.

The South East, he said, was the powerhouse of the UK economy, but no-one had yet resolved how to have economic development without damaging the environment. Sustainable growth required adequate housing because without it there would be major economic consequences. During the next 25 years the region’s population would rise by up to one million additional households, one third as a result of inward migration, the rest generated by people already living in Hampshire.

Problems such as these would, it was hoped, be resolved by the South East Plan published by the South-East England Regional Assembly (SEERA), which he urged the Society to respond to (we have done so – see page 1). Published on 24th January 2005, the Plan envisages the provision of 500,000 to 645,000 new houses in the South East in the next 25 years, one third on greenfield sites. The higher figure would see 6,800 more houses in Hampshire annually, which Hampshire County Council believes is too high, while the lower target – which has been the average rate of housebuilding since 1999 – would mean 5,500 a year, below the current target of 6,000.

Government strategy, he said, was to direct most development towards the Western Corridor between Slough and Swindon, and to the area south of the M27. He pointed out that building solely at these ‘preferred’ locations would be unlikely to solve the region’s housing needs and although Micheldever was not earmarked for development, he thought Zurich/Eagle Star could be reasonably expected

to favour an extension of the Western Corridor’s boundary beyond Junction 7 of the M3 near Basingstoke.

Hampshire, he continued, had the largest residual housing figures in the region, although the county council had protested that this was unfair. If residual house building figures were at the lower end of the proposed range, it would reduce the pressure to allocate greenfield sites; if, however, they were at the upper end there would be real problems.

Under the Local Plan, Hampshire County Council has earmarked a reserve site for 2,000 houses at Barton Farm, north of Winchester. Zurich/Eagle Star has challenged this location in the hope of pushing the council back to the drawing board, although personally, said Mr Green, he doubted it would be successful this time round.

Farewell to Brett

Brett Gill formally retired as Honorary Treasurer at the AGM after 15 years. The Society would like to thank Brett for his dedication and commitment during these years. He remains a valuable member of the Executive Committee.

Phil Dowson was elected Honorary Treasurer at the AGM.

Society makes TV news

The Dever Society made the news on January 24th, the day John Prescott’s major national statement on housing, and the South East Plan, containing targets for house-building, transport, economic growth, and social and environmental issues for the next 20 years was launched in the region.

Phil Dowson, a Society executive committee member (now Hon. Treasurer), was interviewed twice, once before Mr Prescott’s statement was released, and again immediately after.

Reporting for BBC News 24, Emma Howard said: ‘This beautiful location in rolling Hampshire downland (a farm track between Weston Colley and Micheldever Station within the proposed new town boundary) is under threat from Eagle Star which bought the land 25 years ago, and plans to build 9,000 houses in a new town the size of Winchester’.

Emma first asked Phil whether he accepted the need for additional housing in the South East. In reply, Phil said that

the Society did accept the need, supported responsible development, encouraged the right sort of housing in appropriate locations, and wanted priority to be given to affordable housing.

So how did the Society react to accusations of nimbysism? The important question, said Phil, was where would it be appropriate to build. Open countryside like the fields around Micheldever Station were not right for several reasons. First, the transport infrastructure was unable to cope with the huge increase in traffic that would result from 10,000 new homes, with independent reports conservatively estimating 32,000 new daily outbound car journeys.

Second, prime agricultural land should be maintained as such. Third, a development at Micheldever was strongly opposed by local authorities in Winchester, Basingstoke and Andover. They would all suffer negative economic impact from any new town development, which would pull inward economic investment away from them and act as a real disincentive to developers of brownfield sites.

In his second interview, following Mr Prescott's announcement, Phil expressed great disappointment at its threat of more housebuilding, and conceded that it would be 'music to the ears' of Zurich/Eagle Star, despite their new town proposal being repeatedly rejected by Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council and other local authorities. Development was about building sustainable communities in the right places, but independent analysis had shown that Micheldever was not the right place to build a new town. He said high target housing numbers from national government would encourage Zurich/Eagle Star to persist in pursuing its flawed objective.

However, he added that the Society welcomed Mr Prescott's promised support for affordable housing and continued emphasis on developing brownfield sites. The release of government land was a step in the right direction, but clearly further infrastructure funding was required in all areas, including transport, healthcare and education.

Also present on location were Society chairman Richard Cowen; Ken Thornber, Leader, Hampshire County Council; and Sheila Campbell, Leader, Winchester City Council.

Let there be NO light

An interesting photograph appeared on the front page of The Daily Telegraph on 9th December 2004. A colour-graded satellite view of Britain at night revealed that the area between Winchester and Basingstoke was one of the few areas of minimal light pollution in the South East. Coloured similarly to much of Scotland, the Borders, Wales, Exmoor and Dartmoor, it was also one of the nearest such areas to London.

By contrast, the Southampton-Portsmouth conurbation shared the same colour gradings as high light pollution areas such as Greater London, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow.

Were Zurich/Eagle Star to get its way, this oasis of darkness would disappear. Not a pleasant thought.

Calling all planning consultants

Our main hope of beating Zurich/Eagle Star lies in understanding the planning system, particularly in the light of recent major changes to its structure. This is why we desperately need a voluntary planning adviser.

We would expect the role to appeal to someone recently retired but still wanting to keep their hand in, so to speak. He or she would become a member of the Executive Committee, which meets about six times a year, and be on call as to advise on local planning issues which arise between meetings.

So if you are a planner, or know one at a loose end, please contact Jacqui Lindsay (see page 4).

Electronic Newsletter

Please help us to reduce printing and postage costs. If you would like to receive the newsletter by email, please let us know your email address. Every penny saved will help us with our campaign expenses, and also reduce our consumption of paper.

Membership and Area Co-ordinators

Why not introduce a friend?

At our January AGM we suggested that members may care to introduce a friend to the Society. We have a strong membership of over 8,000 but are always wishing to increase this figure, especially in light of the South East Plan and its implications for Hampshire.

Also, we need Area Co-Ordinators. We are very grateful to our current band of helpers but if anyone else can spare a little time to deliver the Newsletter we'd love to hear from you. The areas where we need help are:

Crawley, Overton, Steventon, Whitchurch and Winchester (St Cross, Badger Farm/Olivers Battery)

The task isn't onerous – just delivering to our members in these areas three times a year.

For membership information and/or to volunteer as an Area Co-Ordinator, please contact Jacqui on 01962 774040

'Birdsong' by Richard Adams

Richard Adams is the author of nineteen books, including the bestselling and award-winning *Watership Down*. He has lived in *Whitchurch, Hampshire*, for many years. In this personal contribution he writes of his love of birdsong.

It's a pity that more people don't make a little hobby of birdsong, since it is free and very enjoyable. A lady of my acquaintance once said to me, "It's quite ridiculous to try to maintain that there's no differentiating by species in all that twittering." I didn't argue, but there's no doubt she's missing a lot.

The first bird's song that I came to recognise, when I was still only about four years old, was the song thrush. Before I got up on spring and summer mornings, I could hear him singing at the top of a silver birch just outside the bedroom window. He likes a high song-post and the song is loud. As Robert Browning remarked in one of his poems, "He sings each song twice over." There are a number of phrases that he sings again and again ("Knee deep, knee deep, knee deep - bringing it, bringing it, bringing it - wait, wait, wait.") My father used to say, "Yes, I can hear you, and a nasty, vulgar bawling it is. Give me a blackbird any time."

The blackbird is undoubtedly the best garden singer. He likes a medium-high song-post and his almost contralto singing is at its best on a summer or early autumn afternoon. There are no specific phrases, but the beautiful, low-sounding, pausing tone can be listened to for minutes together. When she was only about six, my daughter Rosamond said to me, "You know, Daddy, if blackbirds were rare, people would come hundreds of miles to hear them."

The robin is another enjoyable singer. He, too, likes a medium song-post and sings - with pauses between - any number of phrases, which he seems to make up for himself. He will let you come quite close, and when he sings he is usually answering another robin some distance away, and you can often hear him, too. No doubt they are establishing territory.

The wren, who spends virtually all his life concealed in hedges and bushes, sings an unexpectedly loud song, with many sustained trills.

Any garden usually has at least one chaffinch. He sings a single phrase all day as he goes about his business in the garden. I have heard it quoted as "Will you, will you, will you kiss me, dear?" And that is the only song he knows. It is a falling phrase, and the interesting thing is that all finches, all over the world, sing some sort of variant of this. I have heard a finch in India, singing a similar phrase that was instantly recognisable as that of a finch.

The yellowhammer, who frequents gorse bushes on open hillsides, is also a finch and has a single song, "A little bit of bread and no cheese."

The blackcap - a warbler - is a marvellously sweet singer. He likes the top of a bush or even the top of a telegraph pole. In fact, when you hear him, you can nearly always spot him, because he prefers an open song-post, always on top of something. The song is quite loud and very beautiful, consisting of about half a dozen varying phrases, with short pauses between. It is so clear that it is arresting.

His relation, the garden warbler, doesn't really want anyone to see him. He is usually concealed when you hear him - low down on a flowering shrub or somewhere like that. It is something like the blackcap song, but more sustained and trilling. He can go on singing for a fair time until he pauses and waits to repeat himself.



*Mr Richard Adams -
a keen supporter of
The Dever Society*

Events

The Society's Events Committee has, as ever, been working hard to put together a packed events programme.

The next diary date is:

Sat 11th June – BBQ Camping - This summer event which is very popular amongst the children will once again be held at Manor Farm, West Stratton. Gates open from 4pm.

Events since last Autumn, including the 70s Disco, Carols in the Barn, and Christmas Quiz raised £460 for Society funds. In March, local hedgerows yielded edible snails, but not in the way you might think. The Society's annual litter clear-up team filled two farm trailers with roadside rubbish in March, much of it the usual haul of crisp bags, cigarette packets and drink cans. There were the usual larger items, of course, such as a bicycle, a mattress and a car bumper, but the most surprising item was surely the container of edible snails!

A big thank you to the 20 volunteers who put right the thoughtlessness of those who cannot be bothered to make their way to local amenity tips and recycling centres, or take their rubbish home.

The Dever Society, Cowdown Farm, Micheldever, Hampshire, S021 3DN
Tel: 01962 774040; Fax 01962 761697, Email deversociety@compuserve.com
Website: www.deversociety.org Registered Charity 1003093

President: The Lord Ashburton KG KCVO DL, Chairman: Richard Cowen
Vice Chairman: Tessa Robertson, Hon Secretary: Charles Hobbs, Hon Treasurer: Phil Dowson
Membership Secretary: Kay Cole
Executive Committee: Phil Bryant (Editor, Newsletter), Simon Hughes, James Dockray, Brett Gill
Office Manager: Jacqueline Lindsay