



The Dever Society News

Autumn 2007

Protecting and conserving the Hampshire Downs and the Dever Valley



South East Plan inspectors reject new town proposals

Eagle Star's plans for a new town at Micheldever have been rejected in an influential report to the Government on the draft South East Plan.

The panel of inspectors appointed by the Government to report on the draft South East Plan has comprehensively rejected Eagle Star's proposals for a new town at Micheldever Station. The inspectors' report concludes that there is "insufficient justification for the inclusion of Micheldever Station Market Town in the regional strategy".

As reported in our spring issue, the inspectors presided over a 4-month Examination in Public (EIP) into the South East Plan, ending in March 2007. During the hearing, Eagle Star's planning consultants argued that the Plan should include a new town at Micheldever Station.

"We welcome wholeheartedly the inspectors' unequivocal rejection of a new town at Micheldever Station," said Richard Cowen, the Society's chairman. "It was clear at the EIP that Eagle Star's plans had no support. This is the latest in a whole catalogue of rejections since they first proposed the new town in 1990".

The inspectors were generally happy with the housing proposals for rural parts of Hampshire. However, they felt that there was further potential in some of the county's larger towns, and on public sector brownfield sites. These include 2,500 dwellings at Whitehill/Bordon, subject to more detailed studies; in Test Valley, an additional 30 dwellings each year would be centred on Andover. The inspectors also proposed 1,800 extra dwellings (90 per

year) at Winchester, with any greenfield releases to be focused to the north of the city. "But," says Richard Cowen, "even if the Government accepts this advice, it doesn't necessarily give the green light for development at Barton Farm. The City Council would still have discretion on where to build the additional new homes".

Elsewhere in their report, the inspectors recommend that the south east region should build a total of 32,000 new homes each year until the Plan expires in 2026. This is an increase on the 28,900 new homes per year proposed in the draft Plan. The report recommends that some of the increase should be in the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley sub-region, which includes Basingstoke and Reading. They did not propose any increase in the number of homes for the South Hampshire sub-region, which covers Southampton, Portsmouth and the surrounding area.

The inspectors' report and recommendations are now being considered by Communities Secretary Hazel Blears, who will take them into account when publishing proposed changes to the South East Plan, probably at the end of the year. There will then be a further period of public consultation.

- The presumption in favour of building new homes on recycled land looks likely to continue. Our picture shows a recently completed brownfield development in Kings Worthy.

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Housing Green Paper – Government plans millions of new homes

Plans for three million new homes across England by 2020 are outlined in a new Government Green Paper.

Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable was published in July.

The proposals come in response to widespread concern about the widening gap between the growing demand for housing and the availability of affordable homes to buy or rent.

The south east is particularly badly affected by a shortage of affordable homes, and the Dever Society has always supported local initiatives aimed at addressing this.

“We welcome the Green Paper’s emphasis on ensuring that a significant proportion of the three million new homes are affordable,” says Richard Cowen, Dever Society chairman. “However, we have to recognise that the pressures caused by such huge increases in new housing will undoubtedly affect the landscape, the environment and the infrastructure of an already overcrowded region.”

To give it its due, the Green Paper does attempt to address this, with a continued emphasis on the use of brownfield land. There are also proposals to ensure that new housing is well designed and ‘greener’, as well as a range of initiatives aimed at delivering necessary infrastructure such as transport, schools, hospitals and water resources.

The three million target includes the new homes in existing regional plans, and in regional plans currently going through the approval process. This leaves a considerable shortfall, however, and the Green Paper proposes a number of ways to deal with this, two of which are particularly relevant to us.

More houses in growth areas

One of the suggestions is that the 45 ‘New Growth Points’ in the Midlands and south of England take more homes than currently planned. Two of these New Growth Points are in Hampshire – the *South Hampshire* sub-region (the area encompassing primarily Portsmouth and Southampton) and the *Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley* sub-region (which includes Basingstoke at its western boundary).



Ten new ‘eco-towns’

The Green Paper also includes a new initiative which rings alarm bells for the Society – so-called eco-towns. These would be entirely new towns of 5,000 to 20,000 new homes, which would have to fulfil a range of criteria. The Government has recently announced that ten new eco-towns should be built, one in each region. This would seem to provide Eagle Star with yet another opportunity to promote their plans for a new town at Micheldever (see our article on page 3).

It is not entirely clear how the increased housing numbers in the Green Paper relate to those in the draft South East Plan – as reported on our front page, this blueprint for development in the south east region from 2006-2026 is currently going through the formal approval process.

“An enormous amount of background research and public consultation has shaped and informed the current SE Plan draft”, says Tessa Robertson, the Society’s vice-chairman. We would be extremely concerned if the Government imposes higher housing numbers on the region during the SE Plan approval process without any consultation or investigation into the impacts.”

People power!

Proposals for some 80 new dwellings at the former Taylor's Coaches site and old station yard at Sutton Scotney have been withdrawn, together with a subsequent application to demolish the workshop and booking office extension. The developer's decision follows objections from the Parish Council, supported by the Dever Society and many parishioners.

"The Society strongly supports the principle of housing development on this site," says chairman Richard Cowen, "but this particular application was seriously flawed. Development on this scale would have materially altered the rural character of the village: the proposal for two three-storey blocks of flats was particularly inappropriate, and the overall density raised concerns about drainage and other local services".

But, despite opposing this particular application, the Society supports the Parish Council's view that this key brownfield site does lend itself to a more sympathetic development.

Eco-towns

No doubt still smarting from the exclusion of Micheldever Station new town from the draft South East Plan, Eagle Star has new reasons for fresh hope ...

The Government's widely-publicised eco-towns will be new settlements of up to 20,000 homes. The towns will use 'the best new design and architecture' to exploit the potential for more sustainable living.

Wherever possible, the towns will be sited on surplus public sector or other brownfield land. "Despite that," warns the Dever Society's vice-chairman Tessa Robertson, "there's little doubt that Eagle Star will use the eco-towns concept to exploit its tired old proposals for Micheldever Station".

Although having their own distinct identity and good facilities for business, shopping and education, the Government expects eco-towns to have links with surrounding towns and cities. The new towns will offer a range of tenures, with up to 50 per cent affordable housing, and will aim for a 'zero-carbon' rating.

Each new eco-town will have a delivery organisation to manage its development and support residents, businesses and community services. As the Government's own guidelines make clear, community involvement will be a vital ingredient for successful new developments, and local authorities will need to consider eco-town proposals as part of their strategic plans for the wider area.

And that, says Tessa Robertson, is Eagle Star's Achilles heel; "there's no getting away from the fact that Micheldever Station new town is widely opposed by residents and local authorities alike. Quite simply, it's in the wrong place".

Diary date

The Society's Annual General Meeting, will be held at 7:30pm on **Monday 28th January 2008** in the Warren Hall, Micheldever Station.

After the formal business we'll have a topical guest speaker – this is still to be arranged, so watch the website for details. There will also be an opportunity to socialise and meet the committee.

Writer's block

If you've ever wondered why there aren't any readers' letters in *The Dever Society News*, the answer's simple – you're not sending us any!

We'd love to include your opinions in the next issue, but do please be brief as our space is very limited; letters or e-mails should be no more than 100 words long.

Our contact details are on the back page.



The Government's eco-towns prospectus praises buildings like this one at Newhall in Essex for their 'high quality of design, with a dynamic approach to the uses of space and materials'.

Colour fast

Over 300 members have already signed up to receive their newsletter by e-mail, saving the Society around £100 in postage, printing and stationery. The full-colour electronic newsletter arrives a good deal faster than second-class post – and, at around 1.2Mb, it's quick to download, too.

"Almost all our new recruits now opt for electronic delivery," says the Society's administrator David Foster. "To join them, just drop me an e-mail at deversociety@compuserve.com and I'll do the rest".

In the firing line

Despite an encouraging breeding season in southern England, stone curlews suffered a setback on the Hampshire Downs.

Ministry of Defence training areas remain the stronghold of stone curlews in southern England. Over half of the 121 breeding pairs in the Wessex area this year were recorded on Salisbury Plain or Porton Down – and, says RSPB’s Phil Sheldrake, “that rises to three-quarters of the birds if you include the fringes of the range”.

The figure represents a small increase on the 116 pairs spotted in 2006. But these long-lived birds have only small numbers of chicks, and rarely move more than 2km from where they were born. They depend heavily on grazed grassland, which makes the Hampshire Downs generally less attractive to them.

Disappointingly, only one pair of stone curlews was recorded in the Micheldever area this summer, down from two pairs in each of the last few years. And, says Phil Sheldrake, the omens are not good. “The birds’ first breeding attempt ended in failure, and we still don’t know the outcome of their second clutch. Really, the local population is just hanging on by its toenails”.

- Phil Sheldrake is keen to hear from you if you see or hear stone curlews locally – just phone him on 07753 776303.



RSPB field assistant Jeremy Peters works closely with local farmers. Here, he protects a pre-fledged chick during ploughing.

Growing for the future

As farming undergoes major change, we take a look at how one local farmer is responding.

James Dockray manages more than 6,000 acres around Micheldever and Andover, both in Hampshire, and Hungerford in Berkshire. Each area is quite different agriculturally, so his methods depend as much on the landowner’s requirements as on the terrain and the soil.

Seven years ago James realised that farming in an environmentally friendly way was going to become increasingly important. Rather than continue as what he calls a ‘chemical junkie’, he decided to change his whole approach and develop a sustainable, biological farming system that depended on much reduced applications of fertiliser and other inputs.

In the Dever Valley he took his more marginal land out of production; then, he began improving its environmental value with help from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. By sowing species-specific grassland he soon attracted a wide range of flora and fauna, including buzzards, red kites and even the rare stone curlew.

After next year’s EU Common Agricultural Policy reforms, farmers won’t need to retain any set-aside land. But James will still keep an extra 10 per cent of his land as voluntary permanent set-aside, just to enhance the environment.

Having steadily reduced his reliance on chemicals, James now crops his productive acreage using a system of fallow followed by wheat. This means of controlling weeds and building soil fertility even allows him to use some of his wheat for the production of baby food.

“This method has served us well,” he says, “but these are changing times and the pressure is now on to produce both food and biofuel. That’s why I’m also now growing wheat for ethanol and oilseed rape for biodiesel. It means that food and fuel are virtually competing with each other.

“Suddenly the world has become very short of food. In the short term we can raise production levels, but in the long-term food production will be a big problem.

So the pressure is on; in the Second World War, we had *Dig for Victory* – now we need to *Grow for the Future*”.

James thinks these are exciting times for farmers. “When there’s plenty of food people criticise us, but not when the going gets tough” he says. “Now, our time has come again”.



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