

New settlements seen as 'last choice', says leading Winchester planner

New settlements, of the sort proposed by Zurich/Eagle Star for Micheldever Station, are Hampshire's 'last choice', Winchester City Council's Steve Opacic told members of the Dever Society at its thirteenth AGM on February 24th.

Outlining radical changes to the country's planning system, and how they affected the Dever Valley, Mr Opacic, who is the city council's Forward Planning Team Manager, said Hampshire's strategy was to concentrate development in and around existing settlements. National planning policy guidance recommends this 'sequential approach', which requires development to take place on brownfield land before greenfield sites are selected.

Although the sequential approach makes new settlements the final option, it still permits some development within the existing built-up area boundaries in villages such as Micheldever and Micheldever Station, he explained.

The county council placed considerable emphasis on Major Development Areas (MDAs), such as that at West of Waterlooville, to meet its housing requirements, Mr Opacic continued. Although it had identified reserve sites, such as that at Barton Farm, north of Winchester, it hoped to avoid using them. This was because new sites had been identified in urban capacity studies in the district, and because of plans to increase housing densities. Government guidance on housing densities now propose 30 dwellings per hectare (dph), compared with the

previous figure of 25 dph. This change was a direct response to the need to avoid greenfield development.

Mr Opacic said local Landscape Assessments to be published in May 2003 would take the view that all landscape was important. Each assessment would identify each district's key characteristics. Although no specific development was proposed for Micheldever or other villages within the parish, the redundant sidings at Micheldever Station were reserved for possible mineral and waste transfer, and agri-industry, he said.

The government's plans for streamlining the planning system are contained in the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Bill 2002. As we have reported in previous Newsletters, one major change proposed (which the Society has already objected to) is the removal from the process of county structure plans, in favour of regional strategies and local development frameworks. Hampshire, and the two unitary authorities of Southampton and Portsmouth, had already started reviewing the current structure plan, but Mr Opacic said they may well decide not to take this work any further. The bill, if enacted, will take effect in 2004.

In response, the Society's President, Lord Ashburton, said he was moderately cheered by what Steve Opacic had to say, since he appeared not to regard development at Micheldever Station as a huge threat. It was vital, in a complicated world, that the Society continued to keep itself informed in its effort to combat "endless pressure from invisible sources". He agreed with the need for more affordable housing.

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DEVER SOCIETY STILL CONCERNED BY THREAT TO STRUCTURE PLANS

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, published in December, is on course to become law by the end of the summer, despite protests from opposition MPs and campaigners. The MPs, as well as groups such as Council for the Protection of Rural England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Friends of the Earth, have complained that the Government's decision to use the guillotine in the committee stages of the Bill prevented scrutiny of key issues.

One of these key issues is government plans to abolish county Structure Plans in favour of regional strategies. Both Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs have attacked the Bill for taking strategic planning powers away from county councils and giving them to unelected regional bodies.

The Bill goes to the House of Lords before Easter, and campaigners are hoping that the Upper House will be able to give the Bill the thorough probing that it needs. It seems unlikely, however, that the government will allow anything to delay the Bill's passage through Parliament.

The provisions of the Bill are unlikely to be in force before April 2004, and in the meantime, the Government is urging all councils involved in plan reviews to see them through. In Winchester, the city council plans to publish the second draft of its Local Plan for the period up to 2011 in May. This will be followed by a six-week period for people to comment on the draft. The council hopes to hold the public enquiry into the Plan in May 2004. One Planning Bill provision that may be in place by then is that the inspector's report is binding on the council.

A REGIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE SOUTH-EAST?

The Government's proposals for directly elected regional assemblies were published in May 2002 in Your Region, Your Choice. It was followed by the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill, which paves the way for England's first directly elected Regional Assemblies, reaching the House of Lords on January 27th. The Bill takes forward the commitment to allow each of the English regions to establish an elected assembly - if approved in a referendum.

Although the proposals for regional assemblies have not yet been fully developed, nor the implications clearly spelled out, John Prescott's office recently launched a

consultation exercise to see if the public wanted such a referendum. As we go to press, we await the result.

It amazes us that an issue of such importance should be progressing with so little awareness by the people likely to be affected. Without detailed proposals, it is difficult to argue whether a Regional Assembly for the South-East would enhance or hinder our lives. Could it lead to the abolition of Hampshire County Council, and the Dever Valley being administered from, say, Guildford or even perhaps from one of Mr. Prescott's proposed new towns in Kent?

What is clear, however, is that it will lead to more bureaucracy and a further burden on public funds. Keep an eye on the press for developments. Screen watchers may find more information on www.regions.odpm.gov.uk/governance/prepbill/index.htm

THE STATE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE 2020

Who will live in the countryside in 2020? What will the quality of life in the countryside be? How will rural people earn their living? These were some of the questions debated at a Countryside Agency seminar in London on 2nd April timed to coincide with State of the Countryside 2020, a new report on the main drivers of change shaping the future of the countryside. The agency is the statutory body working to make the quality of the life better for people in the countryside and the quality of the countryside better for everyone.

We reprint here for members' interest most of an address given at the seminar by the agency's chief executive Richard Wakeford.

Kickstarting the debate, Mr Wakeford said: "Unless we look forward, there's a risk of little steps that don't add up to the journey that's necessary. The way people act now will shape the physical environment and communities of tomorrow's countryside. We cannot treat our countryside as an island. We value it as a place to live, to work and to visit, yet wider drivers are leading to fundamental change.

"This is the first piece of work to take a broad yet systematic look at the future of the English countryside, identifying the main drivers of change and key uncertainties, and developing scenarios for the future. We are not attempting to predict that future - nor are we setting out our vision of what we would like the countryside to be in 2020. We are encouraging people to identify and address the right questions to achieve sustainable development.

"The need for homes continues to rise as we see an increase in single person households and longer life expectancy; commuter countryside will continue to expand, but country towns will become increasingly desirable targets for new or relocating business. Powerful forces of social fragmentation will work against the traditional strong sense of community in rural areas; and there are mixed prospects for the physical environment of the countryside.

"Agriculture will still form an important economic driver and will grasp new opportunities. But biotechnology and the drive for increased renewables will reshape the products of the land and the landscape."

"As a society we have reached a broad consensus that sustainability matters - in principle. The challenge is to move towards a society where these ideals are reflected in people's daily choices. This won't be easy, or cheap. It needs decisions to be taken in a long-term and holistic context. It needs real leadership to achieve consensus. It needs a different attitude to investment. It may need more intervention than some of us are comfortable with. And it needs us to face up to the tensions and trade-offs, so that people can make informed choices.

"The most critical issue is whether environmental, social and economic development can be combined to achieve lasting positive progress on all fronts. We cannot ignore change, but we must seek to understand it before we try to shape it. That way we can begin to identify what we and others need to do to shape the countryside of 2020, based on sound evidence and analysis."

The research team advising the Countryside Agency identified four scenarios for the future of rural England. All assume sustained economic growth, but they differ in the emphasis on social and environmental consideration. None of the scenarios is radically different or shocking; they represent paths which diverge incrementally now, reflecting the cumulative effect of many individual choices:

* In 'The countryside means business' rural economies grow but at the expense of environmental and social sustainability. There are pressures for more roads, housing to combat labour shortages and more intensive agricultural production. Many prosper, but income gaps widen, people feel excluded from decision makers and developers are increasingly at odds with environmentalists.

* 'Go for green' describes a more environmentally sustainable future, but one in which the English countryside is more socially fragmented. Meeting targets for brownfield development is prioritised, planning gain is tilted away from homes for the poor towards building in recycling and energy efficiency: planning guidelines favour urban extensions, tax breaks and road charging are used to limit growth, and substantial sums to farmers to raise environmental standards.

* 'All on board' is a scenario in which labour shortages, traffic congestion and a shift in values combine to place more emphasis on social cohesion. It includes a relaxation of planning controls to allow more extensive and dispersed developments, planning gain used to 'pack in' affordable homes. Congestion leads to big rises in teleworking, leading to more working from home and local networking, with more emphasis on investment in those at the edge of labour market.

* In 'The triple whammy', economic, social and environmental sustainability combine. The economy changes direction radically to become both greener and more inclusive. Many homes are still built in the countryside, but with an emphasis on concentrated developments, strategic dispersal of settlements, affordable homes and design. As broadband matures, services are decentralised and village life begins to revive.

While the latter is the scenario most people are likely to want, the report points out this will be very demanding and expensive, calling for high levels of skills and collaboration.

Stop Press - Zurich to sell Threadneedle

Zurich Financial Services, the troubled Swiss group behind the building threat to mid-Hampshire, could raise up to £350m by selling Threadneedle, which manages funds for Eagle Star and Allied Dunbar, its two UK brands (reported The Times on 14th April). Those thought to be considering buying Threadneedle include American Express, Société Générale, and fund manager Mellon Financial.

Forthcoming events

Summer solstice BBQ & camping with trailer ride

Quiz night

Carols in the Barn

Classical evening

21st June, ride starts at 3.30, BBQ at campsite 5pm.

Northbrook Hall, Autumn

December

January/February 2004

WELCOME PACKS FOR NEW RESIDENTS

New householders moving into the Dever Valley will soon receive welcome packs containing all they need to know about the Dever Society. Our area co-ordinators will be playing a crucial role in getting the packs to new homeowners, and they would be pleased to hear from anyone who knows someone new to their neighbourhood. If you don't know your area co-ordinator, please contact Jacqui at our office.

Our membership has been holding steady at around 8,300 for the last two years or so - and that's without any concerted drive to increase numbers. Another encouraging factor is that most people take their membership with them when they move house.

Recently we said farewell to Mrs Sally Pilcher, our area co-ordinator for Steventon and we would like to thank her for her years of hard work supporting the Society. If there is anyone who feels able to take on newsletter delivery in Steventon three times a year, please let Jacqui know.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

In recent years we have helped fight the very real threat to our countryside from Zurich Financial Services (Eagle Star) who wish to build a new town at Micheldever Station. Until Zurich Eagle Star can be persuaded to finally abandon this plan, the Dever Society must and will continue to actively fight to prevent the needless destruction of a beautiful area, and protect what is our heritage, and that of our children and theirs too.

To continue to run a successful campaign, the Dever Society needs your support. We urge you to become a Friend of The Society, as by making a regular financial commitment, even if just a small one, you will be helping us in this very important environmental cause.

Please join our Friends and encourage your friends and family to do likewise. Contact Jacqui on 01962 774040 who will send you the form with the Gift Aid Declaration.

STONE CURLEWS STILL ON RED LIST

Despite a near doubling over the last twelve years, Britain's stone curlew population is still one of our rarest native birds. According to a recently published report, the government's latest assessment of the 247 bird species that breed here regularly puts the stone curlew on the most endangered 'red list'. This is because its range continues to contract. In 2000 it was found in only thirty-five 10 km squares - a reduction of over 20 per cent in ten years.

According to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), 2002 was a very poor year for chick survival in the Wessex region, which includes Hampshire. Only 37 fledged young were recorded, even though 76 breeding pairs were found. This may well have been due to the very wet weather in May and June. Nationally, says the RSPB, the picture is a little better, and it believes that the population is maintaining itself or even possibly increasing.

Farmers in the Micheldever area are working with the RSPB to try and increase the number of breeding pairs in this part of Hampshire.

More information can be viewed on the RSPB's website: www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birds/biodiv/rspb/bio/reports/stonecurlew.asp

Electronic Newsletter

We have had several suggestions for improvements we could make to our electronic newsletter. Thankyou to everyone who has taken the time to respond.

We have decided to send out future electronic newsletters in PDF format. The advantage of this is that the electronic version will look exactly the same as the printed version. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader V5 to read the newsletters. This can be downloaded from www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html.

If you would like to receive the newsletter electronically, please let Jacqui know your email address.

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