

CPRE Oxfordshire Comments on Didcot Garden Town Proposals

CPRE welcome the designation of Didcot as a Garden Town and the funding and opportunity it brings to create a comprehensive development plan for the town. We also welcome the opportunity the creation of a Garden Town provides to create and enhance the green infrastructure within and around the town. It has been a pattern in Didcot, and elsewhere in Oxfordshire, that speculative housing development comes first and the necessary infrastructure (transport links, schools, health facilities etc.) is provided in a piece-meal and uncoordinated way. Thus, while we welcome this attempt at identifying the infrastructure needs, we would like to see a firm commitment to and timing of this infrastructure before the housing is developed.

If the population and employment in the Didcot area is to develop to the extent envisaged (20,000 increase in population 15,000 increase in jobs) the plan needs to ensure the development is contained within tight urban boundaries and every effort is made to prevent urban sprawl and the coalescence of Didcot with the surrounding villages and settlements. In particular the plan must preserve the integrity of the Wessex ANOB to the south and the Oxford Greenbelt to the north. This should involve more than not building in these protected areas but enhancing the outlooks to and from the areas and planning to ensure they are a positive feature of the Garden Town.

The type and mix of housing planned to be built in the Garden Town must be based on an impartial and realistic assessment of need. We have a housing crisis in the South-east but it is a crisis of affordability. CPRE believes we should plan for much higher densities than are currently constructed within our urban centres. Current practice aims for 25 homes per Ha we believe we should be aiming for higher (for example highly desirable urban area like Chelsea has a density of 75). Higher densities has many advantages:

- it should provide more affordable housing (land value being a major part of the current cost of housing).
- It should allow housing close to transport hubs and services and thus reduce the need for car use and ownership, thus making the new development more sustainable.
- It reduces the land take, thus allowing more green spaces and easier access into open countryside.

We believe if we are to provide housing for those in the population who are current struggling to afford accommodation we need to plan for affordable and appropriate housing for the workers within Oxfordshire. We also need to guard against Didcot becoming a dormitory town for London – again this suggests we need affordable but well-built homes and not the expensive ‘executive’ type housing currently on offer.

CPRE believes there is an exciting opportunity in the Didcot Green Town to provide a beacon of sustainability and good planning while protecting the iconic surrounding countryside. We believe the current plans, admittedly in an early stage, lack vision and ambition. We would look to the example of Freiburg in Germany where already less than 30% of journeys are by car and the 'green' economy employs 10,000 people. The plan needs a proper integrated transport system – and the opportunity exists to plan the housing and commercial development in concert with this. Didcot should also be looking to a low carbon future. We should be aiming for low energy housing, commercial development and transport. We should be planning for electric and autonomous cars and trams. We should be installing rooftop PV power, smart metering, smart micro-grids, Combined Heating and Power and ultra-efficient water systems. We note the planned cycleway network (really the only 'green' bit of the current plan) but would point out the current lamentable maintenance of the current cycle paths which make many unusable. This highlights the important consideration that green (and all infrastructure) needs to have a clear and costed plan for continuing operation, maintenance and upgrade. It would be entirely appropriate for Didcot, whose economy in the 20th century was based on the power station and railways to plan for a 21st century future based on integrated low carbon transport and renewable energy.

We note the plans for wildlife corridors in the original bid, although these do not feature strongly in the subsequent display material. We urge that these are developed with the aid of wildlife ecologists. We would also suggest a green belt around Didcot to provide wildlife refuges and corridors around the town and prevent urban sprawl and coalescence.

Finally we look forward to seeing a plan that fits the Didcot Garden Town into a framework for sustainable development of Oxfordshire as a whole. A plan that protects our rural environment (and in particular the ANOBs and Greenbelts) and provides a healthy, affordable and sustainable future of the current residents of Oxfordshire and their children.

Richard Harding
Chairman, CPRE South Oxfordshire District

16 December 2016