

Hif1 Didcot Inquiry Day 2

Cllr David Rouane – Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council

I'm speaking as leader of South Oxfordshire District Council but I am also Chair of the Planning Committee at Didcot Town Council and so I can accurately represent their views too.

As the previous speaker said, I'm not going to be speaking on technical matters, we have representatives of the planning team at SODC present who can do that with greater knowledge and experience.

What we do know as an administration at SODC is that HIF is a fundamental part of our Local Plan. Without HIF it was made clear that our local plan would fail because so many housing sites, planned and existing, need this road in order to be viable settlements.

You will hear many different types of objections from different groups.

The **first** group is those that opposed our Local Plan. Many people, myself included, thought that the Local Plan that we inherited from the previous administration, had too many houses being built too quickly. We wanted to slow it down, withdraw it and rewrite it. That battle has finished. The Secretary of State intervened, the Local Plan has been adopted and it is our job now to deliver it. The HIF road is key to that, we can't take the houses away so not having the road would leave us with an unbalanced Plan.

People in Culham don't want 3,000+ houses being built on the edge of their village, I understand that, and people opposing that development may think that by stopping this road, they can stop the development. For me, that is not a valid objection to the road, it's an objection to the Plan which is an argument which has been settled. For people in Didcot that argument is too late, we already have the houses. Within my ward alone there are 2,000 houses under construction on the Didcot North-East site. 750 houses have planning permission on the Ladygrove East site. The site called 'Land East of Ladygrove' is a speculative development with around 100 houses. So you have around 3,000 houses added onto an already existing housing estate. For us, it is not a case of unlocking new houses, it is about servicing the houses that already exist.

My ward is sandwiched between the river to the north and a railway line, which acts like a river, to the south. HIF provides connections replacing old and narrow bridges over both of these, allowing people to get to work or play. We are effectively an island sandwiched between these two rivers.

The **second** argument is that it is not green, or not green enough. I am proud to be Leader of one of the greenest councils in the country, it has just been released we've come top of the recycling rates in the country, and we have many other environmental practices and policies of which we can be proud. I have heard that rather than a road we need a cycle lane, a bus lane or a tramline, but these don't glide effortlessly across fields, and they don't fly over rivers, they need a road on which to be anchored.

I'm a fair-weather cyclist, the last time I went to a meeting in Culham from Didcot, I cycled but not many do. I have never seen so many cars on a campus and the reason is simple. Country lanes that link Didcot and Culham are beautiful on a summer's day but are a nightmare in the rush hour, especially in the wet and dark of winter. The bridges at Culham and Clifton Hamden are single laned and traffic light controlled. There is nothing green about sitting in a queue of traffic waiting to be able to cross and nothing scarier than cycling on these bridges knowing there is a queue of angry

motorists behind you. This proposed road provides segregated cycleways and an alternative route that takes you directly from where people live in Didcot to where people work either in Culham or towards Oxford.

The **third** group of objections are about the detail. People will say the route is not quite right or the bridge does not look good. I have lots of sympathy with this, the design of the 'Science Bridge' has been described as 'brutalist' but, in the end, you have to pick a route and a design, and you have to build it.

You will probably hear from lots of angry people during this hearing. People are angry about a road going through their village, they are angry about houses being built alongside their village, but my data officer tells me I've knocked on more doors in Didcot than anyone else over the last few years and I must tell you people that people in Didcot are angry too. They are angry because they have had lots of developments foisted on them without the infrastructure to go with it. People move to Didcot because it is close to their work whether at Milton Park, Culham or Harwell, thinking they would be able to get there quite easily. Some think they will be able to cycle but then change their minds when they look at the roads and revert back to their car. For example, when you cycle towards Milton Park you have to cross a dangerous 5-spur roundabout. Any cycle route is only as good as the worst part of it.

Didcot needs an alternative route out of town, for work or shopping or leisure. At the moment, those routes are all crowded, dirty and dangerous, and backing up all the way to the town centre. This road provides that alternative route for those travelling west towards the A34 or north towards Culham and Oxford for the hard pressed residents of Didcot.