

**TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990 - SECTION 77 AND
THE TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (INQUIRIES PROCEDURE)
(ENGLAND) RULES 2020**

Application by Oxfordshire County Council

Proposal: Dicot Garden Town HIF1 Scheme

**Site Address: Land between A34 Milton Interchange,
and B4015 north of Clifton Hampden, Oxfordshire**

Summary Proof of Evidence

**Emma Bowerman BA (Hons) MSc
On behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council**

In relation to the planning application

**Planning Inspectorate reference: APP/U3100/V/23/3326625
South Oxfordshire District Council reference: P23/S2955/CM**

January 2024

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 I am a Principal Major Applications Officer at South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils. I have a Master of Sciences Planning Degree and 20 years' experience working in planning. I have worked for the councils for the past 17 years in Development Management and have been in my current role in the shared major applications team since 2019.

2.0 SCOPE AND STRUCTURE OF MY EVIDENCE

2.1 My proof of evidence considers the third matter raised by the Secretary of State in his letter dated 25 July 2023 '*The extent to which the development is consistent with the development plan of the area.*' My evidence also addresses topic 14 of the topics outlined in the Inspector's note dated 12 January 2024 in respect of the overall planning balance.

2.2 My evidence covers predominantly development management considerations. It should be read alongside my colleague Emma Baker's proof of evidence which considers the HIF1 scheme from a strategic level in terms of the contribution it will make towards achieving wider housing and employment objectives.

2.3 My proof provides an assessment of the proposed development against the relevant development plan policies. It is structured on a topic basis, with reference to the matters raised by elected members of South Oxfordshire District Council in the meeting held on 29 August 2023, where the progress of the HIF1 planning application and its implications for development in the district was discussed.

3.0 ASSESSMENT AGAINST DEVELOPMENT PLAN POLICIES

Principle of development

- 3.1 The need to provide strategic infrastructure to support planned growth is reflected in several development plan policies, including South Oxfordshire Local Plan ('SOLP') policy STRAT3 (Didcot Garden Town) and policy TRANS1b (Supporting Strategic Transport Investment). The land necessary to deliver the HIF1 scheme is safeguarded in policy TRANS3 (Safeguarding of Land for Strategic Transport Schemes).
- 3.2 The development plan therefore specifically identifies that the strategic infrastructure that is included within the proposed HIF1 scheme is necessary to deliver the adopted spatial strategy for housing and employment growth in South Oxfordshire. And it safeguards land specifically for this purpose. The SOLP clearly sets out strong support for the development as a matter of principle and I consider that the principle of the HIF1 scheme is fully consistent with the development plan of the area.

Sustainable design

- 3.3 Subject to the imposition of a condition setting out a requirement to secure a carbon management plan, I consider the development to be in accordance with policy DES8 (Promoting Sustainable Design)
- 3.4 The high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure that will be delivered as part of the development, plus the delivery of a priority bus lane to be secured via condition, will help encourage modal shift. By providing a genuine alternative to car travel, the scheme will help reduce carbon emissions.
- 3.5 I consider that the proposal complies with the relevant elements of policies TRANS2 (Promoting Sustainable Transport and Accessibility), and TRANS5 (Consideration of Development Proposals) of the SOLP, and policy CUL8 (Sustainable Travel) of the Culham Neighbourhood Plan.

High quality design

- 3.6 The Thames River Crossing Structure (viaduct and bridge) is bulky, and the design does not minimise the visual impacts of the structure. However, for practical reasons, the structure will inherently be engineered in appearance and designed to reflect its use. I am satisfied that the functional appearance of the structure, and its overall scale and form, are acceptable from a design perspective. A condition to secure details of the external materials will, as far as possible, reduce the overall prominence of the structure in the landscape.
- 3.7 Subject to the imposition of conditions, I am satisfied that the development will not conflict with SOLP policies DES1 (Delivering High Quality Design) and DES2 (Enhancing Local Character) in this respect. The proposed development also complies with policy CUL5 (Design Code for Culham) of the Culham Neighbourhood Plan.

Landscape and trees

- 3.8 The proposed development will result in the loss of a significant number of trees that are of landscape value, and these losses will not be fully mitigated. As such, I consider that the proposed HIF1 scheme will have an adverse impact on landscape character and views. The proposal is therefore not fully consistent with the development plan in this respect as there is conflict with SOLP policies ENV1 (Landscape and Countryside) and DES2 (Enhancing Local Character).
- 3.9 Subject to securing suitable conditions to mitigate the impact of the development as far as possible, I am satisfied that the visual and landscape impacts would not represent a reason to refuse the development, given that the benefits of the scheme would significantly outweigh the harm.

Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas

- 3.10 The proposed HIF1 scheme will result in less-than-substantial harm to some heritage assets. In my opinion, the benefits of the development are substantial and outweigh the less-than-substantial harm to the heritage assets.
- 3.11 Conditions to secure landscaping will help mitigate the impact on heritage assets. Subject to conditions, I am satisfied that the proposed HIF1 scheme is consistent with SOLP policies ENV6 (Historic Environment), ENV7 (Listed Buildings), ENV8 (Conservation Areas), and ENV10 (Registered Parks and Gardens), and policy CUL6 (Local Heritage Assets) of the Culham Neighbourhood Plan.

Biodiversity

- 3.12 Subject to securing further surveys and mitigation measures by condition, I am satisfied that the proposal will comply with SOLP policy ENV2 (Biodiversity – Sites, Habitats, Species). A condition can also ensure that the proposed HIF1 scheme achieves a net gain in biodiversity, in accordance with SOLP policy ENV3 (Biodiversity).

Green Belt

- 3.13 The proposal will fail to preserve openness and conflict with some of the purposes the Green Belt serves. The development therefore falls outside the scope of paragraph 155(c) of the NPPF and represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
- 3.14 In my opinion there are very special circumstances to justify the development, including that the infrastructure is essential to deliver planned housing and employment growth. I consider that these circumstances clearly outweigh the harm that would be caused to the Green Belt and other harms, and I therefore consider that the proposed HIF1 scheme is fully consistent with policy STRAT6 (Green Belt).

4.0 THE PLANNING BALANCE AND CONCLUSION

- 4.1 There is strong policy support for the principle of the HIF1 scheme in the strategic policies of the SOLP. Several other development plan policies which are relevant to the HIF1 scheme are either complied with, or can be complied with, through the imposition of conditions.
- 4.2 My proof of evidence has identified some harm in terms of adverse landscape and visual impacts and harm to the openness and purposes of the Green Belt. As such, the proposed HIF1 scheme does not comply with SOLP policies ENV1 (Landscape and Countryside) and DES2 (Enhancing Local Character).
- 4.3 This harm must be considered in the context that the introduction of any strategic highways infrastructure of the scale proposed, into a predominately rural landscape, will inevitably have a harmful effect that could not be avoided completely through mitigation or changes in design.
- 4.4 The planned new growth in the SOLP is unlikely to be delivered without the infrastructure proposed as part of the HIF1 scheme. The housing and employment linked to the HIF1 scheme will provide both social and economic benefits which I give substantial weight.
- 4.5 Other benefits of the proposed development include the provision of sustainable travel links. This will encourage less reliance on journeys by motorized vehicles which will have health benefits, improve air quality, reduce carbon emissions and the causes of climate change, and reduce congestion.
- 4.6 New planting has an environmental benefit and a ten percent net gain in biodiversity is required by condition.

- 4.7 The proposals will provide employment opportunities during the construction period, investment in the local and wider economy through the construction works, and new residents and employees through their spending.
- 4.8 Overall, I consider that the benefits of the HIF1 scheme will outweigh the landscape harm. I consider that the benefits of the scheme also provide the very special circumstances necessary to clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and any other harm. I am also of the opinion that the substantial benefits of the development outweigh the less-than-substantial harm to the heritage assets identified.
- 4.9 I am satisfied that the proposal is in accordance with the development plan as a whole. There are no material considerations of sufficient weight to suggest that it should not be permitted. As such, I respectfully request that the planning permission is granted for the proposed HIF1 scheme.