Oxfordshire Strategic Railfreight Interchange – not wanted!

Of all the big projects planned for our part of Oxfordshire, the least known is the SRFI. In the Summer of 2027, the Secretary of State for Transport will take a decision that will have a dramatic effect on the long-term wellbeing of our neighbourhood and its communities. If she supports the development of the Oxfordshire Strategic Railfreight Interchange (SRFI) at Ardley, it will herald a great road-building programme around Ardley and Middleton Stoney, major engineering works to the Chiltern rail line, and not least the construction of 6.5 million square feet of warehouses, 84 feet high, and the movement of vast areas of earth and landscape. Once complete after **seven years** of construction vehicles disrupting our country lanes, there will be each day a huge number of HGVs carrying containers to be marshalled at the Interchange, using enormous cranes, working night and day. The countryside will have been transformed into an industrial centre reminiscent of major dockside installations, but here marooned in what was an area of relative rural tranquillity. That tranquillity will be gone for ever. Once the roads are built, they will open the door to Heyford Park's huge planned increase in houses, and to other developments invading the countryside around.

Applicants' artists' impression of the SRFI proposals

The SRFI begins Examination by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) on 29th September and could last for six months. Our local planning authorities – Cherwell and Oxfordshire County Council – have some reservations about the scheme, but will not be opposing it. They are satisfied that the new roads and other changes proposed to existing junctions will happily carry all the extra traffic that the scheme will generate. They know that for 'nationally significant infrastructure projects' such as this, there is a presumption in favour of approval by the Government. The Examiners will be presented with vast amounts of evidence from the applicants – Mountpark Logistics– that they have taken care of everything. It will fall to us, the local communities that are going to be so dramatically affected, to make the bulk of the case against the Interchange and to prove that they are wrong.

The new roads, once built, might offer some relief to the two villages that will be largely by-passed. The roads, though, are part of the 'mitigation' package offered by the applicants, carefully calculated to be the bait that catches the prey. **We don't want better mitigation. We want to stop the project.**

We believe that the vast majority of local people are against the project for a number of important reasons. Here are the main ones (although there are many more):

- Destruction of local landscape and permanent change to the historic rural character and appearance of the area
- Huge increase in traffic which will not be effectively mitigated by the new roads, and will anyway produce excessive air pollution and noise (including at night)
- Well-researched health impacts of rail freight on local communities, including the impact of artificial lighting and the noise of train operations
- Impact on local ecology and biodiversity, and potential impact on dinosaur tracks of worldwide importance
- Siting of this SRFI in a rural area distant from the so-called 'last mile' deliveries of goods and products, so far more vans and lorries on our country lanes. There are other better locations for a major distribution centre
- Adapting the Chiltern rail line to accommodate the SRFI will be difficult and disruptive, and will achieve only a small amount of transfer from road to rail.
- No evidence of demand from the rail freight industry for an SRFI in this location, so the scheme could end up being just an enormous warehouse complex served by HGVs. The scheme will not achieve meaningful modal shift from road to rail, which is a requirement for approval.
- Numerous empty warehouses in the area; the SRFI's sheds could end up unused too.
- Cumulative harm of many major developments proposed for this area; approval of the SRFI could be the key that unlocks the others.
- Utilities – provision of water, sewage treatment, power supplies locally are already under stress;
- 'Forever chemicals' found locally in high concentrations could be released more widely by construction on this scale

This will be a highly complex battle. However, the decision by the Secretary of State should rest on one simple question. **Will this project, on balance, bring benefits that outweigh its harms?** As we well know, of course, the answer to that depends on whose interests are being taken into account. When you look at the vested interests ranged on one side of the argument – those of businesses and commercial operators, financiers, land-owners and politicians – and the money and influence some can and will bring to the argument, compared to that of the local community – you realise that this can not be a fight between equals. So we have to try to marshal our case and present it in the court of public opinion, as well as at the Examination.

The Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan Forum is getting ready to present this case, and our 11 member parishes have already built up a fund towards the costs of doing so. If you have any skills or expertise that could help us please contact info@mid-cherwell.org.uk

Martin Lipson, Chair, Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan Forum, a consortium of your local parish councils.

Below: Applicants' plan of the areas of our countryside which will disappear under concrete and development of warehouses and new roads.

Fritwell
Ardley
Bucknell
Middleton Stoney