

Snippets from the shadow of Hinkley Point

I must say at the outset that we decided to move here at the point of the final political commitment to HPC. As far as we could, with what information was available, we came here in full knowledge of the intended programme and with a healthy scepticism that 10 years' building probably meant 15 and that, with this much money and political capital at stake, probably everyone was lying and that every boundary would be pushed to reduce community and environmental commitments and extract ever more from the hapless tax payer and ultimate consumers.

With that said, we came to this beautiful Somerset cul de sac, into a brilliant, idiosyncratic community and into a truly beautiful house and garden which, without a nuclear facility in the vicinity, we would probably never be able to afford. HPC or no, we have the Quantocks immediately to the south, the wonders of Steart reserve and the beach virtually next door and wonderful views to Burnham, Glastonbury and Wales from every angle.

People ask if we are not afraid of a nuclear accident, but our honest answer is that if there were an accident, our demise here would be instant and painless. We were always more concerned about nuclear incidents when we lived in Bristol as whereas annihilation is a given here, in the event of an accident at either Hinkley or Berkley, moves to evacuate Bristol and/or Birmingham (and the repercussions) would be costly political decisions – and recent events have done much to instil confidence in our political decision-makers.

I think it is fair to say that the nature of the HPC project is of less immediate importance to its neighbours than the ramifications of being considered as irritating flotsam in the eyes of the project, which is focused on programme and profit and has little time or patience for the surrounding communities. There are some excellent people working around the various grant-aiding bodies, but at a corporate level the project knows that it has the upper hand and dismisses all suggestions and dissent through micro-managing all issues and answering everything with the mantra that 'this is within our permissions'.

There is a general feeling locally that central government set the rules, but is happy for local and regional government to take the flack for decisions that they were bludgeoned into taking. Consequently, with a vapid MP and largely hobbled councils, there is nobody to stand up to EDF.

Some big decisions and opportunities were missed

- The relief road that would have by-passed Bridgwater and taken the HPC traffic from J23 on the M5 to Cannington never happened. The reason (I believe) is that EU money was allocated to the project, but it coincided with the early beginnings of the Brexit campaign and David Cameron refused the funds. This road alone would have transformed the project for most local people and created a lasting and hugely valuable facility for the whole of West Somerset. Instead, Bridgwater remains a traffic nightmare, which it was even before the Hinkley project began;
- Through an original 'mis-calculation' the vehicle movements were understated by a factor of 100% at the planning stage and permission was retro-granted to double the daily quota of movements. Telling the truth at the beginning would have seen the by-pass and most of the current traffic issues would not have occurred – cock-up or deliberate financial decision?

- The road between HPC and Bridgwater was lightly improved, but the biggest addition (other than an invaluable addition to the Cannington bypass) was the creation of long (unconnected) lengths of cycle path allowing cycle/traffic separation for all but the narrowest, most winding and most scary bits of the route. According to cyclists, the path is teeth-numbingly uneven as it was so poorly constructed and it is always treacherously covered with road grit, so many prefer to continue to risk it on the main carriageway;
- Three years ago, our night sky was pitch dark and star-lit. With a brand-new site, the opportunity to respect the night sky was obvious. However, the light pollution is appalling and EDF totally unconcerned that the site shines out like a beacon from every angle and that from anywhere (Burnham to Newport), it is as visible at 2.00am as in mid-afternoon;

In other instances, rectifiable management decisions are somewhat irksome:

- Several large laybys were created to allow lorries to pause to avoid creation of convoys through the country roads. However, they are now not being maintained as EDF say that their commitment was to make them and Somerset has no money for repairs;
- There are no local bus services serving our villages, yet dozens of buses, often empty, travel along our roads each day from HPC to various Park and Ride sites and pick-up points. With no private parking on site and no interim bus stops, workers living nearby have to drive away from Hinkley to park and ride sites and then retrace their steps at the end of their shift, thus adding to their commute, their carbon footprint and the traffic volume. With the tiny scale of the local community, the buses could easily stop on request to pick up villagers and local HPC staff, but refusal is always dressed up in final, yet totally unconvincing H&S speak/traffic-flow speak etc;
- EDF 'generously' prints the magazines and newsletters for the local communities. Part of the deal however is that they pre-read all of them and, should there be any perceived criticism of HPC, the copy is sent back to the editor for amendment;
- Local forums and gatherings are slick, managed and utterly pointless, other than to give EDF the ability to say that they consult regularly with the local communities;

I am sure that, other than the risk of getting fried should they make a bad mistake, the issues around being a neighbour of HPC are the same as anyone living around an enormous civil engineering project with vast funds and political reputations at stake (HS2 for instance).

Some measures are magnificent, but go un-noticed due to their pre-emptive success – for instance: any breach of the codes of behavioural conduct in respect to housing, recreation facilities, town or village pubs etc immediately puts the person's job at risk, so incidents with HPC staff are almost unknown.

For me and (anecdotally) my neighbours the main issue is that we feel utterly unheard and disregarded over even positive suggestions that would cost EDF little, but make a significant improvement to our communities (busses, light pollution, lay-by repairs). Our councillors appear to be either in thrall to EDF or powerless, our MP (?) and government is terrified that saying boo will further add to the eye-watering cost and jeopardy of the project.

It is still the most beautiful place to live