

SZC – Socio-economic hearing.

I listened to much of the evidence given, most of which reinforced my views of the likely socio-economic outcomes. I refrained from speaking in the interests of brevity, and not wishing to duplicate what others had already said. I set out below a brief summary of my views.

EDF's economic reports run to 250 pages. We have been "snowstormed" with a blizzard of irrelevant information. As a former regeneration and economic development specialist, assertions by the company's consultants give me no confidence at all. What they should have looked at is what happened with SZA and SZB - which left Leiston as one of the poorest small towns in Suffolk.

In fact, the district council seem to have forgotten about these earlier developments altogether. They tell us "The Sizewell C project represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to drive economic growth through business growth and diversification and the creation of jobs in Suffolk." (Rep 1-049 – p3.) Well, SZC is the third opportunity in my lifetime – and I'm not that old. All the council can see is pound signs. As I said in my evidence at the preliminary hearing, "Some have likened them to whores in a gold rush – an unkind but a very apt analogy." The district council has a potential mega windfall from the increase in business rates – it clearly has a massive pecuniary interest in EDF securing consent.

EDF has focussed very much on the short-term benefits – rather than the longer-term impact.

I am sure Leiston would be hit by a short economic boom, just like a gold rush. But like any gold rush, the boom times are comparatively short-lived, and comparatively few gain any lasting benefit. When the music stops, the economy collapses. Tinsel town turns into tumbleweed town.

It happened with SZA – and again with SZB. Locals remember house prices and rents rocketing, squeezing out locals - and then collapsing. During the construction periods social problems, antisocial behaviour and low-level crime were rife. I cannot see anything at all convincing in EDF's evidence that really tells us how and why SZC would be any different and produce a true, lasting, sustainable benefit to the local area.

Since SZB, the area has repositioned itself as an attractive place to visit, for retirement and to live and work. The record tourist numbers have been hard won. The gargantuan SZC construction project will deter most tourists from coming to the area – even if they could get here on the congested roads and find somewhere to stay that was not occupied by construction workers.

Why should the socio-economic impact of the construction of SZC be any different from A and B? Einstein tells us that "The definition of 'insanity' is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Forget the consultants' numbers and look at the reality of what happened in the past.

EDF makes much of jobs for locals. By its own admission, most of the construction jobs (these will be the higher paid jobs) will go to people from outside the area, currently working on Hinkley. But it also claims that a substantial minority will go to locals.

However, its idea of what constitutes “locals” is simply quite ridiculous – it is those within a 90-minute drive time. The number of what normal people would regard as local is relatively minimal. I wonder how many workers will come from what most would regard as the local area? If we define local more realistically as the area from the Deben to the Blyth going west to include Wickham Market and Framlingham – say a 30-minute drive time - we have a population of around 40,000. Many of these are retired.

Most of those working age are already in gainful employment. Our small local labour market is already pretty tight. SZC will simply overwhelm it. Most of the truly local EDF jobs will be comparatively low paid in catering and cleaning. The local tourism industry will be irreparably damaged. Tradesmen are already in short supply – particularly in the construction industry. Higher wages for those in cleaning and catering will lure service industry workers from the local hospitality businesses which are already finding recruitment difficult, now we have left the EU.

One way or another – by way of electric bills or subsidy - the British Public will pay for this development. If we look at the scheme in terms of job creation, the cost of £20bn equates to about: £800k per temporary post created; £300k per man year of construction employment; or £20m per permanent job created. These figures represent appalling value by any standard – especially in an area which does not need the jobs.

Past experience suggests that, if SZC goes ahead, Leiston and the surrounding area will suffer from antisocial behaviour. EDF may say that with Hinkley Point there has been little adverse impact on the nearest town, Bridgewater. It may be right. However, the Sizewell campus and just one of the caravan parks, holding a total of 3,000 people (mainly men) will be within easy walking distance of Leiston. Bridgewater is over 10 miles from Hinkley - not a sensible proposition for a night on the town. Admittedly, Bridgewater does have dedicated worker accommodation, but this has fewer people than proposed at Leiston. Moreover, Bridgewater has a population of 41,000, as opposed to Leiston's 5,500, so any adverse impact will be diluted enormously.

So, to conclude, if SZC goes ahead, the area will experience a temporary economic boom for a very limited number of firms like those in the chamber of commerce. If past experience is anything to go by, the limited boom will be followed by a general slump. EDF offers no real explanation of how the impact of SZC will be any different from that of SZA or SZB. Local businesses in an already tight labour market, will suffer as staff are lured away. And past experience suggests that such a large workforce will inevitably have an adverse impact on the social cohesion of the area.

Nigel Smith – 9 July 2021