

SPECIALIST REPORTS

A matter ignored in NG's Landscape Report relates to the geological stability of the SSSI Roade Cutting. The rock is unstable, with subsurface watercourses, causing difficult, prolonged excavation. A landslide in 1890, forced substantial reinforcement work on the cutting walls. Weathering and run-off in the 20th century may have worsened the problem.

Bridge construction for the proposed Roade bypass would therefore be likely to require intrusion of bulky foundations, grouting and ancillary equipment into the body of the SSSI. As stated elsewhere no indication of type or size of bridge has been supplied by the applicants. This additional factor makes their proposal even less acceptable, as it could cause severe damage to the geology of the bridge site.

As regards Ecology, the woods fringing the cutting, said by consultants not to exist, were planted up by the Duke of Grafton and Sir William Wake, providing an important amenity, and wildlife habitats and corridors; all would be severely impaired by the proposed bridge.

The above are examples of the way reports may be slanted, as outlined below:

Under present usage experts are appointed by and produce reports for developers. Ethically the relationship seems dubious. It would be better if they were appointed by and reported to PINs and were paid for by applicants for reasons stated below:

Consultants purport to preserve professional detachment and report impartially on fields in their remit. But they are only human, and naturally wish to please clients; professional reputations and business goodwill arise from satisfactory performance for clients. They are also subject to a psychological phenomenon, *confirmation bias*¹, which tends to lead an observer to find what he expects or wishes to find. There are many areas in specialist, ostensibly objective, scientific subjects which call for value judgements and so are open to *interpretation*. Thus, where spectra of tenable assessment exist, as in the cases of traffic flow estimates, or landscape and ecology, with a range between moderate and severe adverse impacts, the consultant will at least be under pressure to report in his client's favour.

It is therefore reassuring that specialist reports are reviewed with expert, rigorous, critical, and even sceptical eyes, sensitive to special pleading and bias in applicants' favour, as shown by the questions already raised. As a layman I have noted an error in the Ecology Report concerning woodland along the cutting. How many more errors or inaccuracies inaccessible to amateurs are latent? One can only hope the Inquiry will disclose them.

¹ Confirmation bias, also called confirmatory bias or myside bias, is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses. It is a type of cognitive bias and a systematic error of inductive reasoning.

[Wikipedia](#)