

PARISH MEETING TO DISCUSS THE NEW A358 PROPOSALS BY HIGHWAYS ENGLAND
Thursday 27 April 2017

Following is a transcription of the comments made by Mike Baddeley, Chairman Stoke St Mary Parish Council, Mike Farrell, Vice Chairman and Rob Hossell.

Mike Baddeley: We are, as a Parish Council, very, very concerned at the lack of proper consultation due to government “purdah” rules. For those who are not aware the government have initiated in March this year, if I’m not mistaken, “purdah” rules which prevent discussion of contentious issues during the run up to elections. Somerset County Council declared “purdah” on some of their staff. Highways England apparently have been instructed by Central Government not to discuss this matter at the moment. We made very strong representations, Rebecca and I, to Highways England. But they would not. They eventually agreed to come here on 11th May, which is only 9 days before the Consultation ends. We have made a formal complaint to Highways England, which will stand us in good stead if we need to go to Judicial Review, requesting an extension to the 17th June, in other words, the length of the “purdah” period. Highways England will be exhibiting their plans here on 11th May from 3.30 to 7.30 and I’m hoping, but it’s not confirmed yet, they will have a question and answer session afterwards. After that we, Stoke St Mary Parish Council, will have a meeting, which is our standard meeting, where we will present our proposals and ask for the parishioners consent to go forward with those proposals to Highways England. Around the room you will see maps that Highways England will be exhibiting here on the 11th May. So you will come to a roundabout, you will slow down,

What you won’t have seen at previous exhibitions are extracts from the technical appraisal document. This is a highly technical document which has been very kindly interpreted for us by Rob Hossell and he will give you a little presentation later. These documents are in the public domain’ if you know where to find them. Mike Farrell to explain the plans as they exist at the moment.

Mike Farrell: I’m going to start from the point of view that you don’t know anything at all about Highways England. I can tell you for a start what Highways England are. formally the Highways Agency and they are a government owned company with a responsibility for managing motorways and major trunk roads. So we are not dealing with the government directly so to speak. We are dealing with a private company which has its own directors.

I don’t know if a lot of people know this, but I just want to make sure that everybody is aware exactly where this [the new A358] is going to go, and where it’s going to start. The bit we are interested in is here from West Hatch lane which is where they expect to put a large roundabout. The roundabout will form four lanes going off in this direction [points to new road] the existing A358 will continue on [points to the existing A358]. So you will come to a roundabout, you will slow down, you will go that way [left] to the new road and that way [2nd left] if you want to travel down the A358 as it is towards Henlade and Junction 25.

The road will come through very close to the buildings in Ash Farm, it then goes uphill until it reaches the crest and then drops down in front of Dairy House Farm, past the back of the Mount Somerset Hotel, sweeps round behind Arundels Farm and then continues on up into Shoreditch until it reaches the new on/off here which will go north and south on the M5. We’ve described this as somewhat of a Taunton by-pass. One of the reasons that Highways England exists is to bring forth economic growth to areas. We can’t see using this – how this going to benefit economically Taunton. Or in fact any of Somerset really. It’s going to divert traffic southwards towards Devon and Cornwall and north towards the Midlands. We have support – we are not on our own. We’ve been beavering away trying to find out who’s going to support us. We have spoken to the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Woodland Trust, the Country Landowners Assoc. - they haven’t backed us.

The ones that have backed us are the Campaign to Support Rural England and the Campaign for Better Transport. One of those will hopefully be giving us some legal advice as well – which will be quite useful. The disappointing thing is that the A358 as it exists here – the projected figures from Highways England are that it will stop 11% of the traffic. So 11% quite frankly is neither here nor there. This will actually save 90 seconds for anybody travelling who wants to go to the motorway. I can't actually see that there is a cost benefit there. But more of that Rob will tell you later. When we first met with Highways England back at the end of March we went to the Somerset Museum to look at their plans and we had been told previously that, this was back in February 2015, that there would be a consultation regarding a choice of routes. We were given the impression, maybe we wanted to hear it rather than heard it, that we were going to be given at least two possibly three routes. When you get to the Highways England document – which is the technical document that Mike referred to earlier there were actually 26 routes considered. Of those 26 they have a sifting system and that was sifted down to 4, more of which Rob will tell you about in a few minutes. Those 4 were then presented as this. I said to David Stock when we met him, he is the Project Manager for Highways England whose project this is. I said where is the choice – he said “this is it”. This is your choice. We were somewhat flabbergasted I have to say. We have got to bear in mind that not only is this going to run through probably what is some of Somerset's ,most beautiful countryside, it goes through arable land, through here it going through some of the finest growing land that we know of in this part of the world. It goes very close to ancient woodlands. The Scout Assoc. are not happy that it is going very close to Huish Woods and there are a number of other people who are prepared to stick out and object to some of this plan. So basically that's where we are at the moment. We are here tonight to collect your views, for you to ask questions and we will do are best to answer what little we know. Highways England haven't been exactly very good at coming forward with information. We have had to squeeze information out of them.

Rob: I'll try to keep it as simple as possible.

Slide 1

As Mike was saying we only have one option – was the preferred option, the one on the maps that you've seen. This is the only one that is being publicised in the consultation, On the A303 there are currently three schemes going forward. The two others – the one at Sparkford and one at Stonehenge – they both have two options. So the public see two options – not just one option. So this is really why we are saying we need to see the other options. The vast majority of people aren't aware of this document. This Technical Appraisal Report is available on Highways England's website. It is quite difficult to find. Very difficult. 150 pages long – so what I've done is try to pull out some of the key points and stay to the facts.

Next Slide

So this is all 4 routes. After their sifting process they had as I said 24-26. They sifted that down to 4. Option 2A/2B is similar to the proposals made five ten years ago – again free flowing connection into the M5, spur off to Junction 25.

So those are the 4 options.

Next Slide That is the preferred option that Mike has gone through.

Next Slide. The one close to the Blackdown hills and round the back of Taunton Racecourse. I think that will have a biggest problems in terms of visual impact from the Blackdown hills.

Next Slide. This is the one closest to the current alignment. But the big difference is – rather than cutting across the fields here down to Killams Avenue – access onto the M5 southbound and M5 north at Junction 25.

Next Slide. And likewise what is known as Option 2A/2B. Very similar but more closely aligned to the existing A358.

Next Slide. To try and compare them one of the systems they use is what's known as the Benefit to Cost Ratio. Essentially you put a value on the economic benefits, commuters, business. You also have benefits in terms of reduced accidents, roadworks during construction. You bring that all together to try and put a value on a particular scheme, divided by the cost of the scheme. So that gives you the Benefit to Cost Ratio. Now in their document their preferred option the Benefit Cost Ratio is the lowest 1.54, Option 1 close to the Blackdown Hills 1.76, then the 2 other options with the Junction 25 connections 1.87 and 2.08. It's part of Highway England's mandate to provide best value for money. Best value for money is essentially the Benefit to Cost ratio. So there is something that doesn't tally in terms of the selected option and these figures. This is the best way to try to bring all the different factors, the benefits and dis-benefits that they refer to and put a value on them. Essentially in Highways England's remit they refer to medium value between 1.5 and 2.0 and high value over 2.

Next Slide. In terms of other aspects. These values go into this whole Benefit to Cost Ratio. The selected option or preferred, primarily because it doesn't take much traffic off the A358 is not safer than a do nothing option. It actually increases the cost of accidents, they put a value against accidents. Again the mandate really should be safer roads. It also increases the noise. These are figures taken straight out of the report. I've obviously identified a couple of issues there. You can see the other options they all reduce accidents and reduce the noise. There's a value to that. That benefit is added into the Benefit to Cost Ratio.

Next Slide. Probably most startling in terms of the predicted traffic flows on the 4 options. After 15 years of being open. The preferred option 26,000 vehicles per day. But for comparison it is similar to what goes through Henlade at the moment, to give you an idea on a single carriage way. This is obviously going to be dual carriageway throughout. Option 1 near the Blackdown Hills slightly higher. The other 2 are a lot higher. The best or the most utilised option, the one close to the A358 Option 2a/2b to Junction 25. 54,600. That's more than double the preferred option. So that's why there is so much benefit for it. Yes it is slightly more expensive, I'll show you that in a moment. But the Benefit to Cost ratio – these values that end up going into this. This is another key statistic. For this option [2A /2B + J25] only 27% of the traffic using this road is predicted to go down the M5 southbound which is from the South East to the South West. 73%, and these are Highways England figures, are trying to get into or through Taunton or up the M5 north. So it's not as our option some of it might and try and come down here [J25A] and then back up. The vast majority of the traffic will continue down the old A358 and through Henlade. So the preferred option isn't going to get rid of all the issues going through Henlade. As Mike said the initial 11% reduction will soon vanish, as it attracts more traffic. I think we do know that roads do attract more traffic, it will increase and we will be back to square one at Henlade.

Next slide. So there again there are the 4 options. These are the net present value. Essentially they are 2010 prices. £244 million for the preferred option, the cheapest just. Obviously slightly increasing in terms of the pricing. But see how dramatically the Benefits increase, the value of the benefits and hence this option 2a/2b is much better value for money. So the preferred option in my mind and in a lot of people's minds I've discussed, it doesn't seem to stack up. We don't know why.

Next slide. So really just to summarise those key facts. The preferred option is really a bypass of Taunton. Taunton won't get much value from it. Little economic benefit to Taunton. The traffic doesn't have any access, there is no local access at this new Junction 25a, the one that is proposed unless Somerset County Council suddenly find lots of money to start to tie into it. It doesn't tie into all the development plans of Taunton, in terms of the housing. It says in the document it releases economic and housing benefit. Currently though that doesn't fit in Taunton Deane or Somerset

County Council's plans. Little traffic reduction through Henlade because it doesn't bring value for money.

So we are looking for Highways England to extend the consultation period because we are getting no discussion, no communication during this period. We are looking for at least one more Option for consultation, or more than one. And how do they demonstrate value for money?

Essentially we need a solution that better utilises the traffic flows on this new road. Yes there is a national requirement. I think that is quite clear from central government but there is also a local requirement. We need to engage all the authorities. Somerset County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council. It doesn't seem, and it doesn't appear that is happening from these proposals. And even the Parish Councils we are not getting any engagement from Highways England.

So you have questionnaires. Unfortunately the questionnaire is geared towards the current option, the proposed option. But you need to highlight there are other options and that's what I wanted to do today to say. That's Highways England's choice. Is it Taunton's choice?

Mike Baddeley: Thank you very much Rob