
From: Kerrie Jones [KJones@somerset.gov.uk] on behalf of David Hall - Councillor
[DHall@somerset.gov.uk]

Sent: 30 May 2017 14:55

To: mike farrell

Cc: Michael Bryant; John Woodman - Councillor

Subject: Question Raised at County Council on 24 May

Dear Mr Farrell

Thank you for the question you raised at the County Council meeting on 24 May 2017. Below is your question and my response.

Question :

Statement:

2. Despite earlier reassurances, Highways England have failed to offer more than one route option and have presented their "preferred route" Is it our belief that Highways England Ltd should have held a consultation on more than one route option and that they have failed to supply sufficient detail within their "Technical Appraisal Report" (T.A.R.) for any consulted party to form a studied and considered view of the viability of the overall scheme. On 16 May 2017 the Taunton Deane Borough Council, Community Scrutiny Committee shared this view and have recommended rejection of the Highways England Ltd single option.

Question:

2. Is the Somerset County Council Road Transport Policy: Titled; " Somerset's Future Transport Plan" still in place for the period 2011 - 2026 and if so how would the overall aspirations of that policy connect with the Highways England single option?

Statement:

3. Given that the " Somerset's Future Transport Plan" states and I quote:

"Transport is part of everything we do. It allows us to go to work or school, visit the people we care about and access the things we need. However, if not managed carefully the impacts transport has can also be bad for us. our economy and the environment." Furthermore the document goes on to state: "We will help our communities to help themselves. We will help them to make improvements to transport, allow them to shape our work and deliver improvements in partnership with other organisations."

Questions:

3. How does the current Highways England Ltd single option help contribute to these two statements and how does the Highways England Ltd single option, which effectively bypasses the town of Taunton help either the town or county economically or improve our environment?

Statement:

4. The Highways England Ltd. consultation process has failed. Democratically, they cannot hold a meaningful consultation on their "preferred option" Highways England Ltd should have conducted their consultation on all four options outlined in their T.A.R.

Question:

4. Will the Council agree with the Taunton Deane Borough Council recommendation to ask Highways England Ltd to re-start this consultation with all route options open for

consideration. To review a full Henlade by-pass and link to Nexus 25, plus the £20 million. County Council lead, improvement to Junction 25 and for wider discussions with Devon County Council to take place regarding the current A30 extension?

Response :

Thank you for your questions and interest in this important proposal.

In line with our “Future Transport Plan” which covers the period 2011 – 2026, we have lobbied hard to ensure that dualling and improvements are made to the A303/A358/ A30 Corridor, as we believe this has the potential to bring significant economic benefit to Taunton, Somerset, the South West and the UK as a whole.

Please note that Somerset County Council is not responsible for designing the programme or carrying out the work; that process falls to Highways England on behalf of the Government so it is important that you submit your views to Highways England as part of their consultation process, in order that they can take them into account in developing their proposals. Highways England confirm that they will not be issuing a new deadline for consultation responses until after the General Election on 8 June.

Please note that this project will continue to fall within my portfolio as Cabinet Member with responsibility for economy.

As a number of similar questions were received on this matter I have decided to prepare one comprehensive response which covers the full range questions asked.

Whilst the Council is still preparing its formal response to the consultation, I thought it would be useful to outline the current thinking which will form a set of recommendations for my formal decision in June.

Firstly turning to the key questions of how the proposed Expressway will benefit Taunton and what is the point of the road? The Council strongly supports the need for the A358 between Taunton and Southfields to be upgraded to dual carriageway as part of an end-end whole route improvement of the A303/A358 between the M3 and the M5 at Taunton. If designed appropriately, the improvement will improve connectivity and access to the South West Region, improve the resilience of the strategic road network and help to promote economic growth in the region. An economic impact study commissioned by the Council, published in February 2013 noted the following key benefits of an end-end route improvement based on comprehensive business & tourism surveys and transport economic assessment.

- 21,400 jobs
- £41.6bn boost to the economy (GVA)
- £1.9bn in transport benefits from reduced journey times
- Improve transport resilience to cope with incidents and during flooding
- Save over 1800 fatal or serious casualties over 60 years
- Reduce carbon emissions by 9%

I note the concerns raised regarding the lack of information upon which to provide views, and the Council will also be raising concerns with Highways England, within our consultation response, about the lack of information provided at this important stage in the process.

It is the Council's belief that it will be possible for an appropriately designed scheme to meet the objectives of providing enhanced local connectivity to Taunton (with associated economic growth benefits) as well as providing improved strategic connectivity between London and the South West. One of our key objectives for the scheme is also to ensure traffic travelling through Henlade is reduced to the greatest degree possible. We will urge Highways England to develop a preferred route which delivers on all these objectives.

The Council's view is that the forecast traffic reductions through Henlade currently published alongside Highways England's proposed scheme can be improved upon and we will therefore be requesting that Highways England consider including measures in the Development Consent Order which encourage traffic to use any new route rather than the current A358 through Henlade.

I can confirm that Somerset County Council asked Highways England to consider route options which included a link between the proposed expressway and the existing Junction 25 and proposed employment site. Highways England's technical appraisal report for the scheme demonstrates that they have considered options which include such a link. I am not able to advise you why they have chosen not to put these forward for consultation, and that is a matter for them to address.

The Council is particularly keen to understand why 'Option 2A/2B' and its key feature of a link into the existing M5 Junction 25 has not been recommended as an option for consideration, when the high-level transport economic assessment presented would appear to favour this option. The Council expects this to be a matter for further consideration prior to selection of the preferred route and if necessary during the DCO process.

The Council does not currently consider that it would be beneficial to ask Highways England to re-run the current non-statutory stage of consultation, particularly as four potential options have been described in the technical documentation and this has enabled the community to express views about these options. The Council will urge Highways England to further assess and consult upon the potential benefits and implications of a link between the proposed expressway and Junction 25 prior to selecting the preferred route and to consider including it as part of the preferred route if the more detailed assessment demonstrates that this would be beneficial in terms of economic growth, reducing congestion and improving safety, accessibility, and value for money; rather than discounting it at this stage in the process.

The reasoning behind the precise location of the proposed 'Junction A' on the M5 is a matter for Highways England however within their consultation material Highways England considers that:

- The proposed route provides improved opportunities for future growth in housing and employment leading to increased prosperity;
- The provision of an additional junction on the south side of Taunton would help relieve pressure on Junction 25, reduce journey times and queue lengths.

The Council will urge Highways England to confirm that the precise location of the proposed new 'Junction A' on the M5 will be established through further dialogue prior to (and if

necessary as part of) the DCO process taking into account further technical design work, further appraisal of potential impacts and community views.

It is The Council's current view that it would not be appropriate for a connection to be created between the new 'Junction A' and the existing local highway network without provision of appropriate road infrastructure running between the new junction and destinations in the town.

Whilst noting that the choice of route is Highways England's responsibility, the statutory process for scheme development and development consent includes requirements upon them to undertake rigorous assessment of the environmental, landscape and visual impacts, and to seek to minimise these impacts and provide appropriate mitigation; so concerns raised regarding impacts on the woodland and the countryside will undoubtedly be given a great deal of attention as the scheme develops.

The County Council does not hold detailed plans for the proposals and understands that these are currently being developed by Highways England.

The County Council has not been provided with any proposed vertical alignments for the scheme so is unable to comment on the extent to which the new scheme will be in cutting. As we do not hold any designs for the junction we are unable to advise at this stage in the process what it will physically look like, how visually intrusive it will be or how much lighting there will be. These are key questions that we expect Highways England to be able to address (and will be urging them to address) as the scheme develops and prior to submitting the formal development consent order; so that the Council and the community can fully understand the potential local impacts and consider how any adverse impacts can be appropriately mitigated.

I can confirm that it is the County Council's view that dual carriageway improvements are needed to the whole A303/ A358 route between the M3 and the M5 and that smaller scale complimentary (rather than alternative) improvements are also needed between Ilminster and Honiton in order for the full economic benefits of investment in the corridor to be achieved. This has been our consistent message to Government for a number of years and indeed the Government's road investment strategy does commit to this approach. We continue to work closely with Devon, Wiltshire and Dorset Councils to promote the need for both these investments and we have worked with Devon in developing their proposed solutions between Ilminster and Honiton.

I concur with the points made that the County Council's views on the proposed scheme are of great interest to the wider community and I am happy to confirm that the new Administration will make the Council's consultation response public. We will publish our proposed response as soon as possible following 24 May in accordance with the formal decision making process adopted. Our proposed response will then be the subject of a formal cabinet member decision during June and I anticipate that we will also take the opportunity to have the proposed response considered by a Scrutiny Committee prior to finalisation subject to the agreement of the Chair of the relevant committee. The formal approval of our response is currently timetabled for late June and we will consider if this remains an appropriate timescale once Highways England have confirmed a revised deadline for consultation responses. We will publish our intended date for publication as soon as we have agreed this.

In response to some detailed questions raised; whilst it is implicit in my response above, for the avoidance of doubt I can confirm that Somerset County Council will not be delivering the A303 upgrading, but expects Highways England to start work prior to April 2021 which is their current target. Somerset County Council will not be responsible for deciding upon the exact route of the upgraded road in Somerset, and will not be writing or entering into contracts to get the work done. Highways England will appoint the contractors to build their scheme. Somerset County Council will not be responsible if the work is delayed or delivered late as it is Highways England who will be responsible for the timely delivery of their scheme.

Regards

Cllr David Hall

PA : Kerrie Jones

Personal Assistant to Cllr David Fothergill - Leader of the Council

Personal Assistant to Cllr David Hall – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development

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