

Stoke St Mary Parish Council response to Highways England Ltd proposal to improve the A358 from Taunton to Southfields Roundabout

Introduction:

The consultation period for this road scheme began on 28 March 2017 and will close on 16 July 2017.

The parish of Stoke St .Mary will be the parish most affected by a proposed six kilometre, dual carriageway, which will run from one end of the parish at Ashe Farm to the other near to Taunton Racecourse.

We submit that this consultation is flawed and should be halted and recommenced with other scheme options and a substantial increase in technical detail made available, to enable a meaningful consultation to take place. Letters of objection to the form of this consultation were sent to the Secretary of State for Transport and to the C.E.O. of Highways England Ltd. (HE) dated 17 June 2017. At the time of writing those letters remain unanswered.

The Current Proposal:

There are many issues emanating from the current Highways England Ltd proposals and we will deal with them as individual items as listed in HE Technical Appraisal Report (TAR), Section 2.1. RIS Objectives.

- Making the network safer:
- Improving user satisfaction:
- Supporting the smooth flow of traffic
- Encouraging economic growth
- Delivering better environmental outcomes
- Helping cyclists, walkers and other vulnerable users of the network
- Achieving real efficiency

Firstly we contend that HE have achieved none of their strategy objectives:

Safety:

According to the TAR supplied by HE, the proposed route actually increases accident costs. In the present climate why would any business offer a solution, which does not result in a safe solution for the public?

User Satisfaction:

We have grave concerns that the traffic information supplied with the TAR is out of date and therefore inaccurate. We were also surprised and disappointed to learn that summer holiday traffic had not been monitored and the proposed road scheme was being forwarded without this information being available.

The proposed route does nothing to alleviate the current traffic issues through the village of Henlade a village which is in desperate need to be by-passed. Air quality along parts of this route are some of the worst in the whole of Taunton Deane.

HE own figures produced in the TAR predict a minimal reduction in traffic through Henlade and on to junction 25.

Due to the nature of the current road system in this part of Somerset there is great concern about the connectivity between outlying communities. The current road

structure, away from the A358 is generally single track with passing places and unsuitable for heavy vehicles. There is great concern that larger vehicles; oil delivery, feed delivery, milk collections and the like will be adversely affected by the limited access to these small communities. Any peak time hold ups, road closures, accidents or road works would cause many of these minor roads to become “rat runs” for traffic seeking alternative routes. The minor roads affected by traffic seeking an alternative route will impact on the communities of West Hatch, Bickenhall, Slough Green, Stoke St. Mary, Meare Green, Thornfalcon Creech St. Michael and Ruishton.

Economic Growth:

The proposed link to the new Junction on the M5 motorway, Junction 25A, effectively creates a Taunton by-pass. Therefore there is no discernable, sustainable economic development brought to the area, as this is a closed junction. Neither is there a link to the proposed new upgraded infrastructure at junction 25 or to the proposed business park, “Nexus 25”. Avoiding linking to these two developments is adversely impact economic growth.

*Nowhere within the TAR do HE make the claim that this proposed route is good value for money. In fact the TAR shows this current route to offer worst benefit to cost ratio. This does not represent taxpayers’ money being spent wisely.

Environmental outcomes:

The proposed route will run along a contour of one of Taunton’s most iconic features, Stoke Hill, leaving a scar across the countryside, which will be visible for miles. This is tantamount to environmental vandalism and fails HE own test of environmental outcomes.

Two ancient woodlands will be impacted by the current proposal Huish Woods a world famous Scout Association camp site and Henlade / Stoke Hill Woods an outstanding landmark to the south east of Taunton.

We would also wish to have noted that this proposed road scheme runs through several acres of productive, industrial farmland, which has sustained farming in the area for generations. If this proposal is enacted those farms will be adversely affected.

Concern has been raised on several occasions regarding flooding. Stoke Hill for instance is, in the main, made from lias clay. Lias clay has an absorption capacity, which allows rainwater to be absorbed and let out gradually. If a substantial amount of land is taken away from Stoke Hill no flood alleviation scheme could reliably attenuate the excess water and prevent Lower Henlade and Greenway Lane, marked flood areas, from becoming further inundated.

We also have considerable concerns that the new road scheme will bring new noise, light and air pollution along its route. Additionally, there will inevitably be property affected by vibration from heavy goods vehicles.

Helping cyclists, walkers and other vulnerable users of the network:

Apart from a general mention in the TAR there is no substantial information contained therein.

Achieving real efficiency:

Without up to date traffic data and the monitoring of holiday traffic we cannot see that there is any verification that the proposed scheme would improve “efficiency”.

Keeping the network in good condition:

Again there is no evidence within the TAR of maintenance.

In Conclusion:

The TAR supplied by HE contains many instances of either insufficient or incorrect data that has not updated recently. The party consulting should supply accurate and proven data to allow affected parties to consider the facts and not to guess at the meaning of inaccurate data.

As consultees we wish to express our sincere dissatisfaction with the presentation of this initial consultation. We have attended several presentation events and all recent parish meetings at which we found Highways England and Mott MacDonald staff presenting the proposal fell well short of any reasonable expectations. We found them to be generally poorly informed, disingenuous on several issues and obstructive in releasing information when purporting to be running a “transparent” consultation.

Finally, we submit that this consultation was ill-prepared and lacked significant necessary detail that it is impossible for us to make valued judgements on many issues that we feel are important to our community. We invite you to abandon this current consultation and re-run the exercise with route options, accurate and up to date information and a frank and open discourse regarding the future of this beautiful corner of our county.

APPENDICES

1. Letter to Secretary of State for Transport, Rt. Hon. Chris Grayling M.P.
2. Letter to Jim O’Donnell C.E.O. Highways England Ltd
3. Presentation slides by Rob Hossell