**Stoke St Mary Parish response to Highways England Ltd A358 consultation 16 January to 27 February 2018**

# OVERVIEW

This is the second round of consultations regarding the Highways England Ltd (HE Ltd) planned upgrading of the A358 from Taunton to Southfilelds roundabout. The previous consultation took place from March to July 2017.

It is worth stating at this juncture that the outcome of the previous consultation, considering only one route option, now known as the **orange route**, was overwhelmingly discounted as being non-viable by a large majority of contributors. A conclusion that HE did not appear to dispute. However, and without any satisfactory explanation by any H E Ltd representative, we are therefore surprised to note that this discounted route remains as part of the current consultation.

Two other routes have been supplied as alternative options for the purpose of this current consultation. The blue route, which follows the line of much of the orange route only to divert north to Junction 25 of the M5 and south to a “slips only” junction at Hawthorn Park, Holway. The pink route, which is a route suggested at previous consultations, also includes “new” links to the A378 as well as direct links to Junction 25 of the M5 and new slip roads also located at Hawthorn Park, Holway.

Following an extensive campaign of interaction between the Parish Council and its parishioners, both by public meetings, electronic communication and social media, we now feel able to comment upon the current consultation. However, before discussing further, we wish to raise two particular points of concern.

Firstly, during the original consultation, March to July 2017 on a single route option, HE Ltd supplied an interactive route map, which gave geographic details unavailable during this current event. Given that consultees now have three options to consider we deem this as a regrettable omission.

Secondly, despite three separate requests, HE Ltd absolutely refused to hold public meetings where individuals could discuss their issues in an open and supported forum. We found that the alternative offered by HE Ltd, consisting of a round of “local” exhibitions and “one to one” meetings between HE Ltd and Parish Councils, less than satisfactory for the community as a whole.

# CONSULTATION DOCUMENTATION

With regards to the consultation documentation supplied to the public for them to consider when assessing their route option preference, the three road schemes are set out in the consultation brochure, questionnaire and Technical Appraisal Report (TAR)

The consultation brochure lacks detail and some aspects of what we consider would have been of vital public interest. For example, the brochure makes no reference to benefit to cost ratio (B.C.R.) for each scheme, which is an integral factor when considering which scheme might be the best choice in terms of overall economics, as well as benefits and/or issues to local communities.

The consultation brochure, on page 9, unhelpfully throws in “the mix and match option” which has led to much consternation and some confusion among parishioners and the wider public. We understand that if a mix and match option should become the preferred route then that route will not be the subject of a further consultation. This is both disappointing and disturbing, since a combination may result in further issues (or benefits) arising that would not be subject to scrutiny or discussion by local communities.

We also found the questionnaire supplied with the consultation to be unfairly slanted in favour of the motorist and not the residents.

# ROUTE OPTIONS

We now go on to consider the route options:

## THE ORANGE ROUTE

Prior to this current consultation and having considered the “Report on Public Consultation (28 March - 16 July 2017)” published by HE Ltd in January 2018, we considered that the “orange” route should have been deemed unviable. This is based on the fact that the option only attracted a 32% approval overall and only 31% of consultees thought that a new, all movements motorway junction at Killams was beneficial.

As mentioned previously, and having asked many times why this option remains on the table, we have received no satisfactory explanation.

The “orange” route was unsatisfactory at the end of the last consultation and we can see no reason for that decision to change.

The orange route has the least cost benefit ratio and it achieves none of HE Ltd stated requirements save that it moves some traffic from London and the south east to Devon and Cornwall saving a few minutes in travel time. However, it has a significant negative impact on the local area around Taunton and it makes Taunton a by-passed town. Furthermore and more importantly the safety analysis showed that the accident impact increased for this route, which is in direct conflict with HE’s objectives.

We question the environmental and physical impact that this route would have upon the area. The route passes near to or through ancient woodland and could well have a detrimental effect upon vintage trees and protected areas such as Huish Woods, The Woodland Trust, Millennium Woods and Stoke Hill woods. As with the orange route we believe that the high-level works around Ashe Farm and Stoke Hill would leave a visible scar across the countryside and would impact upon the beauty and distinct nature of the local landscape.

Furthermore, the route does not have the advantage of a direct link to the A378 (similar to the Blue Route). We believe that the A378 link is an important addition to this road scheme to avoid traffic from villages such as Wrantage, North Curry etc. being excluded from using the new road and being forced to use the old A358 through Henlade to access Taunton. Businesses in those villages and the Mattocks Tree Hill junction will also suffer significantly, thus further negatively impacting upon the local economy.

It also has the disadvantage that the new road is inaccessible to all villages to the south, which will increase the traffic on unsuitable narrow roads.

## THE BLUE ROUTE:

Whilst the blue route does make a difference in that it does not require an all movements junction at Killams, because it connects to Junction 25 of the M5, to the Nexus business park and does effectively create a by-pass for the residents of Henlade.

The environmental and physical impacts, as well as the impact on local traffic in neighbouring villages will be similar to those of the orange route.

**Similar to the orange option, we again question the environmental and physical impact that this route would have** upon the area. The route passes near to or through ancient woodland and could well have a detrimental effect upon vintage trees and protected areas such as Huish Woods, The Woodland Trust, Millennium Woods and Stoke Hill woods. As with the orange route we believe that the high-level works around Ashe Farm and Stoke Hill would leave a visible scar across the countryside and would impact upon the beauty and distinct nature of the local landscape.

Similar to the Orange route, the Blue route also does not have the advantage of a direct link to the A378. Businesses in those villages along the A378 and at the Mattocks Tree Hill junction will also suffer significantly, thus further negatively impacting upon the local economy.

As for the orange route, the new road is inaccessible to all villages to the south, which will increase the traffic on unsuitable narrow roads.

## THE PINK ROUTE:

The majority of the pink route has been the subject of at least two previous consultations going back many years and also does not require an all movements junction at Killams.

Most importantly the route achieves many of HE Ltd own stated goals.

* It supplies Henlade with its long overdue by-pass.
* It connects directly with Junction 25 of the M5 motorway
* It connects to the Nexus business park
* The considerable advantage over the orange and blue routes is that it does not cause the same visual impact on the area.
* This route links the A378 into the overall scheme.
* It offers the highest Benefit to Cost ratio, lowest accident cost and provides Taunton with a real opportunity for further economic growth.

# OTHER ASPECTS

## Air, light and noise pollution

We have considerable concerns that the information contained within the TAR for air, light and noise pollution figures are completely insufficient and we have found it impossible to make a route choice based on these factors.

## Visual Impact

As stated previously the orange route will have a huge visual impact upon the local landscape, particularly at the higher level around Ashe Farm and Stoke Hill. We also understand that the lower level of the orange route will have to be raised above the current ground level. This will create a visible ribbon of road running across the plain from the base of Stoke Hill at Arundell’s Farm to Haydon and on to Shoreditch.

The blue route will also be highly visible at Ashe Farm, across Stoke Hill and then raised above current ground levels from the northern edge of Stoke Woods to the new interchange “A” at Hawthorne Park, Holway.

## Drainage / Flooding

The current TAR contains very little detail regarding these two vitally important matters. It is inevitable that replacing green fields with solid road structures, running across recognised flood plains will be an issue.

By the very nature of water movement either up or downstream of any road scheme there will be effects upon the land. We need to see much more detail regarding the potential flooding issues and overall water management and ongoing maintenance.

## Amenities

We are also concerned about possible loss of amenities, such as footpaths, bridleways and cycle routes. In a recent statement from “Sustrans” we would wish to highlight:

* The distances between towns and villages are suitable for cycle commuting if a safe cycle track is available off highway.
* Grade separated crossings, bridges or subways, across the junctions must be included so cyclists can safely access the town centres from the A358.
* An indirect hilly route through the lanes between Ilminster and Taunton is not a substitute for a direct, safe, convenient route in the A358 corridor.
* Highways England’s own standards require segregated provision for cyclists to be made ( Interim Advice Note 195/16)

## Communities:

Stoke St Mary is an ancient settlement, which has grown very little over the past several years. It is off the beaten track but very close to Taunton. Like many other small communities, we are concerned that the A358 upgrade will create either isolated, inaccessible enclaves or villages that will be swallowed up by the inevitable expansion of the town of Taunton. To some extent the route of the A358 will either negate or facilitate these possibilities. We would ask that, once the decision on the preferred route option is made, a greater effort to communicate with the affected areas is made by Highways England and appropriate actions are brought forward to mitigate or alleviate issues.

The parish would also request that due respect for farmed land is given when planning routes. Where possible we ask that you avoid splitting parcels of land where access by farm vehicles would be made more difficult.

# Conclusions:

We consider that all three consulted upon schemes lack imagination and innovation. Whilst we appreciate that there are many issues in trying to bring suitable road improvements to the A358, we wish to emphasise that the A358 has three specific issues: twice each day and at holiday peak times. Those issues are concentrated at both ends of the A358 (i.e. Junction 25 and the Southfields roundabout). We consider it would be an unnecessary drain on the public purse to provide a multi-million-pound road scheme that will continue to have the same issues as we currently endure.

If we are to have an upgrade to the A358 in the local vicinity, the consensus of opinion in the Parish of Stoke St. Mary would be for the **pink route**.

However, we also wish to voice our concerns that Highways England may impose a “mix and match” option or a partial route build only. If there is to be a “mix and match” option then it should have been part of this consultation. As lay people we are in no position to advise the Highways Authorities as to what “mix and match” road scheme would or would not offer effective solutions to the current traffic problems.

The parish would deem both options unsatisfactory as the “mix and match” option, we are advised, would not be the subject of further consultation and a partial route build would be the worst of all options achieving few of Highways England‘s stated aims and would be to the detriment of the local communities for minimal gain.

We urge HE Ltd to consider all of the points raised herein before deciding any road scheme along the A358 corridor.

Stoke St. Mary Parish Council

February 2018