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NON-KEY DECISION TAKEN BY THE Strategic Commissioning Manager for Highways and Transport

Decision title: Response to the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester improvement scheme statutory public consultation.

Officer making decision: Mike O'Dowd-Jones. Strategic Commissioning Manager Highways and Transport. 01823 356238.

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Date of Decision: 9 March 2018

Details of the decision:

That the Strategic Commissioning Manager for Highways and Transport:

- Approves the response to the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester improvement scheme statutory public consultation attached as Appendices A and A1 to this report.
- Notes the issues set out in this report which will need to be taken account of as the improvement scheme progresses through statutory processes.

Reasons for the decision:

The Council has promoted the end-to-end dualling of the A303/A358 between the M3 and M5 with complementary smaller-scale improvements to the A303/A30 between Broadway and Honiton. The business case and economic assessment prepared by the Council demonstrated the benefits of the scheme for the economic growth of the South West and the UK, increasing safety, improving connectivity and resilience.

Highways England are currently progressing three sections of the overall route improvement and are currently undertaking a statutory public consultation on the Sparkford to Ilchester section which is proposed to be improved to dual carriageway.

The Council has a statutory role in the Development Consent Order (DCO) process for the scheme. The current consultation is a statutory public consultation, undertaken prior to the DCO process to assist Highways England in finalising the DCO submission. It is important that the Council responds to this stage of consultation to set out support for the scheme in principle and to highlight issues that should be considered by Highways England before the scheme design is 'frozen' for the DCO submission.

In 2017 Highways England consulted on two options to inform their choice of a preferred route. The two options were for either a 'Central Route' running close to the existing road which partly uses existing carriageway, or a 'Northern Route' which would have been built completely off-line.

The Council submitted a non-statutory consultation response on the two options in March 2017 noting that whilst there were several issues which required resolution at the next stages of scheme development. It was clear from the technical appraisal report that no option had clearly better

performance in all aspects of safety and operation, environmental impacts and value for money; and that either option would deliver the economic, transport and safety benefits that the Council is seeking in promoting the need for the improvement. Either option would have enabled the timeframe dictated by the Development Consent Order (DCO) process to be met, achieving start on site by March 2020.

The Council therefore decided that the choice of a preferred route should be a matter for Highways England to determine, taking into account community and stakeholder feedback from the consultation process along with appropriate technical appraisals.

In October 2017 Highways England announced the preferred route for the scheme as the 'Central Route' running close to the existing road and utilising sections of the existing A303.

The scheme design has now progressed to an outline stage whereby there are firm proposals; and the layout of the new road, lanes, junctions, bridges and changes to the local road network are clearly defined. Highways England are now running a statutory public consultation (26 January - 9 March 2018) on a proposed layout for the scheme and an associated initial environmental information report.

It is important for the Council as Local Highway Authority to engage with Highways England to provide detailed observations on the design and layout of the proposals, to ensure connections and interfaces with the local road network and rights of way network maintain appropriate standards of access and safety; and to ensure appropriate mitigation for any adverse impacts or indeed betterment where possible. The Council has a statutory role in the DCO process to prepare a statement of common ground and a local impact report, and to report on adequacy of consultation.

Having considered the stage of consultation (which is currently related to the detailed layout of the scheme rather than consideration of alternative route options); and the nature of public interest in the scheme (which is relatively non-controversial with community interest largely confined to local impact on the village of West Camel); it is considered appropriate for the decision on the consultation response to be an officer non-key decision in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member.

Ongoing engagement will have resource and governance implications which are currently being examined and the consultation response requests that Highways England enter into a planning performance agreement (PPA) to enable the Council to provide timely and robust input to the DCO process. A PPA has yet to be agreed.

Background to the decision:

1. Introduction

Somerset County Council together with Devon County Council, Wiltshire Council, Dorset Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) provided a strong economic case to Government for improving the A303 and A358 to dual carriageway, together with smaller scale improvements to the A30. This led to Government announcing on 1 December 2014 that over the next 14 years the A303/A358 would be improved to a new 'Expressway' standard along its whole length from the M3 to the M5 at Taunton.

The scheme forms part of the Government's 'Roads Investment Strategy'; a new roads programme starting in 2015/16. Roads investment will be made over 'Road Periods' lasting 5 years, to transform the busiest sections of the network to enable improved safety levels, smoother traffic flow, and increased capacity.

Expressways will generally be dual carriageway – safe, well-built and more resilient to delay. Junctions will be largely grade-separated, so traffic can move freely from the start of the Expressway to its end.

Specific schemes announced for this first five year period (2015/16 to 2019/20) include improving

the A358 to dual carriageway between Southfields roundabout and the M5; the dualling of the Sparkford to Ilchester section of the A303; and construction of a tunnel past Stonehenge with a dual carriageway bypass for Winterborne Stoke.

The final expressway standard has yet to be agreed and the Sparkford to Ilchester options consultation notes that the scheme will not be built to full expressway standard (which requires restrictions on non-motorised users using the road), but will be a dual carriageway with free-flow junctions and will be capable of being upgraded to expressway in due course.

The process to deliver the schemes is a complex process that will take several years to complete and involves a number of stages including, project preparation, option identification, option selection, preliminary design, statutory procedures & powers, and construction preparation. Consent for the scheme will be granted via the Development Consent Order (DCO) process used for national infrastructure projects.

Highways England is now taking the first three A303/A358 schemes through a series of consultations prior to entering the formal DCO process.

The Council has had ongoing engagement with Highways England and has been able to inform the options development process at a strategic level.

Thirteen route options were identified during the options identification stage, sifted down to four for further assessment; and two options were consulted on prior to announcement of the preferred route.

A total of 735 stakeholders attended the public consultation events at the options consultation stage, and Highways England received 1,237 questionnaire responses. 82% of people agreed that something should be done to address the problems on the A303. The responses showed overwhelming support for the principle of the scheme and significant majority support for Option 1 which was the 'Central Route'. As well as giving views on specific elements of the project, people provided feedback on themes such as the environment and the local community, as well as suggestions for additional junctions and crossing points.

The Preferred Route (October 2017)

The preferred route shown below was announced as 'Option 1' on 24 October 2017 on the basis that Highways England considered that it:

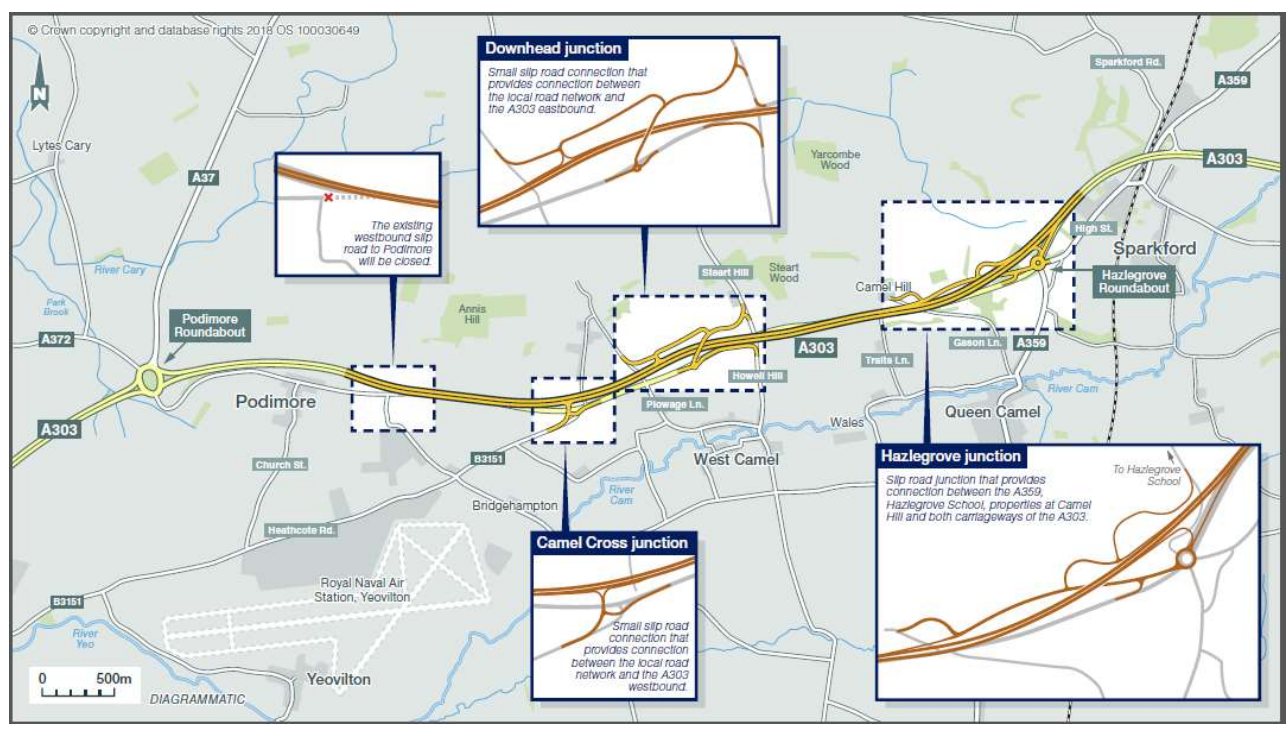
- minimises land-take
- minimises construction in unspoilt rural setting as the route follows the existing corridor very closely
- is preferred by stakeholders and most of the local community as it has less impact on biodiversity
- is the shortest of the 2 options so will provide the best journey time.



An updated economic appraisal was published along with the preferred route announcement in a 'scheme appraisal report' (SAR) stating that the Benefit to Cost Ratio for the preferred route option is 1.82 representing medium value for money, with an estimated cost of £179m. The preferred route is stated in the SAR as increasing annual average daily traffic (AADT) using the route from 33,500 under a 2038 'do-minimum' scenario to 40,000 (noting that 2015 base year AADT is 23,500); and reducing average journey time in neutral periods by about 2 minutes in the 2023 and 2038 forecast years, and by almost 5 minutes in 2038 August weekends.

The proposal issued for statutory public consultation (January 2018)

The further scheme development undertaken by Highways England since announcement of the preferred route has resulted in the scheme proposal shown below. This includes details of the proposed connections with the local road network.



This reduces the number of local road connections onto the A303 compared to the current layout but does provide local access junctions midway along the route in the vicinity of Downhead, and also provides connections which avoid local north-south road routes being severed by the new road.

Somerset County Council's engineering design audit and review of the proposed layout (set out in the summary audit report attached as Appendix A1) has identified substantial concerns with the proposed highway layout at Camel Cross Junction, Downhead Junction and Hazlegrove junction, primarily in relation to highway safety. As a result, The Highway Authority does not support Highways England's current layout proposals at those locations but will continue to work with Highways England to review alternative alignment configurations that might assist in resolving the identified issues.

A transport assessment has not yet been undertaken for the proposal and the information currently available affords insufficient scope and level of detail to enable the Highway Authority to fully understand the operational performance of the proposed layout and impact of the proposed scheme on the local network. A transport assessment has been requested.

A very limited set of traffic flows associated with the proposed scheme has been published as a 'provisional local traffic information' document as shown below for 2038.

Notwithstanding comments above on the validity of the traffic information; The provisional local traffic information provided does highlight that the proposals are likely to create a local impact on the village of West Camel though attracting additional traffic to travel via Howell Hill/ Parsonage Road.

Most other local roads in the area are assessed as having reductions in traffic volume as a result of the scheme, although the geographic coverage of the diagrams is relatively limited so there could be other adverse impacts not shown on the diagrams.



The consultation response requests that Highways England introduce measures to either remove or mitigate the local impact at West Camel as part of their final scheme. The response requests

that Highways England consider traffic calming or some other mechanism to reduce the volume and speed of traffic travelling along that route and better balance the traffic flows across the various local roads noting that the forecasts show traffic reducing significantly on some other local roads in the vicinity once the A303 improvement is in place.

The Council has received correspondence from West Camel Parish Council and several members of the community objecting to the proposed local access junction arrangements which they feel are the cause of the likely impact on West Camel. The Council urges Highways England to more transparently assess variations on the provision of local access junctions and local access roads to establish if a solution can be developed that avoids creating any adverse impacts on local roads; and engage with The Council and local communities in coming to conclusions.

Dialogue is ongoing with Highways England regarding a programme of technical review. The consultation response sets out concerns that the scoping and sequencing of the required assessment methodologies has not taken place prior to issue of material for SCC to review. We have requested that a transport assessment is undertaken to robustly consider the operational performance of the scheme, the traffic impacts and required mitigations.

2. Financial, legal, and business risk implications

There are no specific financial, legal or business risk implications in submitting this consultation response.

The consultation response sets out concerns that joint governance arrangements have yet to be fully put in place particularly in relation to coordination between the workstreams and overall management of the process including management of risks.

The Council considers it is important for the improvement scheme to be delivered at the earliest opportunity, along with the other required A303/ A358/ A30 improvements in order to achieve benefits for business growth in the area.

Financial

There will be financial resource implications for the Council if it is to fully engage in scheme development and the DCO process, but that is not a barrier to submitting this initial consultation response, and resource implications will be considered in due course. The consultation response requests a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) with Highways England to properly resource the Council's timely and robust input to the process although this has yet to be agreed.

The scheme will have future financial implications in terms of maintenance and operating costs as a result of the de-trunking sections of the existing A303 as part of the DCO process. Historically when roads have been de-trunked Highways England have compensated Local Authorities for the additional maintenance burden, however as this scheme replaces the road with another, rather than simply handing a road over to local authority management it is not clear at this stage whether compensation will apply so financial implications cannot be quantified. SCC must ensure this is discussed within the DCO process.

Legal

It is Highways England who will be the lead body in any application for a DCO. The role of the Council within this process is as a statutory consultee (and one of the principal consultees). We are currently at the pre-application stage. The proposals are still at an outline stage and it is necessary for further information to be made available to the Council in order for it to fully assess the proposals. Therefore the Council should retain the ability to refine its position once the additional information is available.

3. Due regard implications

The consultation response urges Highways England to take account of the needs of people with protected characteristics as part of the detailed design of the preferred route once identified. Of note are the needs of people with poor mobility, people with disabilities, younger and older people who may be vulnerable road users; the need to ensure the safety of all road users; and the need for the scheme to maintain connectivity for existing walking and cycling routes and where possible provide improved facilities that promote more sustainable travel and associated health & wellbeing through physical activity.

4. Options considered

The alternative option is not to submit a response. It is considered important that a consultation response is submitted in order to express strong support for a dual carriageway improvement and to highlight issues which need addressing with regard to the layout and local impacts of the scheme.

Members consulted; members informed :	Yes
Officer consultations completed: Heritage Trust and South Somerset District Council have been consulted as part of this decision process and their comments are incorporated.	Officers from South West
Senior (including statutory) officer sign off completed	ECI Lead Director consulted and approved 8/3/2018.
Public / other consultations undertaken	Not considered necessary. The consultation response has taken into account views on the proposals that have been expressed by the local community as communicated to the senior officer.
Financial, Legal, HR, Risk, Due regard implications considered	Yes

Background papers:

Highways England consultation documents accessible from <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/he/a303-sparkford-to-ilchester-statutory-consultation/>

The below has been completed:	Name(s)	Date
Relevant local County Councillors consulted where decision directly affects their Division	Cllr Mike Lewis	07/3/2018
Relevant Cabinet Member(s) consulted (if applicable)	Cllr David Hall Cabinet Member for Business, Inward Investment and Policy.	07/3/2018
Opposition Spokesperson informed (if applicable)	Cllr Mike Rigby	07/3/2018
Chairman of relevant Scrutiny informed (if applicable)	Cllr Tony Lock for Scrutiny Place. Proposed response copied to members of the Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee	07/3/2018 07/03/2018

Decision Maker

I am aware of the details of this decision, have considered the reasons, options, representations and consultation responses (where applicable) and give my approval / agreement to its implementation.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M O'Dowd-Jones', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Name: Mike O'Dowd-Jones

Post: Strategic Commissioning Manager Highways and Transport

Date: 9/03/2018