

HCC TRANSPORT VISION 2050: AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOCUSING PARTICULARLY ON HERTFORD

These comments, amounting to an alternative vision, have been assembled following a meeting and much follow-up work on the part of a working group of volunteers recruited from the membership (some 300 households) of Hertford Civic Society; the working group included one or two people with specific transport policy expertise. All members accessible by email have had the opportunity to comment on a draft circulated to them; a good many have done so and their responses were very useful in finalising this response. While these comments do have a Hertford focus, they could also have useful implications for other towns (such as Bishops Stortford – see paras 11 and 13). We recognise that it is important to take a broader, county-based perspective.

2. In terms of Hertfordshire County Council's *Transport Vision 2050* document and its format, we are responding particularly to the question posed at the end (page 35): "Limiting future levels of traffic growth and improving walking, cycling and public transport provision will be very hard to achieve without policies which encourage less car use and help to enhance provision of and investment in more sustainable modes. What policies should Hertfordshire consider adopting to achieve this?"

3. We salute the presentation of the *Transport Vision* document and, at times, recognise readily that sensible ideas are being floated but, ultimately, we feel that too many important threats and opportunities have been missed or downplayed.

Summary: the underplayed threat and the missing opportunities

4. If there is a single glaring omission in this report, it is that:

- Pollution associated with traffic congestion, and the need to tackle this more fully and speedily, if lives are to be saved (this is not mentioned in the foreword or the vision chart/Fig 1, though it is introduced alongside much other detail on page 10);
- Symptomatic of this lack of emphasis, there is no substantive mention of the importance of reducing the need to travel. For instance, it is not directly mentioned in the foreword or in Fig 1, though there are some allusions later in the report.
- With recent improvements in technology, it is no longer as necessary for office-based staff to commute to their workplaces. (For example, in London, in the HQ of the Ministry of Justice, a huge building housing several thousand people, all staff are expected to work from home two days a week.)

5. Linked closely to this, opportunities are missed or downplayed, to articulate the full range of ways of enticing people out of their cars. We present a case study of how rush-hour congestion in Hertford could be eased without road building, as mentioned in the first bullet point below and later in more detail:

- In the context of congestion in Hertford, no mention is made of the possibility of HCC 'leading from the front' in terms of setting a good example of how staff in a large

organisation (HCC HQ) can reduce their travel-to-work car usage. There are other large organisations that have been doing substantially better in terms of facing this kind of challenge, even if there has recently been some fresh interest on the part of HCC.

- The suggested option of an extremely expensive bypass in Hertford indicates that, even on its own 'home ground', HCC has not managed to think through the process – which would need to be gradual – whereby key groups of people could be persuaded to do less in the way of single-person commuter car journeys.
- There is, in the *Vision* document as a whole, an over-emphasis on road building which, if implemented, would merely increase traffic volumes and worsen pollution. While a pair of bus rapid transport systems is suggested, trams remain a more promising option for enticing larger numbers of people from their cars, on the all-important east-west route.

6. An important underlying weakness in the *Vision* document is that it makes little attempt to consider patterns and problems of local movement, within particular urban settlements. Which urban areas are, relatively speaking, best or worst in terms of traffic and pollution, and why? Which fare best in terms of levels of rush-hour walking, cycling, car sharing and public transport usage? How do local patterns of movement in individual urban areas contribute ultimately to the total pattern across the county? Does the County Council know the answers to these questions? If it does not know the answers, might it need to do some more research before unleashing new proposals?

Pollution and air quality issues

7. Hertfordshire (and of course Hertford itself) suffers from serious air quality issues. One set of key junctions in Hertford is already the focus for an **Air Quality Management Area (AQMA)**. It is however important to recognise that pollution is a general problem across the County as a whole: thus Hertford is for instance downwind of St Albans, Hatfield, Welwyn and parts of the M25, all of which are apt to disseminate particulate pollution in the direction of Hertford. And lives are certainly being shortened across the County, as the next two paragraphs show. Ultimately, all of this reflects the lack of good-quality east-west public transport. All the current commuter routes are north-south.

8. Recent statistics published by Public Health England (part of the Department of Health) show that 'the fraction of mortality attributable to particulate air pollution' (which at least in South East England is largely due to motor traffic, especially diesel vehicles) is higher in Hertfordshire than in any other area outside London. (Source: 'Public Health Outcomes Framework', November 2013.) In London, just over 7% of deaths are attributable to particulate air pollution; next comes Hertfordshire at 6%, whereas equivalent figures for England as a whole, or for the East of England, are about 5%. What the *Vision* document does note (page 10) is that Hertfordshire has 30 Air Quality Management Areas, and that 'approx. 514 deaths per year in the County are thought to be attributable to fine particulate air pollution.' This represents over 10 times as many deaths as those resulting from traffic accidents. The *Vision* document also notes (again on the page 10) that, 'on average, road use by each resident produces 2.3kt (kilotonnes) of carbon dioxide, which is higher than the East of England average.' No mention is made of Nitrogen Dioxide as generated by diesel vehicles in particular, although only recently (November 2016) the Government has

acknowledged that pollution from diesel engines will need to be tackled more vigorously, particularly in urban areas.

9. To reinforce this point, when the County Council consulted the Environment Agency earlier this year (2016) in connection with a planning application for phased extraction of sand and gravel at Wadesmill Road to the North of Hertford (for the proposed Bengoe Quarry) the Environment Agency stated **“the site is located in an area that has been the subject of significant concern to us with regards to air quality. In particular, there already are high levels of airborne particulate pollution and Nitrogen Dioxide...”**. If the Environment Agency has these concerns, for a site not close to any formal Air Quality Management Area or to the A414, should not the County Council be putting a much stronger emphasis on the need to foster alternatives to car use, than it actually does in its *Vision* document? And, in the light of that November 2016 court case, is not the time now right to ensure that people in Hertfordshire who want to travel, as many do, on an East-West basis between different towns, can actually have a realistic opportunity to do this on reasonably rapid public transport, as opposed to the meandering bus journeys currently on offer? (This is a point that we will return to later in this response, in the next section.)

HERTFORD AS A CASE STUDY

10. The first point about a proposed bypass for Hertford is that it would take too long, perhaps around a decade, to implement. That implies a decade of not tackling pollution in Hertford, which is surely not acceptable.

11. The other reason why we doubt that any bypass would ultimately reduce pollution is that, once constructed, the tract of land that would then be enclosed would almost immediately start to be filled in with new housing, which would generate further traffic and more pollution (also strongly affecting the character of this market town). This is precisely what has happened at Buntingford and Bishops Stortford. Bishops Stortford, as the other large town in East Herts alongside Hertford, is a particularly relevant example. Construction of a bypass there has done nothing to relieve traffic congestion in the town, or to ameliorate its Air Quality Management Area.

12. A more timely strategy would develop Hertford as a sustainable town, on a rapid though still phased basis. Hertford offers exceptional opportunities to do this. Local government is by far the largest employer. The car parks at Wallfields and County Hall are substantially larger than all the public car parks in the centre of the town: together these two local government car parks account for some 1300 spaces, as opposed to around 900 public spaces in the town centre car parks. And, unsurprisingly, much of the rush-hour traffic turning off the A414 at the Richard Hale roundabout is heading for either Wallfields or County Hall (as was mentioned in the HCC presentation on the bypass on 30 September 2016).

13. There are some major employers both in the public and private sectors which do a great deal more to ensure that car use by their staff is well managed, utilising both positive and

negative incentives. Some of these organisations are supported by Liftshare, which exists to promote car sharing. Its website carries case studies of well-known companies which have found it worthwhile to foster car sharing for their employees, as this is good for morale and productivity, besides offering substantial, measurable reductions in car use in the vicinity of their main workplaces (business.liftshare.com/business-case-studies). Occasionally this website is a little coy about exactly what (dis)incentives have been used to promote car sharing, though there is no doubt that both the ethos of the participating company and the offering of seemingly modest incentives (such as the most highly desirable parking spaces being reserved for car-sharers) can do quite a lot. For instance, at Jaguar Land Rover, some seven thousand staff have registered for at least occasional car sharing, while almost three thousand do so on a daily basis. (Another large organisation which has a well-established commitment to car sharing by staff is Heathrow Airport, an example which could perhaps be relevant to the other large town in East Herts, Bishops Stortford, where Stansted Airport surely generates much road traffic by staff, who work for a large number of different companies.)

14. Here, we are mainly concerned with Hertford, where the two large local authorities, which account for so much rush-hour traffic, are uniquely well placed, jointly, to lead the way in promoting alternatives to individual car use, and ultimately to bring about environmental benefits on a large scale.

15. Before introducing the following case study, from Southampton, it is vital to emphasise that Southampton is not Hertford. First, Southampton is a single conurbation. Secondly, it has been implementing some fairly vigorous measures against pollution for over two decades, so it is now able to be much more decisive than it would previously have been. In introducing car sharing on any large scale, it is important to do this on a staged basis, and fully in consultation with staff (as too with any non-staff agencies also operating from the same location). It is also crucial that the process is done as fairly as possible, and not bearing onerously on those for whom sharing is genuinely difficult or impossible. And, finally, it is necessary that staff are fully supported not only by a team of coordinators but also through such policies as a right for staff to be reimbursed for any taxi fare they might need to get home if, at the end of their working day, their car share is unexpectedly not available. Staff morale is crucial to car sharing, while successful car sharing can actually enhance overall staff morale. And, of course, those participating regularly in car sharing should feel financially better off.

16. The best and longest-running example from local government that we have been able to find comes from Southampton and its City Council. There, over a couple of decades, starting with the Council's own staff, and following this up with all the other key players such as schools and other large local organisations, real reductions in car use and pollution have been achieved. Southampton City Council introduced parking charges for its staff: they now have to pay over a thousand pounds for an annual permit (unless deemed essential car users). This is the kind of charge which concentrates the minds of car drivers, persuading some of them to car share, or use public transport, or cycle, instead. It also generates revenue which can be used to support staff in other ways, for instance by funding co-ordinators who can advise on other options or facilitate car sharing, or by providing discounted tickets on public transport. Over the last fifteen years, Southampton City Council

has not only done a lot to encourage its own staff to refrain from driving to work individually, but has also worked hard to enhance all the relevant alternative options for everyone living or working in Southampton. This even includes the journey to school, for which levels of car use are regularly monitored (a reduction in the proportion of pupils travelling by car has been achieved). Last but not least, efforts have been made to ensure that other large employers in the Southampton area also introduce their own travel to work plans – so much easier to do with the local authority leading from the front. Changing levels of pollution are routinely monitored, in large numbers of locations, with follow-up action as necessary.

17. There has arguably not been any significant effort so far by East Herts Council or by Hertfordshire County Council, least of all on any joined-up basis, to promote alternatives to individual car use. Certainly there have not been any major campaigns to woo the public to resort less to personal car use. A few modest efforts have been made to encourage the two workforces to adopt alternatives to personal car use, but these have not been backed up by anything much in the way of prompts or incentives, and accordingly staff continue overwhelmingly to travel to work in their own individual vehicles. Perhaps the most dramatic example in Hertford of a positive change that is relevant is at the North station. There, as at various other stations in the wider area, the introduction of large new sets of cycle racks has been all that is needed to encourage appreciable numbers of commuters to travel to their train station by bicycle. These cycle racks are better than those offered to visitors at County Hall or, certainly, Wallfields.

18. In these few paragraphs we have sketched in outline how Hertford could become a much more sustainable town, and how this could be done without expenditure on a bypass, which would generate its own problems for the future. We have highlighted the scope for the two local authorities to lead from the front and, over a period of time, to involve other people and organisations, while also gradually improving the alternatives to car use. The single most important alternative that needs to be developed is a better east-west public transport route, which takes us well outside Hertford, while still being highly relevant to Hertford, and thus constituting another important part of this case study.

19. Many of the major settlements in Hertfordshire are strung in an east-west line from Hertford through to Hatfield and St Albans, and then on to Hemel Hempstead. Currently the public transport on offer is too infrequent and localised to attract large numbers of users. The County's *Vision* document suggests a pair of guided bus routes by way of a major improvement. However, it is still worth asking whether a tram route would be even better. This is the option suggested in the recent Gascoyne Cecil Estates publication "Transport for Hatfield and beyond in Central Hertfordshire". A tram route would offer faster and more comfortable travel, and could move more people more readily than a busway. It is possible that in the first instance a shorter but high quality tram route should be developed between St Albans and Hertford (not initially including Hemel Hempstead). It would still join up major but congested centres of population and economic activity, and could indeed be used by those members of the EHC and HCC workforces who live to the west of Hertford, and currently have little option but to travel to work by car. It would be very helpful if the route could pass close to or even conceivably terminate in the vicinity of their workplaces.

CONCLUSIONS

20. As mentioned at the beginning of this response, the County's *Vision* document culminates with the crucial question: "Limiting future levels of traffic growth and improving walking, cycling and public transport provision will be very hard to achieve without policies which encourage less car use and help to enhance provision and investment in more sustainable modes. What policies should Hertfordshire adopting to achieve this?"

21. We think that, at least where Hertford is concerned, we have sketched out a practical sequence whereby, starting with car sharing on the part of the EHC and HCC workforces, a great deal could be done. We note that the County has not immediately had a positive response to its proposal for a Hertford bypass, either at the consultative seminar on 30 September (Mark Prisk MP as the neutral chairman noted at the end that the event had increasingly raised questions), or in the letters page of the 'Mercury'. People locally obviously dislike the rush-hour congestion, but are still cautious about ravaging some beautiful and well-used countryside.

22. Even if the County presses ahead with plans for a bypass, we still think that the pollution-reducing ideas sketched out above would be well worth implementing, starting as soon as possible. We would not want to suffer for a decade (or anything like that) until a bypass and any linked enhancements are put in place. We would all benefit from making a transition to a more sustainable Hertford much sooner than that.

23. While the County Council may be keen to press ahead with a bypass on the basis of a single option (the southern route, as mentioned in November's *Axis* magazine), we believe that alternatives should be evaluated as well. We can only begin to outline these here. A northern route probably makes even less sense than a southern one, though even this might allow the existing A414 south of Panshanger to be reclaimed, perhaps partly for a guided busway or tram route. To avoid the kind of southern option last floated in the 1990s, which would soon be followed by infilling with housing, it could be worth considering a longer route altogether, that might start at the Harlow turn-off on the A10 and conceivably run through to the existing A414 at Holwell. This would be more difficult to designate for infilling. Yet another option would be to consider some cut-and-cover tunnelling, which could enable a much shorter route to be developed, 'underneath' Hertford (there is a detailed letter in the 'Mercury', 3.11.16, though technical questions have also been raised about this since then). Ultimately, the County Council is vulnerable to the charge of acting with undue haste, or of a lack of open-mindedness, if it only assesses the costs and benefits of a single route: especially if that one route happens to cost somewhere in the range of £155-175 million pounds of public money.