

HERTFORD BYPASS/A414 CONSULTATION: MAIN/FULL RESPONSE BY HERTFORD CIVIC SOCIETY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. We support the County Council's approach of drawing up a transport strategy for the A414 corridor as a whole. But this approach inevitably means that the proposals set out for individual towns such as Hertford do not fully address the transport problems of the town; instead they concentrate on issues affecting movement between towns.
2. It is undeniable that the bypass proposed for Hertford would provide a quicker, easier route for traffic between towns east of Hertford and those to the west, and the town would benefit from the transfer to the bypass of a proportion of the traffic which currently uses Gascoyne Way (although we doubt whether the reduction in traffic on Gascoyne Way would be as significant as forecast). We acknowledge that, as the approved plans for large-scale development at Welwyn Garden City, Ware, Gilston, Harlow and elsewhere are built out, the scale of those benefits would increase.
3. But there is a growing public consensus that traffic congestion cannot be solved by building more roads. The costs of roadbuilding, not only financial, but also in terms of issues such as encouraging more traffic, air pollution, climate change, and loss of countryside and valued habitats, have been well-rehearsed. In the case of Hertford, we are particularly concerned:
 - that a bypass might encourage the infilling of land between the new road and the edge of the town,
 - that a bypass might even be seen as a way of enabling the town to grow by more than current approved plans envisage. The future size of the town should not be pre-determined by transport considerations. (The least damaging option for any eventual bypass route might be further south.)
4. In policy terms, major new roadbuilding runs counter to the thrust of the Transport Plan, except as a last resort. The Mass Rapid Transport System proposed in the strategy is a far better fit with the thinking behind the Transport Plan, and should be given the chance to demonstrate its effectiveness before any decision to go ahead with a bypass is taken.
5. The strategy mentions measures which could be taken to make it easier for people to get about Hertford, but these are not worked up in detail, and action on them is deferred until after a bypass is built. This is a fundamentally wrong approach. Action on some of the measures, and many more not mentioned, could and should be taken now. They would produce benefits whether or not a bypass is built, and could even help to reduce the need to build one.
6. The kind of things we believe should be investigated are listed in our full response. We believe that large employers, including the County Council, could help by more actively promoting car sharing, staff park and ride, and working from home one or two days a week.

FULL REPORT

Introduction

1. We welcome the County Council's action in compiling a comprehensive strategy for the A414 corridor as a whole. We have tried to convey our views on the strategy by responding to your on-line survey, but would like those responses to be read in the context of the following narrative commentary. We recently organised a well-attended consultation event (in the Catholic church in Hertford on 16 January), which revealed considerable public scepticism as to the value of the one major new road that is proposed, the Hertford bypass; our views here tend to reflect that scepticism, at least up to a point.

Objectives

2. With one exception, the stated objectives of the strategy are not controversial. The exception is the first, to 'support sustainable economic growth'. There are many among our members, and no doubt among Hertfordshire residents as a whole, who do not necessarily see further growth in the population and economy of the County as desirable, bearing in mind the pace of growth in the recent past. Those who take that view will not be likely to favour any transport strategy which facilitates such growth. However, we recognise that decisions about future population and economic growth are made by District Councils and incorporated in development plans which must be consistent with government policy; the role of the County Council, as we understand it, is to ensure that the transport infrastructure is in place to support those agreed plans. Looked at in that way, we accept that one of the objectives of the A414 strategy must be to ensure that economic growth can come forward in a sustainable way from a transport perspective. We can therefore agree with all the stated objectives, in particular those concerned with modal shift and demand management. However it appears to us that some objectives have had a far greater influence on the proposals than others, and we elaborate on this point in our detailed comments.

Segments 11 & 12: Hertford

Priorities

3. Because they set the scene for what follows, we comment briefly on the 'priorities' for Segment 11 first. It would of course be beneficial to Hertford if through traffic were removed from the town, but we are not convinced that a bypass would remove enough traffic to enable the other priorities listed to be realised. It is also premature to label a bypass as a 'priority' purely on the basis of the benefits it would bring, without first taking account of its costs and disadvantages.
4. The second priority (a transformative change in function of the current A414 through Hertford etc) appears to be an answer to the question "What shall we do with this roadspace that we no longer need" rather than a response to the needs of people wishing to move around Hertford. Whether a bypass would in reality enable roadspace to be released is debatable (see 9b below), but the redundant carriageway, if available, would indeed provide an opportunity to accommodate a Mass Rapid Transit system. However it is not in the right place to become a street attractive to pedestrians and cyclists; as it was built as a relief road for through traffic it runs tangential to the direction of local movement on foot, by bike, and indeed by car, between the southern residential areas of Hertford and the town centre.

5. With regard to the supposed priority for increased accessibility between the two Hertford train stations, the strategy presents little evidence of the need for this. Presumably the assumption is that there is a latent demand for commuter journeys between places such as Cheshunt and Broxbourne and the Stevenage area – otherwise why would anyone wish to interchange between the two Hertford stations?
6. We would certainly not disagree with the final priority – an improved cycle network within Hertford – but the reference to routes such as the Cole Green Way and the towpath reflects the strategy’s focus on long-distance travel between towns, rather than local work-related, shopping and social trips within Hertford itself. Cycling in the town is not comfortable and is potentially dangerous.

Hertford Bypass

7. Despite the stance taken by the Local Transport Plan that the County’s traffic problems cannot be solved by building more roads, and despite the strategy’s stated objectives to facilitate modal shift, implement demand management, enable behaviour change and deliver better environmental outcomes, pages 237 to 240 of the strategy make the case for building a Hertford bypass. There are good arguments that the costs of a bypass – financial, and in terms of encouraging more traffic, air pollution, climate change, and loss of countryside and valued habitats – outweigh the advantages either to Hertford itself or to those wishing to travel through from east to west. We would argue that at present the problems in Hertford of congestion, air pollution, severance and so on, though irksome, are not so severe that a bypass is necessary in the short term: other measures can and should be taken without delay (see 16 below).
8. However we recognise that future development planned for Harlow, the Gilston area and Ware, and for Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, could well throw an enormous volume of extra traffic on to the A414 over the next twenty years, with the increases continuing beyond that for as long as can be seen ahead; and it is easy to overlook the fact that a significant amount of the traffic on the A414 is road freight. If the growth forecasts are accepted uncritically as inevitable, and unless really serious steps are taken to replace longer distance car travel by shorter journeys and other modes, a bypass might make sense. But we are all, as a community, addicted to roads and private motoring and, given the growing consensus that we cannot build our way out of traffic problems, a plea for one more bypass smacks of “Lord, please make me good, but not yet”.
9. Further to that, perhaps rather philosophical, perspective we make these five specific points about the bypass:
 - a. The proposal to build a bypass at some time in the future is not a good reason to put off taking steps now to help people to move in and around Hertford more easily. We return to this below, under the heading of Package 23.
 - b. The proposed bypass would not take away enough of the traffic currently passing through the town to enable the “reimaging” of the A414 through Hertford to be achieved. If 40% is through traffic and can mainly be persuaded to use the bypass, it follows that, even before allowing for latent or suppressed demand, the residual traffic volume will be at least 60% of what it is now. If two of the four lanes of Gascoyne Way, ie 50% of capacity, were taken out of use for general traffic the remaining two lanes would be at least as congested as the dual carriageway is now, air quality would remain poor, and the roadspace released could not become “attractive and well-connected footways and cycle routes as well as potential mini parklands” as the strategy suggests.

- c. The possibility that a bypass could enable Hertford to grow should not be counted in its favour in evaluating the merits of the scheme. We mention this because the draft Local Transport Plan said that the bypass *“should enable further growth of Hertford beyond that currently included in the emerging East Hertfordshire Local Plan. This should be a consideration in the further development of the scheme given its potential to strengthen the case for the scheme and fund its delivery.”* Although this wording is not repeated in the final Transport Plan or in the strategy, there is still an implication that the further growth of Hertford would be desirable, and that the bypass should be given credit for facilitating such growth. We submit that the question of whether more development should take place around Hertford, or be directed instead to other parts of the County or beyond, is a matter for future decision by the local and national bodies responsible for planning at the time; it should not be predetermined now as part of the cost/benefit analysis of a particular road proposal. If a decision to expand Hertford further were to be taken, the plans should be based round strong priority for walking, cycling and local public transport.
- d. The experience of other towns such as Bishop’s Stortford and Buntingford shows that, if a bypass is built fairly close to the edge of a town, the land between it and the urban edge becomes less useful as farmland and vulnerable to being infilled for housing and business uses. To guard against this consequence in the case of Hertford we believe any bypass, if built, should follow an alignment well to the south of the town, connecting with the A10 at the Hoddesdon junction. Admittedly a route of this kind would be less attractive for traffic wishing to turn north, but it would not face the requirement to circle round Hertford Heath – a requirement which substantially lengthens any route even loosely following the 1994 scheme.
- e. Finally it is important to note that one of the initial consequences of constructing a bypass modelled on the 1994 alignment would be to damage very seriously three successful farms, Amwell Place, Foxholes and Dunkirksbury. These are all cattle-raising farms, selling a range of related products (including Dawlicious ice cream) as well as providing some employment, and their potential loss in part or ultimately in whole would deplete much of the more viable cattle-farming that takes place in East Herts.

Package 23

- 10. In our view the strategy approaches the question of sustainable travel improvements for Hertford from the wrong perspective. The whole strategy, as its name suggests, is primarily about inter-urban connectivity along the A414 corridor. We have no quarrel with the measures in Package 23 in so far as they attempt to improve that. But in order to put together and prioritise a set of measures to help people get about Hertford more easily the first step should be to collect and analyse information about the local movements which people actually make: where do people want to go to and from, when do they want to make those journeys, which journeys involve carrying or transporting heavy items, are journeys ‘there and back’ or linked with others, why do people choose the mode of transport which they do, what are the problems faced by people with limited mobility, what journeys could be avoided by changes in lifestyle such as working from home? The questions are almost limitless, but if we wish to achieve a real change in travel behaviour, then current travel patterns are only part of the information needed; they are determined by the present supply of destinations and travel modes: creating different patterns of supply is part of the way to change behaviour.

11. In relation to road traffic and prospective roadbuilding, a whole industry has grown up in the past few decades devoted to surveying, analysing and modelling traffic flows and exploring the pattern of origins and destinations of journeys and the reasons for them. For local movements, varying in length from a couple of hundred yards to a mile or two, there seems to be very little analysis and understanding. Instead we find, in Package 23 and elsewhere in the strategy, a series of well-intentioned but mostly vague phrases, such as 'delivering a step change in terms of high quality footway and cycle route provision', 'improve the environment and provision for active travel', 'improve public transport within Hertford', 'significant improvements in walking, cycling and passenger transport provision', 'improving the quality and connectivity of transport provision within Hertford for people using non-motorised forms of transport', and 'improved routing facilities for pedestrians and cyclists and improved urban realm'.
12. Probably no-one would disagree with aspirations like these, but they do not constitute a strategy. Success in bringing about the changes aspired to will depend on changing behaviour, but it will be impossible to change people's behaviour unless the reasons why they currently behave as they do are understood.
13. It is also unhelpful to regard measures to encourage people to change their travel behaviour, or to help them move around more easily on foot or by cycle, as necessarily part of a package associated with road improvements. All such changes will have to be introduced incrementally, and some could and should be begun now, whether or not a bypass is eventually built at some time in the future. A step by step approach will also make it easier to understand what works, to learn from mistakes, and to put in place workable maintenance plans – it will be no good building a new cycleway if it is constantly strewn with broken glass or deep in mushy leaves for half the year. Proper management and maintenance of local highways, including roads and also pavements and footpaths, will be fundamental to the success of measures to change travel behaviour. At present footways in particular seem to be very poorly looked after, with very low standards, seen for example in failure even to trim back hedges or clear leaves. To expect people willingly to choose walking in such conditions seems strange; it is also inequitable treatment for the elderly, children and other less mobile people, contradicting the LTP policy (1) objective of putting pedestrians and cyclists above travellers by other modes.
14. An aspect to which the strategy pays little attention is the extent to which the need to travel, whether long- or short-distance, can be reduced. We believe any strategy to improve travel conditions in Hertford should examine this aspect in detail, as well as examining the scope for altering the times of journeys so as to smooth the peaks.
15. If measures to change the pattern of travel and travel behaviour in Hertford are to be successful, the costs will be substantial compared with the amounts now spent on pedestrian crossings, footpath maintenance etc. But they should be seen not in that context but in comparison with the costs associated with road-building and maintenance. And expenditure on non-motorised transport of course has the advantage of improving conditions not only for people wanting to get from place to place, but also for dog-walkers, joggers and those who just like to take a walk or cycle ride for pleasure and exercise.
16. Here are some of the steps we would like to see explored or taken (in no particular order):
 - More flexitime working
 - More working from home
 - Staggered school opening and closing hours

- Charges for workplace parking
- Free school buses
- School 'walking buses'
- Improvements to local bus services, especially through on-road priorities, improved bus stops and coordinated through tickets.
- Large employers to more actively promote car sharing (with full professional support), staff park and ride, and working from home one or two days a week etc.
- Additional free, secure cycle parking at town centre locations, other key destinations and railway stations (especially Hertford East)
- Developers of peripheral housing estates to donate free electric bicycles to purchasers
- Use of bollards or draconian fines to prevent pavement parking
- Removal of unnecessary signs, A-boards and street clutter from pavements
- Regular clearing and maintenance of footways and pavements to nationally recommended standards set out in Manual for Streets
- More and better cycle lanes; at Old Cross and other tricky junctions, 'advanced stop lines' or designated spaces for cyclists should be provided, in front of the stop lines for motor vehicles
- Creation of dedicated cycle routes, not just cycle lanes, to reassure nervous cyclists or those who have not cycled before that cycling is safe
- Road-pricing at rush hours

17. If, over a period of time, changes of this kind are to be successfully achieved, the County Council will need to lead from the front. This point was strongly emphasised by members of the public at the 16 January consultation meeting. HCC will have to be prepared to influence the travel habits of its own workforce, which currently depend heavily on the subsidised provision of spaces in what is one of the largest car parks in regular use in Hertfordshire. Whilst the Local Transport Plan calls for major employers to foster reduced car use, we recognise that this kind of change will take time and effort to promote and reward, and to reassure staff that they are not being 'singled out'. To this end, it is highly relevant that various other Councils are currently assessing whether they should introduce charges on all workplace car parks in polluted urban settings: charges that could be passed on to employees either wholly or in part. Nottingham City Council has recently introduced a workplace parking levy on all employers (except NHS ones) who provide workplace parking, and those charges have themselves been passed on to staff by a good many employers. Ultimately, the important point to bear in mind is that, according to the County's own research (the 2014 AECOM report drawing on ANPR or number-plate tracking), as much as 30% of the rush-hour traffic on the A414 in Hertford is heading for County Hall (or Wallfields): not quite as many vehicles as are 'through traffic', but still a very sizeable cause of congestion, capable of being reduced.

Mass Rapid Transit (Annex 15)

18. We welcome in principle the proposal to develop a Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system across the County. However, we are concerned that this proposal exists largely as a concept at this stage and appears to be poorly developed. There are two main areas over which we have serious questions.
19. First, the system proposed is based on non-guided bus, the choice reflecting an analysis of four technologies: non-guided bus, guided bus, light rail/tramway, and autonomous mass transit. However, this analysis uses a series of general statements rather than comparing capacities,

performance and other factors, and the basis for the decision remains unclear. Guided bus was the system chosen in the LTP4 policy document (November 2017) but on no real basis: the analysis here seems to be merely a rationalising of a previous decision rather than an unbiased evaluation.

20. Second, the system is routed mostly along the main roads of the A414 corridor and in particular “could avoid some congested urban centres including St Albans and Welwyn Garden City.” Links to the main commercial and public destinations within towns would be by existing ‘traditional’ bus services connecting at new interchanges on roads outside the towns. Integration of all services is implied by the principles set out for the MRT. But no suggestion is made anywhere of improving existing services, in fact the County does not have a good record on bus service development over recent decades. Interchange between bus services is not attractive to most travellers, except where interchanges are set on frequent routes within densely populated urban areas.
21. Several other aspects also pose questions on the feasibility of the proposed guided bus system:
 - The MRT is expected to be delivered in phases: short term (branded traditional bus), medium term (extensions and dedicated network), long term (autonomous electric vehicles). No indication is given of the years over which these phases would happen. But if an initial stage of creating an upgraded bus section does not make a significant change, then the viability of further steps could well be open to question, causing the MRT project to be abandoned.
 - The system would consist of five overlapping (bus) routes, but these are clearly defined as initial thoughts, requiring further analysis of operational requirements and viability based on existing journey patterns. So no real work on design and appraisal appears to have been done.
 - No indications are given about how the viability of MRT services would be judged or how any shortfall against costs might be met from public funds.
 - It is suggested that Transit Oriented Developments on the MRT would support more sustainable local movement. These would be mainly on the edge of towns, on the A414. No mention is made of how they might be developed or of their role in Local Plans, responsibility for which lies with the district councils.
 - Tables are given of the possible MRT projects and their costs but these are indicative only. The feasibility of the defined projects to achieve a viable MRT operation remains questionable. For example, would the works proposed in principle around Hertford and Ware (other than on Gascoyne Way) be sufficient to overcome the serious traffic congestion that affects both the main Hertford to Ware Road and other roads within the two towns?
22. We remain convinced that a real step change in travel behaviour along the central Hertfordshire corridor can be achieved only through the provision of a modern rail based system through the main towns, for which the proposed Herts Orbital Transit tramway forms potentially the most suitable candidate.