

## **BYPASS/CORRIDOR STRATEGY FOR HERTFORD? ANALYSIS OF FEEDBACK, PUBLIC MEETING**

### *Introduction: public meeting/consultation on A414 Strategy/Hertford bypass*

As soon as Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) announced in December 2018 that it was beginning a consultation on its strategy for the A414 corridor (ending late February 2019), Hertford Civic Society invited the HCC lead Councillor, Derrick Ashley, to give a presentation at a public meeting. This event was held in the Roman Catholic church in Hertford on 16 January, in the evening, and was attended by some 200 people, the majority of whom were not members of the Civic Society. Participants asked thoughtful questions and were also able to complete open-ended feedback forms which they put into a 'ballot box' at the end of the meeting: 108 people did this. These forms have been analysed: they provide a rich source of information from many different points of view, as reviewed here. Where appropriate, they are contextualised by references to official *A414 Corridor Strategy* report, as supplemented occasionally by the best guide to the traffic flows in Hertford's rush hour, the AECOM report of 2014 (*A414 Transport Strategy: Strategic Study Stage 2 ANPR Data Analysis*, as commissioned by HCC).

2. Unsurprisingly, many respondents (59) took the opportunity to vote for or against the bypass: the overwhelming majority (50) declared themselves opposed. They included one person who explained that 'I went into the meeting desperate for a bypass, but now I am not so sure.' Only 9 people positively welcomed the idea of a bypass for Hertford. That is as clear a steer as could reasonably be envisaged, from any impartially-organised and public meeting, which was widely advertised (by flyers, in the local paper, and online).

### *The development of the bypass/corridor strategy: key elements*

3. The proposal for a bypass is intimately linked with the final articulation of the East Herts District Plan, as signed off in 2018. Extra housing is actively envisaged along the A414 corridor (not just in East Herts, but also further afield), and the A414, in Hertford in particular, is congested and polluted at rush hour. However, this aspect of the District Plan was not based on detailed study of the full range of different transport options for East Herts and, until this current HCC consultation, it has been less exposed to public scrutiny.

4. Once the District Plan was finalised, Hertfordshire County Council (as the Highways Authority) prepared a document, the *A414 Corridor Strategy*, on which it could consult the public. While the document reviews the A414 across much of the County, only one major new road is suggested: the Hertford bypass. As well as the bypass for Hertford, other initiatives are proposed for the town, to enhance the currently modest alternatives to car use, including the development of an enhanced East-West bus route linking Hertford with nearby towns in the A414 corridor (the 'Mass Rapid Transit', or MRT). A much-repeated mantra is that 'improvements to sustainable travel in Hertford are closely tied to the timescales for bringing forward a Hertford bypass', and that "a Mass Rapid Transit system through Hertford is unlikely to be feasible until a bypass is in place."

### *The case against the bypass/corridor strategy: basic issues*

5. The bypass represents “yesterday’s solution”, to the problem of congestion, in the words of one person giving feedback. Some of the key problems facing the bypass include:

- Massive price tag (£250-500 Million), probably implying a long delay, a decade or more, as this is a lot of money for so short a route. One feedback form went so far as to describe the bypass as a “a long-term dream”, which needed to be put aside in favour of “more early actions” against pollution and congestion. Potential “early actions” are reviewed in greater detail in the next section.
- With at least one of those respondents in favour of a bypass believing that “most of the traffic in Hertford is cutting through”, it is important to consider how far any such road would really deliver an immediate or short-term reduction in rush-hour congestion and pollution in the vicinity of Gascoyne Way. The AECOM report indicates that up to 40% of A414 traffic in Hertford in the rush hour is ‘through’ traffic. That is not negligible. However, there remains suppressed demand which might easily replace the some of the re-directed vehicles, not least from significant new developments in the Ware Road area and nearby. Additionally, as the *Corridor* report also notes, if a southern route is chosen, those heading east towards Hertford, but then wanting to go North up the A10, might well opt to stick with current route of the A414. (A northern route would also suffer from some equivalent displacement.)
- “Roads attract cars”, as one feedback form observed, and this would very likely be true of an A414 bypass for Hertford. As fully recognised in the *Corridor* report, there would be additional congestion and rat-running in the vicinity of the next town to the West (Hatfield), which would require significant remedial action. Roads have a well-documented habit of stimulating traffic; this one would become a regular rather than occasional alternative to the nearby part of the M25, as the *Corridor* report also says.
- Ultimately, while a bypass would bring short-term benefits in terms of reduced pollution in central parts of Hertford, the existence of a high-speed freeway with merely a 70mph speed limit would offset this gain, in terms of vehicle emissions. As noted by various respondents, construction of a bypass would not represent a constructive contribution to reducing climate change. More specifically, Hertford as a whole is already apt to experience relatively poor air quality from being downwind of major roads such as parts of the M25 and the A1(M). This is true even of Bengeo, described in 2016 by the Environment Agency in a letter to HCC as “an area.... where there are high levels of airborne particulate pollution and Nitrogen Dioxide.”
- Finally, as HCC notes both in the *Corridor* report and more strongly in LTP4 (Local Travel Plan 4), the construction of a bypass would be followed by further housing, which would cause more congestion, as Hertford’s narrow streets are already clogged with traffic at numerous pinch points, such as Old Cross. The number of houses in Hertford could potentially increase by as much as a third (if the 1994 preferred route is followed), which would have serious consequences for the town and its traffic. And, of course, the destruction of a large swathe of well-cherished farmland and countryside should not be forgotten. A saving of six minutes in journey times has been calculated by HCC, to meet the requirements of the WebTAG process for new road projects of the Department of Transport (see *Corridor* report).

6. Of course, no route has yet been identified (apart from 'southern preferred'). And, as briefly noted in the *Corridor* report, there are still possibilities of using tunnels, which might reduce some of the harm associated with big new roads (in particular, the noise and the destruction of the countryside). But these tunnel options for a bypass (or for adding fresh lanes closer to the existing A414 in Hertford), which were suggested in a few of the feedback forms, cannot be said to have been fully evaluated in the *Corridor* report.

#### *Long before a bypass – the scope for “early actions”*

7. “The assumption [as made in the *Corridor* report and in the HCC presentation in the Catholic church] that a bypass has to be implemented to facilitate other improvements is worrying and not necessarily correct.” That was one person’s comment in a feedback report. Someone else who said they were “cynical about the necessity for a Hertford bypass” asked: “What about easier and less expensive and invasive ways to resolve the need for a bypass?”

8. The most popular early action identified in the feedback reports was to improve local bus services, both within Hertford and to/from neighbouring towns and villages. As many as 26 people made this comment. “We need more buses, and a reliable service”, was a typical response. Smaller, thinner, faster and electric buses all had their adherents. Various feedback respondents said that HCC should be more actively involved in supporting and managing bus services. Echoing an admission by Councillor Ashley during the meeting, one person lamented in their feedback form that “Councils do not have control over bus services, which seem to be the key to the reduction of car journeys.” The case can be made that, under the Transport Acts of 2008 and 2017, Councils can now do more in partnership with bus companies, but if this is the well-ingrained perception of both the Hertford public and HCC, it does not bode well for any bus-based MRT.

9. The next most popular early action, mentioned by 18 people, was for HCC to manage its staff commuting behaviour far more actively. As one person said: “First get County Hall’s transport sorted – 30% of rush-hour traffic on Gascoyne Way is going there (HCC’s own research finding). Promote car sharing, staff park and ride, and working from home one or two days a week etc.” That figure of around 30% of rush-hour A414 traffic heading to County Hall (or Wallfields) comes from the AECOM report. Someone else declared: “If County is expecting reduction in traffic by the local population then they should make more strenuous efforts to reduce traffic to their own offices.” It is certainly true that some other Councils have been more active (for instance, Southampton City Council introduced charging for staff car parks some decades ago). Here in Hertford, within roughly the last ten years, HCC has actually ended a car pool for staff that previously enabled them to make occasional car journeys for work purposes without having to deploy their own vehicles. HCC also subsidises staff car costs by offering tempting financial arrangements very widely.

10. Finally, smaller numbers of people suggested a wide range of other initiatives, including encouraging less ‘school runs’, improving facilities for walkers and cyclists, supporting ‘active travel’ schemes and so on. Small improvements or just gestures of encouragement

can go a long way towards the promotion of reduced car use. For instance (to award HCC credit where it is due) the installation, with the County's financial support, of huge sets of cycle racks at Hertford North has resulted in a situation where up to 140 people now cycle to/from Hertford North on weekdays: more than the 120 people who fill the spaces in the station's car park. Hertford East, where cycle provision is far less satisfactory, now needs an equivalent makeover, especially with much new housing in that part of Hertford.

11. In some ways, the importance of taking simple and inexpensive "early actions" is reinforced not only by the likelihood that the bypass is a long way off (if it happens) but also by the fact that even if it is ever built, Gascoyne Way is unlikely to be sufficiently 'tamed' to be capable of being reduced to a single lane for car use in either direction. If, at best, between a third and 40% of the traffic 'disappears' from the Gascoyne Way in the rush hour with the arrival of a bypass, cramming the remaining cars on to a single lane in either direction would not curtail congestion and pollution. If that is so then, by implication, it might also be difficult for a Mass Rapid Transport to take over the other lanes, as the *Corridor* report proposes.

#### *A different kind of long-term dream: the case for modern tramways*

12. Although neither the *Corridor Strategy* report nor the HCC presentation by Councillor Derrick Ashley incorporated anything other than brief references to trams as possible contenders for any MRT, these were advocated by over half a dozen people completing feedback forms. One made the point that a tramway could be a modern equivalent of the Cole Green railway; another said simply "trams are better than buses". An East-West tramway from, say, Harlow or Broxbourne to St Albans or even Watford might be at least twice as expensive as a Hertford bypass, but would benefit a much larger set of towns on a more sustainable basis. It would also be more likely to attract drivers out of their cars, or so recent experience in other places suggests. Drawing on the now increasingly persuasive research UK evidence, the case for investing in trams has recently been made just down the road from Hertford by the Gascoyne Cecil Estates (*Transport for Hatfield and Beyond in Central Hertfordshire*, 2016). Transport consultant Reg Harman outlined his case for an East-West tramway for Hertfordshire in the autumn 2018 issue of Hertford Civic Society's *Newsletter* (accessible on the Society's website: look under Archive). A tramway that would involve both on-road and off-road elements would not only link different towns but also move large numbers of people to/from town centres and key sites of employment, education and leisure.

#### *Conclusion*

13. This review has presented a succinct overview of the multi-faceted responses received from the relatively large number of local people who turned up one winter's night in January 2019, to hear about the County's A414 strategy and its proposal for a bypass for Hertford. In this particular exercise in public consultation, the idea of a bypass found few friends, though there were plenty of other suggestions for better ways forward.