

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

13 October 2020

Statement by Richard Kendall

Agenda Item 8 – A350 Melksham Bypass

To Cllr Bridget Wayman – Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Statement:

Forget Option X (FOX)

I would like to start by stating that I recognise the importance of the A350 to the local economy – and agree that the optimal route for a bypass to Melksham should be chosen.

However, a new option – outside the ‘A, B or C’ routes which were given the ‘amber light to proceed’ to an Outline Business Case by DfT - is clearly being considered.

This route would start to the south of the canal, creating new crossing of the Semington Brook floodplain and Kennet & Avon Canal. For the purpose of this statement, I shall name the area to the south of the canal as Option X (X for expensive). It is on this specific area that I wish to make this statement.

My concern as a citizen of Wiltshire, a tax payer at both the local & national level is that Option X cannot conceivably deliver better Value for Money than Option C.

I am assuming that Option A & B are no longer *really* on the table – despite being considerably cheaper than Option C (i.e. less money) - as they don't sufficiently solve the transport outcomes (i.e. less value).

The simple logic goes as follows:

1. Crossing of the Semington Brook the and Kennet & Avon Canal: Option C benefits from the A350 already being configured to be widened into a dual carriage way. Option X would require new crossings. It should be noted that going under the canal was by far the most expensive part of the first Melksham bypass.

2. Flood Risk mitigation related to the floodplain: The cost of building a dual carriage way over an area which floods regularly will be significant. Fast forward to 2070, as per the requirement of the Flood Risk Assessments, and the costs will escalate. This would be required for Option X, but not for Option C.

3. Length = cost: All other impediments notwithstanding, Option C would simply be shorter than any possible variant of Option X

4. Ecological mitigation: the area to the south of the canal is unsurprisingly home to significantly greater biodiversity than the start of Option C. This includes several species with National as well as European level protection (such as otters & bats). Mitigation costs during construction (which will cover multiple breeding seasons) and beyond will inevitably be more under Option X than Option C

5. Historic monuments and listed buildings: The Wiltshire and Swindon Historic Environment Record clearly shows the area which is now proposed to be surveyed for Option X, to have historic monuments and listed buildings with statutory designations. These would need to be navigated – which comes at both a cost and adds inefficiency. Option C has no such impediments.

6. Complication, uncertainty and duration – also known as ‘deliverability’: taken on their own and then combined - Option X is more likely to result in a longer and less predictable construction programme than Option C. The forecast contingency for Option X would need to be higher than for Option C

7. Increased chance of Public Inquiry: as the list above provides plenty of genuine ammunition to any opponents of Option X, the chances of a Public Inquiry by the Secretary of State are higher. This would lead to further delays and cost ... and ever-more decreasing value for money. A vicious cycle

8. Poor use of developer contributions: DfT have only committed to partfunding this bypass which we all hope will go ahead. The rest will be funded by Wiltshire Council. If this is to come via developer contributions, this money would be better spent on improving the local infrastructure in Melksham. Option X would take up a disproportionate amount of future developer contributions. This would lead to ‘worse value for money’ for local residents

Value for money is clearly a *relative* concept. But if Option C was already scheduled to use up a disproportionate amount of the potential money £1.3m from DfT ... in *absolute* terms would there be enough money to deliver Option X?

So, in conclusion, Option C is simply a far more logical option than Option X because:-

- It represents better value for money
- It is achievable within the ear-marked budget – and within the existing list of options already presented to DfT

I would therefore urge you to Forget Option X and focus on delivering Option C.