Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

30 November 2021

Subject:	**A350 Melksham Bypass – Report on Second Public Consultation**
Cabinet Member:	**Cllr Dr Mark McClelland, Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding**
Key Decision:	**Key**

Executive Summary

The A350 Melksham Bypass is a Large Local Major scheme which was awarded development funding by the Department of Transport (DfT) to take it to Outline Business Case (OBC) stage. It would be a major improvement to the important A350 Primary route which provides vital transport links between the M4, the towns of western Wiltshire and the south coast. The Melksham Bypass is required to address current growth trends and future planned growth within Wiltshire.

Options for the scheme, including road and non-road options, were the subject of a public consultation earlier this year. The results of that consultation and an option sifting exercise were reported to Cabinet on 1 June 2021, when it was agreed to undertake further consultation on an emerging route.

The second consultation was launched at the Melksham Area Board on 23 June 2021, with webinars held on 6 and 13 July 2021. The public consultation ended on 8 August 2021. However, discussions have continued with landowners and other organisations regarding various aspects of the scheme.

There were 760 responses to the second public consultation questionnaire, the majority of which (78%) were from Melksham and the nearby parishes of Melksham Without, Lacock and Seend. There were 480 written and email responses to the consultation. The town and local parish councils and other organisations were also invited to provide their views on the scheme (see **Appendix 1**). There were 396 (52%) questionnaire responses that did not support the need for an improvement to the A350 at Melksham and Beanacre, and 331 (44%) that did support the need for an improvement.

From the questionnaire responses there was a clear divergence of opinion between those who supported the need for an improvement to the A350 and those who did not. Most of those who supported the need for an improvement considered the emerging route to be suitable for the scheme and preferred Option A at the northern end. Those who did not support the need for a bypass did not consider the route to be suitable and did not prefer any of the options at the northern end. Alternative alignments and variants of the emerging route were suggested by the public during the consultation.

From the assessment work undertaken to date, Option 10c has emerged as a viable route corridor. There may be benefits in considering potential variations to the route alignment (see **Appendix 2**) in more detail at the next stage of the scheme development in order to seek to address some of the concerns identified in the consultation responses. Further surveys and assessment work would be required at that stage to determine the full effects of the scheme in more detail and to enable a planning application to be prepared.

There are many factors that need to be considered in developing a scheme of this type, including the transport objectives, landscape, archaeology, ecology, air quality, flood risk, environment, climate change, cost and benefits. The final scheme could be a variation of the route previously consulted on as the design could be refined in response to the consultations and further assessments.

The scheme includes a complementary package of walking and cycling improvements which would be developed in parallel with the bypass. This could include continuous footways across junctions, visual narrowing of carriageways, gateway features and new pedestrian crossings in the town centre. Access to Melksham Rail Station could be improved with additional signalised pedestrian/cyclist crossings and shared use paths. Improved links to Lacock and the Kennet and Avon Canal could also be provided by two-way cycle tracks and improvements to existing routes.

It is proposed to carry out further non-statutory consultations on the scheme following approval of the OBC by DfT. The scheme would then be designed in more detail and a planning application prepared together with an environmental impact assessment and there would be statutory consultation through the planning process. It is likely that statutory orders including compulsory purchase orders would be required, and the scheme could be the subject of a public inquiry in due course.

The strategic study of M4 to Dorset Connectivity currently being undertaken by National Highways (see **Appendix 3**) may have implications for the A350 route and further consideration should be given to the Melksham bypass scheme when the results of that study are available.

Proposals

It is recommended that:

(i) The response to the second public consultation and the views of the town and local parish councils and others are noted and taken into account in the scheme development,

(ii) In view of the comments made in response to the consultations the route variants should be the subject of further investigation and consultation as appropriate after the OBC has been approved,

(iii) The possibility of improving walking and cycling facilities in the area in

conjunction with the scheme or separately should continue to be explored,

(iv) Further consideration should be given to the scheme when the results of National Highways' M4 to Dorset Connectivity study and the DfT's comments on the OBC are available.

Reason for Proposals

The A350 Melksham Bypass is a Large Local Major scheme which was awarded development funding by the DfT to progress it through to OBC stage. It represents a major improvement to the important A350 Primary north-south route which provides vital transport links between the M4, the towns of western Wiltshire and the south coast.

Various options have been considered and a potential route corridor has been identified to the east of the town which meets the transport objectives and appears to meet the criteria for funding to develop to the next stage in the business case process.

Further survey and development work is required to prepare the scheme to the level of detail necessary to submit a planning application and environmental impact assessment. This would include further consultations with the public, town and parish councils, the Area Board, and other relevant organisations.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

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Subject: **A350 Melksham Bypass – Report on Second Public Consultation**

Cabinet Member: **Cllr Dr Mark McClelland, Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding**

Key Decision: **Key**

Purpose of Report

1. To review the response to the second public consultation on the proposals for the A350 Melksham Bypass scheme.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The Council's 'Business Plan Principles 2022 to 2032' has the themes of thriving economy, resilient society, sustainable environment, and empowered people.

3. The plan seeks to make Wiltshire a place with vibrant, well-connected communities. The Council wants people to be able to get around easily and access good services, including through digital channels. This will help to grow the local economy in a sustainable way.

4. Other relevant aspects of the plan are having the right skills to prosper, ensuring decisions are evidence-based, having the right housing, being safe, staying active, taking responsibility for the environment, and being on the path to carbon neutral.

5. The proposed Melksham Bypass would be a major infrastructure improvement to the local and wider transport network, which will support housing and employment growth in the west Wiltshire corridor, and it would improve local connections to the strategic road network.

6. It also has the potential to facilitate improvements for walking and cycling. The environmental and carbon considerations will need careful consideration as the scheme is developed.

Background

7. The importance of the A350 to the local economy has long been recognised in Wiltshire, and improvements have been undertaken previously over many years to address sections with capacity constraints and where improvements were needed. There are several proposals for other improvements to the route currently being developed, as well as those at Melksham.

8. The A350 through Beanacre and Melksham has been a concern for many years. The road has sections with 30 mph speed limits passing through residential areas, with several busy junctions providing access to Melksham town centre, retail and commercial sites, the A365 Bath Road and A3102. The Strategic Outline Business Case was updated in 2019 and identified it as one of the busiest major roads in Wiltshire, with daily traffic volumes often above 35,000 vehicles per day, and heavy goods vehicles accounting for around 8% of all traffic. There have also been high collision rates with severity generally higher on the A350 compared to other roads in the area.

9. In July 2017, the Department for Transport's (DfT) 'Transport Investment Strategy' was published. As part of the strategy, government committed to creating a Major Road Network (MRN) across England, which would be a network of England's most important routes which complement motorways and strategic trunk roads. The A350 at Melksham was included as a route in the MRN; this is in addition to its designation as Primary Route Network as defined in Wiltshire Council's Core Strategy.

10. Government acknowledged the need for a long-term funding stream for road investment, specifically through establishment of the 'National Roads Fund', being £28.8 billion between 2020-2025; £3.5 billion of which is to be spent on improving the MRN. This funding was confirmed in March 2020 in the DfT publication of its second Road Investment Strategy (RIS2) for the period 2020 – 2025. A central principle in the development of this strategy was to:

    "create a road network that is safe, reliable and efficient for everyone – whether they are cyclists or drivers, passengers or pedestrians"

11. Government indicated that prioritised investment planning within a consistent national framework should be carried out by Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs). The Western Gateway Shadow Sub-National Transport Body (WGSSTB) was officially formed in a shadow status in December 2018 with Cllr Bridget Wayman elected as Chair.

12. The WGSSTB considered candidate schemes from all member authorities, and following its meeting in June 2019, the Board agreed to submit nine schemes to DfT in July 2019. Four of the schemes were in Wiltshire:

    - A350 - M4 Junction 17 Improvement
    - A350 Chippenham Bypass Improvements – Phases 4 and 5
    - A338 Southern Salisbury Improvements and
    - A350 Melksham Bypass

13. At its meeting on 19 May 2020 Cabinet considered a report on the success of the Council's bid to the DfT for development funding for the four schemes, including the A350 Melksham Bypass Large Local Major (LLM) road scheme.

14. On 13 October 2020 Cabinet agreed to public consultation being undertaken on options for the A350 Melksham Bypass scheme. Following consideration of the response to the consultation and further options appraisal and sifting, a proposal to undertake a second round of consultations on an emerging route for the scheme was approved by Cabinet on 1 June 2021.

Main Considerations for the Council

Transport Objectives

15. The transport objectives for the scheme were derived from relevant key policy documents and strategies, including the DfT Transport Investment Strategy, Swindon and Wiltshire Strategic Economic Plan, Wiltshire Core Strategy, and the Wiltshire Local Transport Plan. The transport objectives set for the scheme were confirmed by Cabinet at its meeting on 13 October 2020 and are to:

(i) Reduce journey times and delays and improve journey reliability on the A350 through Melksham and Beanacre, improving local and regional north-south connectivity, and supporting future housing and employment growth in the A350 corridor.

(ii) Reduce journey times and delays and improve journey reliability on the following routes through Melksham and Beanacre:

- A350 South – A3102
- A365 West – A365 East
- A350 South – A365 West

(iii) Provide enhanced opportunities for walking and cycling between Melksham town centre and the rail station / Bath Road, and along the existing A350 corridor within Melksham and Beanacre, which will help reduce the impact of transport on the environment and support local economic activity.

(iv) Reduce collisions resulting in personal injury rates and severity for the A350 and Melksham as a whole, to make the corridor safer and more resilient.

(v) Reduce the volume of traffic, including HGVs, passing along the current A350 route in northern Melksham and Beanacre to reduce severance, whilst avoiding negative impacts on other existing or potential residential areas.

First Public Consultation

16. The first consultation on the long list of options was launched at the Melksham Area Board on 4 November 2020. An initial presentation was given to Seend Parish Council on 27 October 2020, and a presentation was also given to Melksham Town Council on 23 November 2020. An extension to the consultation period from the end of November to 17 January 2021 was made in view of the limitations imposed by the pandemic, and to ensure that the local newspaper would be operating so that it could report on the consultation.

17. There were 1,018 responses to the public consultation questionnaire, the majority of which were from individuals (962), with a small number from businesses or organisations (42). Most of the responses were local from Melksham or within five miles. There were also 175 written and email responses

to the consultation, and the town and local parish councils and other organisations also provided their views.

18. Most respondents to the first consultation supported the need for an improvement to the A350 at Beanacre and Melksham (594 Yes/406 No), but there was not overwhelming support for a particular option.

19. A sifting process of the options was subsequently undertaken to identify an emerging option, together with walking and cycling proposals in the area. The outcome of the first consultation and the option sifting were reported to Cabinet on 1 June 2021 when it was agreed to hold the second public consultation.

Second Public Consultation

20. In view of the pandemic, the second consultation was also held primarily on-line, with the opportunity to submit written comments by letter or email. There were press releases about the forthcoming consultation issued on 24 May 2021 and 1 June 2021.

21. The second consultation was launched at the Melksham Area Board on 23 June 2021 when a further press release was issued. The presentation and consultation material can be viewed on the scheme webpage at:

https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/highways-a350-melksham-bypass

22. Webinars were held on 6 and 13 July 2021 which comprised a presentation describing the proposals and the opportunity for the public to ask questions. As there was not time to reply to all of the questions during the webinars, written answers to the 118 questions were provided on the scheme webpage shortly after.

23. A press release was issued on 7 July 2021 to advise that a video of the proposed route had been prepared and was available to view on YouTube. The fly-through video was not a definitive image of the final scheme but was provided to give an indication of the potential scheme and the route to help orientate viewers as to the location of the emerging route within the wider landscape and relative to the town and villages. The link to the fly-through video is still available on the scheme webpage, and the video has been viewed over 10,000 times to date.

24. A meeting was held with Melksham Without Parish Councillors on 8 July 2021 prior to their own meetings regarding the scheme. The Corsham Area Board on 22 July 2021 included a Chairman's announcement regarding the consultation to encourage participation.

25. Two drop-in sessions were held at Melksham library on 30 July and 6 August 2021 where plans of the scheme were displayed, and staff were available to answer questions.

26. Organisations with an interest in the scheme, local councils, and others were advised of the consultation by email and were invited to submit their views.

27. The consultation was primarily held through the scheme webpage, which provided a short introduction to the proposals and a link to the 'Melksham Bypass 2nd Consultation Information Pack'. This document described the background to the scheme, the scheme objectives, and set out the scheme preparation process, advising that it was at a very early stage of its development and would be the subject of further non-statutory and statutory consultations should it proceed.

28. The document described the previous consultation and the outcome. It provided information on the further options assessments undertaken and the results of the sifting process. There was a description of how Option 10c was refined to become the emerging route which was being consulted on.

29. There was a description of the emerging route and its main features, which included three potential variants at the northern end where it would cross the River Avon and join the A350. Typical scheme cross-sections were shown to indicate the road, drainage ditches, possible combined footway/cycleways and provision for potential future dualling.

30. Predicted traffic flows on the existing road network and for a scenario with the delivery of the bypass were shown for 2036, based on current plan development. Corresponding heavy goods vehicle flows were indicated and the anticipated reductions in journey times were described.

31. Potential complementary walking and cycling measures were suggested which had three main components of a pedestrian friendly town centre, better access to the rail station, and connections to the north and south. This could include continuous footways across junctions, visual narrowing of carriageways, gateway features and new pedestrian crossings in the town centre. Access to Melksham Rail Centre could be improved with additional signalised pedestrian/cyclist crossings and shared use paths. Improved links to Lacock and the Kennet and Avon Canal could also be provided by two-way cycle tracks and improvements to existing routes.

32. The main environmental constraints considered in developing the scheme and a summary of the key considerations and mitigation measures were provided.

33. As well as the consultation document described above, the draft Options Appraisal Report (OAR) and its appendices were made available on the webpage, together with the Walking Cycling Horse Riding Assessment Report (WCHAR). These are technical documents, but it was considered that they could be helpful for those wishing to get a deeper understanding of the scheme.

34. The public were invited to give their views via a questionnaire on the scheme webpage, by email or by writing to the Council.

35. The aims of the second non-statutory consultation were to:

- engage with stakeholders affected by or interested in the scheme;
- engage with potentially affected landowners;
- encourage involvement from stakeholders and build strong open relationships;

- raise awareness of the scheme and understanding for the need to improve the A350;
- inform about the emerging option identified including walking, cycling and horse-riding measures;
- understand stakeholder concerns, issues and suggestions;
- receive feedback on the options to allow us to develop the scheme further; and
- prepare for the statutory consultation phases.

36. Although the second public consultation ended on 8 August 2021, liaison has continued with landowners and other organisations in order to obtain a better understanding of the potential impacts and implications of the scheme, and to inform future development of the proposals.

Response to the consultation

37. There were 760 questionnaire responses, the majority of which were from Melksham and the nearby parishes of Melksham Without, Lacock and Seend (78%), and 480 emails and written responses from the public, with 4 responses from local councils and 4 from other organisations (see **Appendix 1**).

38. Melksham Town Council listed the pros and cons for the scheme and suggested ideas for mitigation measures should the scheme proceed. Melksham Without Parish Council considered that further evidence is required to justify the scheme and suggested some changes to the proposals. Lacock Parish Council objected to the scheme and raised some specific issues. Seend Parish Council indicated that their preferred choice would be no bypass and made comments on the proposals.

39. The National Trust would appreciate further engagement with Wiltshire Council and other stakeholders such as Lacock Parish Council to fully understand the proposed road scheme and its implications for Lacock. Wiltshire Air Ambulance commented about signing and street lighting aspects. Bowerhill Residents Action Group (BRAG) felt that the proposed Melksham Bypass would be detrimental to Bowerhill residents and its surrounding environment. The Executive Committee of the Bowerhill Scout Troop objected to the proposed route because of the effect on areas they use. Community Action Shaw and Whitley (CAWS) Group supported the emerging route.

40. There were fewer questionnaire responses to the second consultation, with 760 questionnaires completed compared to 1,018 previously. The number of responses that did not support the need for improvements to the A350 at Beanacre and Melksham was virtually unchanged at 396 compared to 406 previously, but the number of responses supporting an improvement had reduced from 594 to 331.

41. In the questionnaire response to the second consultation:

- 52% (396 responses) did not support the need for an improvement to the A350 at Melksham and Beanacre,
- 43% (331 responses) did support the need for an improvement.

42. Overall, 67% (486 responses) considered that the emerging route being consulted on would not be suitable for the scheme, and 33% (235 responses) that considered that the route would be suitable.

43. At the northern end of the scheme Option A, connecting to the southern roundabout at Lacock, had more support than Options B or C, but a majority did not prefer any of them.

44. From the questionnaire responses there was a clear divergence of opinion between those who supported the need for an improvement to the A350 and those who did not.

45. Of those who supported the need for an improvement (331 responses):

- 69 % (228 responses) considered the emerging route to be suitable for the scheme,
- 63% (209 responses) preferred Option A at the northern end,
- 63% (208 responses) thought that the scheme would reduce journey times on the A350,
- 57% (188 responses) considered the proposed rights of way alterations to be suitable,
- 55% (181 responses) had no concerns about the route.

46. Of those who did not support the need for a bypass (396 responses):

- 95% (377 responses) did not consider the emerging route to be suitable,
- 90% (360 responses) had concerns about the route,
- 88% (349 responses) did not prefer any of the options at the northern end.

47. The questionnaire provided the opportunity to comment on the proposals, and the biggest concern expressed was about the potential impact on the countryside, habitats, and the environment (242 comments). There were various comments about details of the scheme, rights of way alterations and other aspects of the scheme.

48. From the emails and letters received the main concerns about the scheme and the emerging route were about:

- the potential impact on the countryside, scenic areas, and other environmental impacts (256 comments),
- noise (263 comments)
- air pollution (256 comments).
- impacts on wildlife, including protected or endangered species (217 comments)
- the effect on access from Melksham and Bowerhill to the canal, countryside, and Giles Wood (196 comments)
- the potential effect on physical and mental well-being (136 comments).

49. There were concerns raised by individual landowners, particularly about accommodating agricultural operations and the effects on individual properties. Discussions will be continuing with affected landowners to understand the potential impact of the scheme and identify potential mitigation measures.

50. There were comments and questions about various aspects of the traffic modelling, including in connection with future traffic growth and Covid-19, the closure of Cleveland Bridge in Bath, and the Bath Clean Air Zone. These will need to be factored into future assessments and traffic modelling as appropriate at the next stage of the scheme development when the potential impacts should be clearer.

Key issues identified through the consultation

51. There were several themes identified in the consultation responses regarding aspects of the emerging route and the scheme, many of which would need to be considered in more detail at the planning application stage, and these are described below:

- The effect on the countryside and access to the countryside from residential areas were key concerns for many of those responding to the consultation, together with concerns about the traffic noise, air and light pollution associated with a new road.

- There were comments in the consultation responses that traffic patterns had changed significantly as a result of the Covid pandemic with increased flexible and home working, which it was suggested would reduce the need for the scheme. It should be noted that there is currently no firm evidence for this. Given current Covid cases and some population reluctance to return to prior pandemic norms, an evidence base for such concerns may not be available for a significant period of time.

- The strategic case for the scheme was also questioned in the consultation, including the journey time savings and their relevance.

- The carbon footprint and climate change were factors raised in the consultation, particularly by those not in favour of the scheme, and its compatibility with developing policy and commitments was questioned.

- There were concerns expressed that the scheme would enable large scale housing developments, which was a particular concern locally because of a perception that Melksham currently suffers from an under provision of local services and facilities.

52. The impact on the countryside and mitigation measures would be considered in more detail in the development of the proposals and the preparation of a planning application, should the scheme proceed to the next stage. This would include detailed consideration of noise and air quality aspects. Future traffic growth will be reviewed when any revised DfT traffic and economic growth predictions are published, which would be expected to include information on post-covid traffic forecasts. The carbon implications of the scheme and the strategic case would also be considered in more detail at the planning application stage.

53. The scheme is an improvement of the Major Road Network and is a strategic transport improvement. It does not include or require the construction of houses or other developments. The Wiltshire Local Plan Review was the subject of a

separate consultation held between January and March 2021, regarding the requirement for new homes at Melksham and Bowerhill for the plan period 2016 – 2036, and this will establish future development proposals and opportunities. Future growth in west Wiltshire is anticipated because of population and employment growth in the towns, especially at Chippenham and Trowbridge, and the proposed improvements to the A350 would help accommodate that growth.

Variations of the route suggested in the consultation

54. The consultation responses suggested variations to some of the route, including realigning various sections of the route (see **Appendix 2**). From an initial assessment it would appear that some of these alignments may have some merit and it is suggested that it would be appropriate to explore these further at the preliminary design stage.

55. Of the options at the northern end of the scheme Option A with a new roundabout at the southern junction at Lacock was generally preferred. However, there were concerns about the proximity of the route to Lacock and its visual intrusion where it would cross the River Avon floodplain. There were also concerns about the effect on National Trust land with that option.

56. An alternative route for the northern connection located further to the south was suggested in response to the consultation. This was referred to as the 'pylon route' and would cross Lower Woodrow Road near its junction with New Road and follow the route of the existing electricity pylons to a new roundabout on the A350 close to Halfway Farm.

57. The emerging route would not provide a junction between the bypass and Lower Woodrow Road, and it was suggested that there would be benefits in providing a junction at that location.

58. Between the A3102 and A365 the emerging route is proposed to curve to the east to avoid identified archaeological remains, which would take the route closer to properties in Redstocks. It was suggested that this section of the route should be straighter, potentially with a single crossing of Clackers Brook. Consideration of this alternative would require a better understanding of the archaeology in the area and potential mitigation measures.

59. At the southern end of the scheme there was considerable concern about the potential effects on Bowerhill, especially about the effect on residential properties, access to the Kennet and Avon canal, rights of way and recreational areas. A route further to the south, away from the built-up area was suggested for this section of the route, together with the road being in cutting, additional screening and 'green bridges' to take the rights of way across the bypass.

60. There were suggestions about landscaping, screening and public rights of way provision on parts of the route, and these and the route variations could be considered in more detail at the next stage of the scheme design.

Local Plan Review

61. The review of the adopted Local Plan will assess the future levels of need for new homes (including market, affordable and specialist housing) and

employment land over the period 2016-2036 and provide an appropriate basis for housing, employment land and infrastructure provision over that period.

62. It involves considering if the existing adopted development strategy remains relevant, identifying new site allocations relating to housing and employment together with supporting services and infrastructure.

63. The emerging Local Plan could have implications for the Melksham Bypass scheme especially in terms of housing allocations and future growth. It would also be desirable to protect the route corridor of the Melksham Bypass in the local plan. The progress of the local plan will be monitored to ensure that the development of the Melksham Bypass scheme takes this into account.

64. Initial work carried out to determine the impacts of the growth agenda that will be reflected in the emerging Local Plan, was carried out and consulted upon in January 2021. This work included the 'Wiltshire Local Plan Transport Review', which presents the evidence base for the transport impacts of forecast growth. This document was clear in its assessment that Melksham Bypass was an essential and key component of the transport strategy for the plan and despite the significant mitigation it provided, additional measures would be required along the A350 corridor. It is therefore clear that the bypass will be necessary to mitigate current Core Strategy policy growth and will be a key element to accommodate further growth in the subsequent plan.

M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity

65. The Government included a commitment in its second Road Investment Strategy (RIS2)[1] to undertake a strategic study into road connectivity between the M4 corridor and the Dorset Coast, incorporating the major towns of Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole, Weymouth and Portland (see **Appendix 3**).

66. National Highways (formerly Highways England) is undertaking this study, exploring the role of both the existing A46 / A36 Strategic Road Network (SRN) corrido, as well as other road corridors, including the A34, A350, A338 and parts of the A37. The study will consider their performance against a range of objectives agreed with key local stakeholders through workshops and aligned with both RIS2 and wider government objectives. The Strategic Study sits alongside and will input into a wider corridor study led by the Western Gateway strategic transport body, which will consider wider transport connectivity issues, including rail.

67. Next year, work is expected to start on a sifting of a longlist of interventions, based on their performance against a set of agreed Study objectives, alongside deliverability considerations. This will result in a shortlist of interventions that can be combined in a number of corridor scenarios and be tested using an area-wide strategic highways model. This process will allow an understanding of the performance of different corridors against each other, and to determine whether an alternative strategic corridor would perform better than the existing A46 / A36 route. It will also enable interventions to be identified that could be brought together to achieve the overall objective of improving connectivity between the

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025

M4 and the Dorset Coast. RIS2 makes specific reference to the alternative corridor being the A350.

68. National Highways is aiming to report the recommendations from its work in late summer 2022. As the strategic study area includes the A350 and could consider designation of the route as part of the SRN, it may have implications for the Melksham Bypass scheme and the A350 route in general, which will have to be considered when the results of the study are known.

Potential Scheme Benefits

69. The potential scheme benefits were reviewed following the initial public consultation and have been considered again to ensure that any proposals being taken forward continue to be likely to deliver the benefits originally envisaged.

70. The scheme is forecast to deliver strategic benefits including:

- Helping unlock the potential of the south coast and facilitate greater economic alignment between the north and south of the Western, Gateway by providing improved strategic connectivity from the M4 and A303 corridors to the south coast,
- Potential to help realise local growth ambitions and forge significant benefits by removing one of the barriers to more efficient north and south travel in the Western Gateway area,
- Creating a more reliable, less congested, and better-connected transport network that works for the users who rely on it,
- Providing a well-connected, reliable and resilient transport system to support economic and planned development growth across the corridor from the M4 through western Wiltshire and at key locations in Melksham and surrounding Market Towns and Principal Settlements,
- Supporting and helping to improve the vitality, viability and resilience of Wiltshire's economy and market towns,
- Assisting the efficient and sustainable distribution of freight in Wiltshire and beyond to build stronger, more balanced economies by enhancing productivity and responding to local growth priorities,
- Supporting and promoting a choice of sustainable transport alternatives,
- Reducing the level of air pollutants, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions generated by inefficient highway networks and congestion, thereby contributing to the Council's carbon reduction targets,
- Improving safety for all road users and reducing the number of casualties on Wiltshire's roads,
- Reducing traffic flows on the National Cycle Network through Melksham, facilitating increased use of cycling and realising the health, environmental and carbon benefits therein,
- Reducing traffic flows along the current A350 alignment and from within the town to facilitate a parallel package of measures (see below).

71. Significant localised benefits are anticipated to accrue from a parallel package of transformational improvements including:

- Improving access to the railway station from the town and residential areas,
- Improving walking and cycling routes from the town to the south and Semington,
- Improving walking and cycling routes for leisure use by connecting existing routes,
- Improving air quality, physical and mental well-being by reducing traffic and traffic noise on the existing A350 through Beanacre and Melksham,
- Improving access to local services, shops, amenities and schools with the removal of through traffic,
- Reducing severance impacts on communities in Beanacre and northern Melksham caused by high traffic volumes and encouraging HGVs to use more suitable routes,
- Improving localised air quality by shifting traffic and pollutants away from sensitive receptors, especially residential areas,
- Generating opportunities for public realm schemes following the diversion of traffic.

72. It appears likely that the emerging route or its variants would be capable of delivering the benefits originally anticipated for the scheme, and this will continue to be reviewed as the scheme development progresses.

Considerations

73. The consultations on the Melksham Bypass proposals have provided the opportunity for the public, town and parish councils, Area Board and other organisations to comment on the developing scheme.

74. There appears to have been a reasonable response from the public despite the limitations caused by the pandemic. However, it was noted that there were fewer responses to the questionnaire than there had been with the previous consultation. However, there were more email responses. Most of the responses were from local residents and businesses and so may not necessarily represent the views of the public or businesses that would make use of a Melksham bypass.

75. From the public consultation there are clearly local concerns about aspects of the scheme which would require further consideration. The consultation was not intended to be a public ‘vote’ for the most popular route or option as there are many factors to be considered in determining a suitable scheme, including the objectives, landscape, archaeology, ecology, air quality, flood risk, environment including climate change impact, cost and benefits.

76. There were several themes identified in the consultation responses regarding concerns about the emerging route and the scheme, many of which would need to be considered in more detail at the planning application stage, including the effect of the scheme on the countryside and access to the countryside from residential areas, traffic noise, air and light pollution, changing traffic patterns

following Covid pandemic, the justification for the scheme, the carbon footprint and climate change, and concerns about increased housing development.

77. From the consultation it is clear that there are opposing views about the need for a bypass. However, from the design and assessment work carried out to date, there does not appear to be any technical or practical reason for not adopting Option 10c as the preferred route corridor based on current knowledge.

78. In view of the concerns expressed during the second consultation about elements of the route it would be appropriate to consider the potential route variants suggested in more detail as part of the preliminary design process should the scheme proceed to the next stage, and it would be desirable to carry out further consultations before finalising the proposals for a planning application.

79. The planning application would be a key decision point when the scheme will have been designed in more detail and the environmental impact assessment will have been prepared. Further design and assessment work is required in order to reach this stage and to be able to fully understand all of the potential benefits and impacts of the scheme.

80. National Highways are planning to report on their study of M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity next year. This includes consideration of the role of the SRN and other road corridors, including the A350.

Next Stages

81. The Outline Business Case (OBC) is being finalised for submission to the DfT. It will then be published on the scheme webpage. The programme set out in the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) envisaged the OBC being submitted by December 2021 and this remains on programme.

82. If the OBC is approved, it is anticipated that funding would be awarded to develop the proposals in more detail through to the Full Business Case (FBC).

83. The development to FBC stage would be expected to take about four years for a scheme of this size and complexity and would include:

- Preliminary design and further non-statutory consultation
- Planning application with statutory consultation
- Statutory orders (Compulsory Purchase Orders etc.)
- Public Inquiry
- Detailed Design
- Procurement (excluding construction)

84. At the preliminary design stage, the potential route variants would be considered in more detail and further non-statutory consultation undertaken before a planning application is prepared.

85. The preparation of the planning application would be a key stage of the scheme's development. It would require the scheme and mitigation measures to

be designed in sufficient detail to enable the environmental impact assessment to be prepared, which would then be the subject of statutory consultations.

86. If the planning application is approved, the statutory orders would be prepared to enable the compulsory purchase of land if it is not possible to acquire by agreement, and to make alterations to side roads and private accesses as required. With a scheme of this type, it would be expected that there would be a public inquiry in connection with the statutory orders.

87. The FBC would be reviewed by DfT and if approved funding would be provided to enable construction which would be expected to take about two years but may depend on the final design of the scheme and the associated mitigation measures incorporated in the proposals. The new road could open in mid-2028, subject to successful progress through the statutory orders.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

88. The scheme is still at an early stage of its development. Future progress on the project will be reported to the Environment Select Committee in connection with the annual report made on the highways service.

Safeguarding Implications

89. There are no safeguarding implications.

Public Health Implications

90. The scheme would improve the highway network significantly in the local area and has the potential to improve road safety and reduce the number killed and seriously injured on our roads. The potential reduction in injury collisions and the road safety implications would be considered in more detail at the next stage of the scheme development.

91. The removal of through traffic from residential areas could reduce traffic noise and air pollution with consequent health benefits for residents, but the scheme does have the potential to introduce traffic into previously unaffected areas and may have other detrimental effects. The planning application for the scheme will need to take these impacts into consideration.

92. Reduced traffic on some of the existing roads with the scheme, and the improvements proposed, would provide the opportunity to provide improved facilities for walking and cycling to encourage active travel and healthier lifestyles. The potential for improved walking and cycling provision is being considered at the earliest stage of the scheme development and could be included in the scheme or promoted separately should the opportunity arise.

Procurement Implications

93. The Melksham Bypass would be a major construction project. The exact procurement arrangements may depend on the final details of the scheme, and at this stage it is too early to confirm the procurement process to be followed, but indications are that it would be likely to be a single contract, with a two-stage

procurement process. There may be opportunities for some advanced works, staged construction, or specialist contracts, which would be determined when the scheme has been prepared in more detail and the programme is better defined.

94. The scheme would be largely funded by the DfT and procurement would be carried out to meet the DfT requirements, using standard documentation where available, and in accordance with the Council's own procurement rules.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

95. Equality impact assessments will be undertaken in accordance with the DfT guidance as the scheme is developed and will be used to inform scheme development and assessment.

96. It is anticipated that scheme options may have different implications for different groups. The ongoing design and assessment work will help identify these so that they can be considered in detail at the planning application stage.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

97. The government has recently published its Transport Decarbonisation Plan, which is relevant to the proposed scheme and states that 'continued high investment in our roads is therefore, and will remain, as necessary as ever to ensure the functioning of the nation, and to reduce the congestion which is a major source of carbon'.

98. The Melksham Bypass would be a major transport improvement, which would be likely to reduce journey times and vehicle operating costs on the A350 and at the associated junctions. The reduced congestion, better facilities for active travel, and improved road safety would be expected to reduce energy consumption with the scheme. A Carbon Management plan will be prepared for the scheme. Any future policies or strategies will be taken into account as the scheme develops, and the project will need to be considered in the light of emerging policies at both Government and local level.

99. There are clearly going to be changes to the types of vehicles using our roads and to the provision of transport in the future, especially with the use of electric vehicles and alternative fuel sources. However, the DfT predictions indicate that in the longer-term traffic volumes are expected to increase and this is especially likely to be the case in west Wiltshire where employment and population growth is anticipated.

100. It is anticipated that there will be changes in the plant and equipment used to build and maintain our roads, as well as increasing use of materials and techniques with a lower carbon footprint. This Council was an early adopter of warm asphalt, a surfacing material which has a reduced carbon footprint and is now being used more widely, including on the strategic road network. We will be closely watching and learning from National Highways (formerly Highways England) who have recently published their own decarbonisation plan.

101. An assessment of the carbon implications of the scheme will form part of the assessment of the project when it has been designed in more detail. The scheme is still at an early stage of its development and the current work and consultation is seeking to refine the proposals to identify a suitable scheme, taking into account all of the relevant factors. However, even with landscaping and other measures it may not be possible to mitigate all the potential carbon impacts within the scheme, and these will need to be considered in the context of the potential strategic and other benefits associated with the scheme.

102. The scheme would include environmental mitigation measures, including landscaping proposals, sustainable drainage schemes, and environmental protection measures to control potential incidents as a result of collisions. A road designed to modern standards with appropriate environmental protection measures is likely to be less of an operational risk to the environment and people than the existing road.

103. The scheme provides the opportunity to create well designed green and blue infrastructure to enhance biodiversity, including extensive tree planting linking to existing woodlands, and new ponds and watercourses. The landscaping and mitigation measures will be designed in detail in the next stage of the scheme development and will take into account the habitat and ecological surveys being undertaken.

104. The potential effects of climate change will be included in the design of the scheme and will include making allowances for increased rainfall and flood risk, as well as the use of more durable materials to provide resilience in connection with increased temperatures and other potential impacts of climate change.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

105. Should the decision be made to not proceed with the scheme, the opportunity to obtain significant government investment in the county would be lost. The existing problems on the road would remain, and the situation would be expected to deteriorate because of anticipated future traffic growth.

106. The scheme is a strategic improvement to the Major Road Network seeking to improve links between the north and south of the Western Gateway area by providing improved strategic connectivity from the M4 to the south coast. It has the potential to help realise local growth ambitions and create a more reliable, less congested, and better-connected transport network that works for the users who rely on it. These and other local benefits would not be delivered if the scheme does not proceed.

107. The Melksham Bypass is required to address current growth trends and future planned growth within Wiltshire and not delivering the scheme could directly affect growth in the county.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

108. Should the decision be made to proceed to the next stage of the scheme development, it should be noted that there are risks with a scheme of this type. It

would be important to ensure that there is a robust case for the scheme, taking into account the environmental considerations which would be the subject of an environmental impact assessment, and the many other factors which would need to be considered.

109. The scheme would have to include landscaping and other mitigation measures to address the concerns that have been identified in connection with some aspects of the project, including consideration of the route alignment in more detail at the preliminary design stage and landscaping proposals. From the public consultation results it is clear that there would be objections in principle to the scheme, and it may not be possible to remove all objections to the proposals.

110. The scheme would be the subject of a planning application, which would include substantial survey and the assessment results to inform an environmental impact assessment. The statement of case in connection with the statutory orders and the supporting information would have to be robust and stand up to challenge. A substantial volume of work would need to be undertaken to develop the scheme to Full Business Case stage that should ensure that a robust case is made for the scheme.

111. There is a risk that after developing the scheme to the planning application and statutory orders stage, the scheme may not proceed because funding is no longer available from the DfT, or if the statutory orders or other permissions are not obtained. In some circumstances the DfT could seek reimbursement of any payments in respect of the grant award in the event of the scheme not proceeding.

112. Should the scheme proceed to construction, there are risks associated with cost overruns. These would have to be managed carefully in order to reduce the financial risk to the Council, and appropriate measures would need to be put in place with regard to contract preparation, procurement and site supervision. The cost estimates for the scheme currently include substantial risk and inflation allowances. It is anticipated that the risk allowances would reduce considerably during the design process when the scheme is designed in more detail and many of the uncertainties are removed.

113. At the various stages of its development the risks associated with progressing the scheme would be assessed and appropriate risk management would be implemented. Risk management is an important consideration with schemes of this type and robust processes would be in place to manage the risks throughout the life of the project.

Financial Implications

114. When Cabinet considered the Transport Capital Programme on 19 May 2020 it recognised that most of the funding for the scheme would be provided by the DfT, with initially £1.330 million awarded to prepare the OBC for the scheme. The report identified Council funding of £0.670 million to contribute to the development of the OBC during 2020/21 and 2021/22. The development of the OBC has proceeded to the originally envisaged timescale and budget.

115. The successful acceptance of the OBC by DfT would result in an award of further funding to progress the scheme to a Full Business Case (FBC). This would include the planning application, statutory procedures, public inquiry, and contract procurement stages.

116. The latest cost estimate for the scheme at 2019 prices is:

Cost Category	Cost (2019 Prices)
Preparatory	£16,000,000
Land and property	£3,100,000
Construction	£123,100,000
Site supervision	£3,800,000
Total excluding risk	**£146,000,000**
Risk	£35,200,000
Total including Risk	**£181,200,000**

117. The scheme cost estimate is £146,000,000 based on 2019 prices, which are the most recent rates available. A substantial risk allowance has then been added to reflect the uncertainties at this stage. This would be expected to reduce during the design stage as the proposals are refined and uncertainties are removed following the more detailed surveys and assessments.

118. Allowances for inflation have been included in the economic modelling to assess the economic viability of the scheme, and a scheme outturn cost of £234,600,000 including risks has been calculated.

119. In the Cabinet report of 19 May 2020, it was indicated that a substantial contribution to the scheme costs by the Council may be required in the years 2024 to 2027 and based on the 15% contribution suggested by DfT which would have been in the region of £20 million based on the original estimated scheme cost of £135,810,100 at the SOBC stage.

120. The scheme has now been developed in more detail and the current programme envisages construction taking place over a two year period during the financial years 2026/27, 2027/28, and 2028/29, with the scheme opening in summer 2028 as originally proposed. The currently anticipated expenditure profile based on the latest estimate, including risk and inflation allowances, is shown below:

A350 Melksham Bypass – Expenditure Profile (£000's)

Year	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	Total
Total	£5,400	£5,600	£5,700	£11,500	£69,700	£104,900	£31,800	£234,600

121. A local contribution to the scheme development and construction costs could come from CIL, s106 or the Council's own funding. In the longer term the possibility of the status of the A350 changing could result in other funding sources becoming available to meet the full scheme cost, but that is not certain at this stage. It is therefore recommended that funding of the next stage of the scheme should be considered after the results of the National Highways' strategic study of M4 to Dorset Connectivity are available.

122. The Council is also progressing three MRN schemes. The OBC for the A350 Chippenham Bypass Dualling (Phases 4 & 5) has recently been approved, and funding of £26.625 million has been awarded by DfT for that scheme. There are also OBCs in preparation for the A338 Salisbury Junction Improvements and M4 Junction 17 MRN schemes which should be completed shortly.

Legal Implications

123. There is no legal requirement to undertake public consultation on the scheme at this stage. However, undertaking the non-statutory consultation on the emerging route has helped ensure that the information necessary to inform the later stages of the scheme development has been captured, and it is in accordance with the DfT guidance for major schemes. There would be further consultations, including formal consultations at the planning application stage and in connection with the statutory orders.

124. It should be noted that in certain circumstances there could be blight claims if land is adversely affected by the scheme. Any such claims would be considered on their merits should they be received but are unlikely to be successful at this early stage when the proposals are not certain.

125. The scheme would be the subject of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) under the Highways Act 1980 should it not be possible to acquire the necessary land and rights from owners by agreement. It is also likely that the scheme would require Side Roads Orders (SRO) to make alterations to minor roads, rights of way and private accesses needed to accommodate the scheme.

126. Objections to the CPO should one be required or to the SRO could result in a public inquiry being held. An Inspector's report would be considered by the Secretary of State to determine whether to confirm the statutory orders for the scheme.

127. Decisions of local authorities are potentially subject to legal challenges by way of judicial review if those decisions or the decision making process is considered by a third party to be unlawful.

Workforce Implications

128. There are no immediate workforce implications in connection with this stage of the A350 Melksham Bypass. A small major highway projects team has been established in the Council, which works closely with the Council's consultants who have the specialist knowledge and expertise required for a scheme of this type.

129. In the longer term, if the project proceeds to the detailed design and construction stages, it is likely that there would be significant training opportunities for the Council's technical staff with good opportunities to broaden their experience.

Options Considered

130. A wide range of options for the scheme have been investigated and were consulted on, including road and non-road options. The assessment work

undertaken indicates that the non-road options alone would not meet the transport objectives for the scheme, but some of them could be progressed in conjunction with the scheme or separately. The potential DfT funding available for the scheme would be for an improvement to the MRN and the funds could not be diverted by the Council for other purposes.

131. The strategic need for improvements to the A350 was confirmed by the Western Gateway STB. Should the scheme not proceed, the existing problems on the road would remain, and the situation would be expected to deteriorate because of anticipated future traffic growth. There are also local benefits that would not be realised.

132. The improvement of the existing road through Beanacre and to the north of Melksham is constrained by properties adjacent to the road. Improving this section of the existing route to the standard required for a major road to carry the volume of traffic predicted is not considered to be feasible or desirable.

133. The western routes for a bypass did not offer significant cost, operational or environmental benefits when compared to the eastern routes and had less public support than the eastern routes.

134. The options assessment indicated that the eastern routes generally performed well in operational and cost terms, with varying environmental implications. However, the longest eastern route (Option 10d) which would cross the Kennet and Avon canal and its variants were the most expensive and had greater adverse environmental impact. Consequently, they were not progressed further.

135. The long eastern route (Option 10c) has been identified as a potentially suitable route, but variations of that route within the route corridor would be worthy of further consideration at the preliminary design stage.

136. The comments at both public consultations included suggestions for walking and cycling improvements, which could be included as part of the scheme or progressed separately, and these will be investigated further.

Conclusions

137. The importance of the A350 Melksham Bypass scheme has been demonstrated through the policies in the Core Strategy, the ‘Wiltshire Local Plan Transport Review’ prepared in connection with the emerging Local Plan Review, and by its inclusion as a MRN improvement scheme awarded development funding by DfT. The Melksham Bypass is required to address current growth trends and future planned growth within Wiltshire and delays to its delivery would directly affect growth in the county.

138. Various options for the scheme, including road and non-road options, have been investigated and were the subject of the first public consultation earlier this year. An option sifting exercise was undertaken and Option 10c emerged as a viable route corridor. Further consultations were undertaken on this emerging route between 23 June 2021 and 8 August 2021.

139. From the questionnaire responses to the second consultation there was a clear divergence of opinion between those who supported the need for an improvement to the A350 and those who did not. Most of those who supported the need for an improvement considered the emerging route to be suitable for the scheme and preferred Option A at the northern end. Those who did not support the need for a bypass did not consider the route to be suitable and did not prefer any of the options at the northern end.

140. The consultation responses indicated that there were concerns about the emerging route and aspects of the scheme, many of which would need to be considered in more detail at the planning application stage, including the effect of the scheme on the countryside and access to the countryside from residential areas, traffic noise, air and light pollution, changing traffic patterns following the Covid pandemic, the economic case, the carbon footprint and climate change implications, and concerns about increased housing development.

141. Alternative alignments and variants of the emerging route were suggested by the public during the consultation. It is considered that there would be benefits in examining these suggested variations in more detail at the next stage of the scheme development in order to seek to address some of the concerns raised in the consultation responses.

142. The package of complementary walking and cycling measures would also be developed further in the next stage.

143. The design and assessment work undertaken to date indicates that it would be possible to develop a viable scheme for a Melksham Bypass based on the emerging route or the suggested variants.

144. Further design and assessment work is required to develop the scheme in more detail and prepare a planning application, including an environmental impact assessment with supporting documentation.

145. It is likely that statutory orders including compulsory purchase orders would be required, and the scheme could be the subject of a public inquiry in due course when an independent Inspector would make a recommendation to the Secretary of State regarding the proposals.

146. The strategic study being undertaken by National Highways in connection with M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity could have implications for the A350 and the scheme. Further consideration should be given to progressing the scheme when the results of that study and the DfT's comments on the OBC are available.

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Date of report

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Melksham Bypass Report on Second Public Consultation
Appendix 2 – Melksham Bypass Emerging Route and Variants
Appendix 3 – M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity Study