

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

13 October 2020

Questions from Janet Giles

Agenda Item 8 – A350 Melksham Bypass

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

Question 1:

If the answers to the questions below are given before the meeting can the members of cabinet be made aware of both the questions and the answers and if not why not?

Response:

The questions and answers will be brought to the attention of the Cabinet members.

Question 2:

Traffic count. Can you please state when the last traffic count was made on the existing A350, at what precise location(s) and whether each location had live monitoring of distribution of vehicles and did not rely merely on axle counts and whether any traffic count has been made since the completion of work on traffic lights at Farmers Roundabout?

Response:

A detailed traffic model of the wider road network has been created to determine potential changes in traffic flows as a result of the scheme. There are also live Automated Traffic Count data sites at the following locations:

- A361 County Way Trowbridge (by Tesco') only a recent permanent site,
- A350 Semington Bypass
- A350 South of Westbury
- A363 Cock Hill between Trowbridge & Bradford on Avon
- A363 Farleigh Wick (between BoA and County Boundary)
- B3105 Staverton (by the Canal Bridge)

Data from these sites will be used to calibrate and validate the traffic flows across the modelled network, which were surveyed for the purposes of model creation in 2018, with local validations in 2019.

The Strategic model will further utilise signal logs from a variety of signal-controlled junctions such as Farmers, and this will inform how the calibrated traffic flows are synthesised through these junctions.

Detailed traffic counts have not been taken since the completion of work on the Farmers Roundabout. The impact of Covid-19 on traffic patterns would make any counts unrepresentative of the longer term flows.

Question 3:

Has any allowance been made for reduction in traffic flow as a result of post Covid economic recession?

Response:

The Business Case for the 'bypass' will need to include traffic scenarios for both high and low growth. The principles for generating these scenarios are dictated by Central Government guidance in the form of WebTag.

The WebTag guidance was recently supplemented by a paper titled 'A route map for updating TAG during uncertain times' (July 2020); hereafter referred to as 'Route Map'. This paper sets out parameters for how traffic flow changes will be calculated, mindful of the following implications of a 'changing world' (Route Map, p.8, DfT):

A revised economic and fiscal outlook

'As part of the Spring Budget of 2020, the Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) published a revised economic and fiscal outlook and associated forecasts of the UK economy in the long-term. On 14th July, OBR published the 2020 Fiscal Sustainability Report, updating medium-term growth forecasts to 2024 to take into account COVID-19 impacts.' (para 1.6, Route Map, DfT):

The COVID-19 pandemic

The uncertainty around forecast traffic flows represents a significant difficulty for DfT in assessing business cases to ensure the best returns for the Tax Payer. The 'Route Map' ensures that a concise and coordinated approach to appraisal is provided across local, regional and national portfolios. The Route Map 'highlights the need and importance of collecting evaluation evidence to better inform these considerations over time' (para 1.8, Route Map, DfT).

The Green Book review

The Green Book underpins the economic appraisal in WebTag and will be updated to reflect changing economies of scale.

The Oakervee Review

The Oakervee Review (February 2020) reflects on lessons learned from planning and delivery of stages of HS2, as they affect other appraised schemes.

Net Zero and the Transport Decarbonisation Plan

In line with the 2016 Paris accord, the Government have set out legislation to end its contribution to global warming by 2050 and has hence set zero net green-house gas emissions targets for the same year. The 'Route Map' presents proposals for altering carbon values etc. within the appraisal of schemes to assess their impact upon this national target.

The 'Route Map' will lead to revisions to WebTag to be released in February 2021, which will directly affect the appraisal of the Bypass scheme. This will ensure that the bypass is directly appraised against post Covid economic environment as it affects travel behaviour.

Question 4:

Has any analysis been made of origination of journey and final destination for vehicles on the A350 to estimate the proportion of traffic passing through the Melksham catchment area or having a destination within the area?

Response:

The scheme will continue to be assessed using Wiltshire Council's Strategic Transport Model, which is based upon Highways England's South West Regional Model. The extent of the assessment therefore takes on board the origin and destination of trips across the entire A350 corridor. Initial studies carried out to support the Strategic Outline Business Case for the scheme suggested that up to 40% of the traffic on the A350 at Melksham is through traffic.

Question 5:

Has any analysis been made of the number of occasions when traffic was not flowing freely regardless of speed on the existing A350 and if this were the case whether this coincided only with usual peak periods of morning and evening rush hour.?

Response:

The traffic surveys which underpin the Strategic Traffic Model were taken across a considerable period considering the 24-hour variation in flows. Across the network, internal to Melksham and its surrounding environs, the typical peak hours of 8am to 9am and 5pm to 6pm exhibit the highest flows, however as is typical for a strategic

route, the peak is drawn out with high traffic flows either side of the peak hour. Further fluctuations are also exhibited at very localised sites outside of the peak, as they are affected by traffic demands generated by retail and recreational uses.

Question 6:

In May the council indicated that they needed to extend the capacity and experience of the team who would deal with major projects. Have additional officers with transport studies experience been employed by the council since then and how many and what is their experience?

Response:

The Council has created a small specialist team to manage the project. The Council already has officers with knowledge and experience of traffic and transport matters. They are supported by the Council's consultants Atkins, who have specialist teams with extensive knowledge of these matters. Atkins are an engineering consultancy who work for many clients, nationally and internationally, and bring significant expertise to carry out the required traffic modelling and help the Council develop the business case for the scheme.

Question 7:

The council estimates that the project will cost the council at least £20m for a highway which will only benefit those passing through our county rather than residents and business in the catchment area of Melksham. If this sum were increased by extending the route beyond Option C would this not be better spent on local infrastructure and will the council be willing to be scrutinised for expenditure which could be considered wasteful even before the anticipated economic recession?

Response:

The A350 forms a strategic route between the M4 corridor and the Southern Ports and is heavily trafficked along sections throughout Wiltshire. Whilst Melksham would significantly benefit from a material spend to maximise the capture of active travel modes in the town, such measures are prejudiced by the weight of strategic through traffic. In this regard, the spend to deliver the bypass, of any extent, will unlock further opportunities to maximise sustainable travel and remove severance which is currently created by the existing alignment of the A350. To ensure that these opportunities are realised, the scheme will incorporate measures to prioritise walking and cycling measures along and across the existing A350 alignment.

Question 8:

The council has allocated in excess of £670k for a pre option survey. Did this sum anticipate surveying land south of the K&A canal and why when any canal crossing be it aqueduct or viaduct would add in excess of £12m (the cost 16 years ago) to any route?

Response:

The cost of the walk over surveys and associated work is estimated to be in the region of £50,000 and forms a small element of the extensive investigation and assessment work which needs to be carried out for a scheme of this type. It was always intended that the walk over survey should be carried out over a wide area as the wider environmental and landscape issues over the whole area as well as adjacent to the routes. The possibility of a route south of the canal was suggested at the Melksham Area Board in March, and it was considered appropriate to consider this option at an early stage as it had been suggested.

Question 9:

If public consultation is confined to online reporting the council will be giving the impression they have something to hide. During the recent Governance review the man in the street found it well nigh impossible to negotiate the WCC website and the council was asked and complied with a request to accept opinions etc in writing. Will you ensure that all written evidence or comment will be accepted and will carry as much weight as online comment and how will you advertise consultation?

Response:

The consultation will not be confined to on-line responses. Written responses and emails will be welcomed. Carrying out consultations at this time is particularly difficult because of the Covid-19 restrictions. Exhibitions and public meetings which would normally be held are not feasible in the current circumstances. However, it was considered that it would be appropriate to continue with this non-statutory consultation in order to inform scheme development. The use of publicity and social media provides opportunities to raise awareness of the consultation locally, as well as direct communication with those organisations likely to have an interest in the scheme.

Question 10:

Is the Cabinet aware that land to the south of the K&A is a natural flood plain from Semington Brook and the flood risk allocated by the Environmental Agency extends over a significant area of farmland?

Response:

As Lead Local Flood Authority the Council is well aware of the local flood risk and works closely with the Environment Agency.

Question 11:

Has any preliminary analysis been made of the ecological and environmental impact of repurposing extensive areas of farmland south of the K&A and if not why not?

Response:

The walkover surveys currently being carried out are to augment existing environmental information on the wider area to inform option assessment.

Question 12:

Will the Council be compromised into granting planning permission to developers if contribution from developers is included when calculating contributions to the road scheme in excess of the original estimate?

Response:

Any planning applications by others will be considered on their merits in accordance with the regulations and relevant guidance and policy. The policy position at present reflects the adopted Core Strategy and this is being reviewed and will result in a revised Local Plan scheduled to be adopted before commencement of works on site to deliver the scheme.

Through development of the Local Plan, a transport evidence base will be produced, and this will propose mitigation measures to support housing development being brought forward. Should the evidence base provide a direct linkage between housing delivery and the need for Wiltshire's MRN schemes, such as the bypass, then Local Plan policy may reflect this and provide material support for the collection of contributions, via S106 or CIL, towards reimbursing the local contribution required.