

Response to the Melksham Bypass Consultation to 8th August 2021

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6. Summary, thank you, and my asks of you who have asked for input.

I am Graham Ellis, live at 48, Spa Road, Melksham, SN12 7NY. My wife and I moved to Melksham in 1999, and opened an IT training business here – specialist topics, with delegate coming to Melksham for courses from all over the British Isles. From 2006, we provided accommodation for our delegate and over time got to know a great deal about travel to, from and within Melksham – probably more than most people living here.

A systems analyst by training and nature, I have taken a close look at many aspects of getting around and through this area. I have come to an understanding of many of the difficult choices and decisions you have to make as people empowered with the role of keeping us moving, with a vibrant economy, and looking after our micro and macro environment and quality of life, health and safety as you do so.

Thank you for this opportunity to make none-statutory inputs; please take the following to heart in your helping the communities of Wiltshire through follow ups to achieve the very best results.

1. On the building of the bypass.

I am not convinced that it's the right thing to be doing, at the right place or the right time. I will raise concerns here, and suggest alternative approaches and evaluations.

1.1 I am concerned that projections are based on pre-covid, pre-climate-emergency numbers and algorithms, and request that Wiltshire Council and its contractors and agents fully examine the real and current case and projections, rather than using historic numbers and methods. Just because "we always do it this way" and "it's what the government asks us to do" doesn't make it scientifically the best or even acceptable. We cannot be sure that any outcome will be best for the environment or for the local economy or the quality of life;

there may be lower cost and more effective places to be in 2051 (half-life time as figures use projections of up to 60 years).

1.2 Assuming that significant traffic is being moved from the south coast and from west and south Wilts and Frome to the M4 corridor, smaller interventions on the existing A36 / A46 trunk route (such as a link between the two near Bath and a link under the A36 at The Viaduct, Dundas, to connect the Winsley Road to Brassknocker Hill, would allow traffic long distance traffic to take the currently designated trunk road across the county. Drastically increasing electric vehicle numbers in place of diesel and petrol will allow a lower cost engineering solution with steeper hills on the A36/A46 link because of the cleaner, quieter and better performance of electric vehicles, reducing or removing the impact of the short road section at Bathampton / Batheaston. Directing traffic from the south coast via Warminster (A36 / A350) junction to Bristol and South Wales via the A36 / A46 rather than via the A350 / M4 will reduce the length of each journey by around 10 miles / 16 kms, for the benefit of the environment and the economy of the haulier. At an average of just 6 vehicles each way per hour, this makes for a reduction of 1.05 million miles per year, or 60 million miles of indirect (needless?) diversion over the 60 year costing life.

1.3 Should a road be built from the Lacock area to the Semington area, it will attract extra traffic, including long distance traffic - that is the stated intent. I acknowledge that some projection of traffic flows in neighbouring areas has been done, but have the associated costs of (for example) providing a better connection from the A350 Semington/Yarnbrook road all the way to the A36 been included in the scheme's BCR calculations? There will be other benefits to be costed too from these extra links, such as environmental improvements in Westbury. Without adding such calculations into the mix, any BCR figure that is produced will only be for a fraction of the whole project and will have spurious boundaries and be mathematically flawed.

1.4 I am not convinced that we'll have the same peak / off peak differentiation of loadings by the time the road is opened. I am seeing (on public transport, where I have some experience) a changing pattern of use and this is seen elsewhere too - the peaks are much more levelled out. With the low distributed better through the day, the need for expensive peak provision is significantly reduced - a flow of (say) 10,000 vehicles per day of which 1,500 are in the busiest hour need far less provision than a flow of even 12,000 vehicles if only 1,000 are in the busiest hour.

2. If a road IS built from Semington to Lacock, it has to go somewhere

On the assumption (which in my view it is too early to make - see section 1) that a road is to be built, it will have to go somewhere.

2.1 Should the road be built at ground level, or in a cutting or on an embankment, it will give rise to serious local concern in the immediate area of the road (indeed it has done so already). Has consideration been given on route 10c to tunnelling from the cutting on the current A350, where the road is already well below land level, to north of the A365 (Melksham to Devizes road)? Was such an option looked at with regard to options 10a and 10b on the section from the Semington bypass to the current Melksham eastern relief road?

2.2 In section 1.2, I have suggested traffic diversion to more direct routes, which would seem to make environmental and economic sense - especially as they would involve far less road building.

3. If a road IS built from Semington to Lacock, it would bring local benefits, and those should be considered and provided to the full with such a road.

3.1 Cycleway and footpath should be provided throughout the new road, with the exception of any tunnelled section (see section 2.1) and cycle and footpath interchanges provided to all existing rights of way, helping to build a network for the future that encourages walking and cycling. Tunnelled sections may be powered vehicle only, provided that a route above is available and waymarked for others (horses, pedestrians, cycles)

3.2 Pedestrian and cycle access also to be provided where the new road crosses the line of the Wilts and Berk canal to the towpath of that canal.

3.3 Pedestrian and cycle provision from where the bypass joins the old A350 to the south of Lacock into Lacock

3.4 Vehicle access to the north and the south from the east of Melksham would be considerably easier with the junction on the A3102, and I commend this junction being planned so that interchange between the A3102 and the new A350 is possible in all directions.

4. IF a road is built, Melksham itself can and should benefit for the most part.

4.1 I acknowledge and celebrate the immediate (well, once the road is opened) benefits to include

4.1.1 Reduction of traffic through Beanacre and north Melksham to the benefit of residents along that road

4.1.2 Reduction of heavy traffic and noise on current bypass south of Farmer's roundabout to the significant benefit of residents in housing close to that section

4.2 There are also disadvantages on the existing road:

4.2.1 There is a potential drop in passing trade to businesses along that road such as roadside cafes, petrol station, drive throughs, take aways and convenience stores. I note that after the Semington bypass was built, the Waney Edge cafe lost its passing trade and closed, and businesses that rely on passing trade on the old road could be effected.

4.3 An Enabler for new housing

4.3.1 Although we are told that the provision or not of further housing is outside the scope of the current consultation and business case, we are also presented with graphic showing planned housing in Trowbridge, Westbury and Warminster. I am also aware of major additional housing underway in Frome - across the administration boundary but very much in the economic area. I acknowledge that a new road around Melksham will help additional traffic generated pass by on the way to the M4 corridor should provision via the Bath area on the current trunk road not be improved.

4.3.2 Historically, bypasses have lead to infill building and in spite of firm statements that the bypass consultation and housing growth in Melksham are not linked, I am not convinced.

4.3.3 Where a bypass passes through a SHELAA site (1006, 1035 and 3345 for example), the bypass would actually reduce the possible housing provision there. Depending on junction arrangements, it could help with access to the remaining parts of those sites.

4.3.4 Housing is proposed on land to the west of the current A350 to the West of Melksham, to include a new cut canal. Reducing traffic on the current A350 would allow a new junction to be provided at the cemetery gate - perhaps a roundabout or if not, lights, to give (a) access to the new housing, (b) safer controlled access to the Cemetery and (c) Access to the rear of the Melksham Campus for traffic arriving to use those facilities, keeping it clear of the Town Centre.

4.4 Traffic reduction in Melksham Town Centre and consequences

4.4.1. Traffic headed from the A350 to the north of Melksham to the east of the town (A3102) would have a shorter and faster route and could be usefully removed from the Town Centre. This is substantial, though traffic from the Bath and Bradford-on-Avon directions towards east Melksham would probably still pass through the town.

4.4.2. I would welcome street scene changes and consequential encouragement of pedestrian, cycle, and stopping (to make use of businesses) traffic in the town. Whether that extends to full pedestrianisation still required thought and consultation with businesses in its own right.

5. Other improvements effecting the north / south flow which should be considered and / or implemented as part of this package, whether or not the road element itself is build.

5.1 Rail station access.

5.1.1 The consultation talks of better access to the station from the town. Whether there's 10,000, 15,000 or 20,000 vehicles per day passing over the subway, it makes no difference as far as I can see to the station accessibility. A crossing on the level with a pelican, puffin or zebra might be welcomed by some and be possible if traffic levels dropped, but would add a risk factor

5.1.2 The consultation also talks of the proposed northern access via Foundry Close to the station. I would welcome this access to allow buses, taxis, cycles and pedestrians to access the station as part of their passageway through / to access housing in north Melksham. Your drawing rather curiously shows this link going through the middle of the Victorian goods shed and into Foundry Close from the south, rather than passing to the north of the good shed and entering Foundry close where there is already a spur "waiting" on the roundabout.

5.1.3 There is an opportunity to take a path from the rear of the car park at the station to the A350 at the gate of Spencer's Sports and Social Club, opposite Scotland Road, and provide a new pedestrian crossing there; this would likely be workable if there was a substantial reduction on the number of vehicles passing there at busy times. It would save several hundred metres off the walk or cycle from the station to the Melksham Forest area (where much of the housing stock is not good for having too many private cars), bringing those houses into the station catchment and provide an off-road route all the way from Melksham Station to the national cycle network.

5.2 Rail provision. One train from Southampton to The Midland and North takes up to 40 lorries worth of containers. One train from the Somerset Quarries to the Swindon area and the West of London takes the equivalent of 40 lorries. One train of waste to a new Westbury Incinerator - authorised by Wiltshire Council planner on what used to be railway facility land by Westbury Station - would save dozens of lorry journeys. However, the line through Melksham was reduce to a long single track section where trains cannot pass each other, nor even follow each other until the previous one has cleared the line, and the line currently has limited extra capacity. At present, a quarter of the containers leaving Southampton do so by rail and there is scope to increase this. Passing loop(s) between Dunch Lane, Melksham and the road from Notton to Biddestone, and/or from just south of Melksham Station to the approaches to Staverton (just before the Avon Bridge) would allow substantial extra freight traffic in addition to increasing passenger services, which are currently less than attractive; passenger numbers at Melksham are up from 3,000 to 75,000 journeys per annum in recent pre-covid years; forecasts of

400,000 up to 600,000 per annum with an increase service should be revised to a conservative working figure of 300,000 while we see the effects of covid and climate issues, but never the less these sorts of numbers would have a major benefit for the community as well as a smaller (but welcome) help in moving people out of private cars.

5.3 Future development of communities where commuting need is reduced

"Connected Cities" ... "Transport for New Homes". Our towns are growing such that the need to travel between them will not grow in proportion to their population growth - much more in town. Furthermore, working from home has become accepted practise - rail commute figures suggest that the average office worker will be travelling 2.2 days per week as opposed to 4.4, and with that a further reduction of traffic. Where journey number are halved, a slightly slower journey is less of an issue, and there is also a better opportunity to shift the journey to public transport with the capital cost of a car for just two days a week becomes less easy to justify. See 5.3 and also look at the Government's "Bus Back Better" which calls for bus service to run from early morning into the evening and at a much better frequency, with side-journeys that are common at present met by other means to speed the services up. An outcome of the current consultation and proposals needs be to put theses elements, which includes local Broadband and Bus policies, into the mix to come up not just with a good outcome, but the best possible outcome

5.4 Ride Sharing.

Stand beside the A350, watch private cars go by, and most will have five seats but just a driver in them. Many of those with multiple people will be driven by someone taking a friend or family member - "Mum's taxi" and of course some of the one-person vehicles are Mum's Taxi returning from a drop off or going out to pick up.

Ride sharing scheme have been tried and not a huge success. Formally, they require a lot of admin and people who shares start point, end point, time outward, time return and days of travel. Informally, there are significant issues such as "who pays for it?", insurance, taxation, and the safety of both the person offering and the person receiving the lift. It has also been suggested that the motor industry and indeed highway engineers and government taxation teams have been none too keen on changing things to make it work, preferring to sell cars, do insurance business, build roads and collect fuel duty. But there is an alternative, and the Warminster - Chippenham Corridor would be a prime place to try it - with drivers "DBSI" ("I" for insured) checked, riders carrying an ID to authorise them, and a simple cash payment model or app. No need for detailed record. Increasing passengers per private car from 1.2 to just 1.32 would represent a 10% drop in vehicles, even if we don't count removed runs of Mum's taxi.

5.5 Deliveries. We have moved to a world where much more is delivered to the household, and much less collected from "the shops", but we have done so over the last 18 months by stretching the current systems. Rather than stretch further and [just] build the new road, how about providing a delivery hub from where packages and parcels can be delivered in efficient groups - probably by electric van or even cargo cycle. Again - traffic reduction

5.7 If and when traffic on the old A350 is reduced (could it be done anyway, please?) there is scope for cycle and footway improvements along that road. Your consultation documents provocatively draw a line south through Farmer's Roundabout toward the Challemead Bridge, but no footpath is provided or suggested for there. It is a short walk to the entrance to the Cemetery along that road, but an extremely unpleasant one that feels dangerous. Yet it could bring the whole of the Hazelwood Road area into the shopping area at ASDA and the Railway Station Hub. Please include making this route into a walking and cycling route as part of your mitigations, or part of the base plan to reduce traffic thereabouts. When the canal / west of Melksham is built (4.3.4) this will provide their access too, bringing them within station walking distance.

6. Summary

6.1 I would prefer that new road building be limited, and have suggested an alternative to the 9.3 km of option 10c which I ask you to look at.

6.2 I am unconvinced that calculations use best current methods and current data, and feel they are based on an old world though we are now in a new world. So I ask you to visit your calculations based on current scientific knowledge, not on past practise and convention. It would be helpful to those of us who feel that asking a road builder to come up with a balance case for or against a road if you could get your outcomes ratified (or assisted by) a neutral organisation whom we both can trust.

6.3 Should, notwithstanding the concerns, this road build go ahead, I ask you to tune it for the future and provide ancillary infrastructure to help us (and Wiltshire) be best placed for zero carbon and otherwise environmental friendly living with the highest practical quality of life and enjoyment

6.4 Many thanks for undertaking this none-statutory consultation. Please ask me if there is anything in there you would like me to clarify / provide additional sources, etc. I write in the hope of a pragmatic solution that answers as many concerns as possible and work for the greater good of all of us - not just this year, but through the lifetime of any changes

6.5 Written by - Graham Ellis, 48, Spa Road, Melksham - in a private capacity, though I am a Town Councillor, Member of the Melksham Transport User Group, and board member of TravelWatch SouthWest; my input has been (to a very great extent) informed by electors and other members of those organisations. graham@wellho.net - <http://grahamellis.uk> - 01225 708225