

Notes of a meeting to discuss opportunities to take forward a new proposal for improvements to the A303, A358 and A30.

Fleet Air Arm Museum 6 January 2012

Attending:

- Cllr Ken Maddock, Leader, Somerset County Council (SCC)
 - Sheila Wheeler, Chief Executive, SCC
 - Cllr David Hall, Cabinet Member – Strategic Planning and Economic Development, SCC
 - Patrick Flaherty, Director of Environmental Services, SCC
 - Mike O’Dowd-Jones, Interim Service Director - Physical Regeneration, SCC
 - Stephen Walford, Interim Group Manager Strategic Planning and Road Safety, SCC
 - Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council (DnCC)
 - Ian Harrison, Head of Economy and Enterprise, DnCC
 - Cllr Fleur de Rhe-Philipe, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Strategic Planning, Wiltshire Council (WC)
 - Alistair Cunningham, Service Director-Economy and Enterprise, WC
 - Allan Creedy, WC
 - Peter Finney MBE, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation, Dorset County Council (DtCC)
 - Miles Butler, Director for Environment, DtCC
 - Tim Wood, Assistant Transportation Manager, Cornwall Council
 - Anthony Payne, Director of Place, Plymouth City Council
 - Cllr Ray Hill, Torbay Council
 - Rupert Cox, CEO, Somerset Chamber of Commerce
 - Meghann Downing, Highways Agency
 - Tim Jones, Chairman, Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership
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Introduction.

The Leader of Somerset County Council, Cllr Ken Maddock, thanked people for taking the time to attend the meeting and set out the broad context for the meeting as follows:

The ambition is for a consortium of Local Authorities to develop and take forward a new scheme for improvements to the A303/ A358/A30. The group needs to be ambitious and businesslike. The scheme is needed to improve connectivity between London and the South West to ensure that we keep the jobs that we have and increase jobs through inward investment. The current road access to the South West has an acute lack of resilience in the event of an incident and has considerable road safety issues. Now is absolutely the right time to be taking this forward as the Government has signalled that money will be found to tackle issues that inhibit growth and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) are being encouraged to make their own arrangements

to tackle important economic issues. The Department for Transport don't have many projects 'on the shelf' and not all the other sub-regions currently 'have their act together'.

The purpose of today's meeting is to achieve support in principle, discuss the type of scheme or package that people would like to achieve, agree to the proposal for a project team and gain momentum to take the proposals forward.

Presentation.

Mike O'Dowd-Jones (Service Director) and Stephen Walford (Group Manager) gave a presentation to add further detail to the issues. This covered the geographic extent of the scheme, road safety and resilience issues, economic and timing issues as well as broad scheme options. The presentation outlined the following key points:

- The scheme should cover the whole length of the A303, the A358 to Taunton and the A30 to Exeter focusing on the sections that are currently not dual carriageway;
- British Chamber of Commerce view this as a very high priority scheme which they feel has a £1.1bn benefit;
- Government has plans for 'Local Transport Consortia' (alliances of LEPs);
- There is a range of schemes that could be prepared, and a need to balance cost with deliverability;
- Options for a lower cost set of improvements were presented although these were at the lower cost/ higher deliverability end of the possible spectrum of schemes.

Discussion: The following points were made during discussion:

North/South connectivity issues are also important (Dorset) particularly access to ports, so should not be forgotten. A350/A37 North South links would be a higher priority for Wilts and Dorset.

It was noted that the scheme might not be everyone's top priority, but is everyone's high priority

A compelling story on the economics of the scheme has to include the wider routes and markets that connect with the scheme.

General agreement that the options tabled needed to be more ambitious and scaled-down from the 'gold plated' scheme rather than scaled-up from the minimal route management ideas.

The LEP and Chamber of Commerce highlighted the need to be ambitious on timescale as costs inflate each year. A 'business recognisable timescale' needs to be achieved to attract private sector investment. Creative private sector packages are needed on a short timescale.

Highways Agency (HA) have 'stress mapping' for the strategic network. Single carriageway sections do feature as being under stress, but not as stressed as sections around Bristol for instance. The Highways Agency can't determine what the wider impacts are though, so this extra intelligence is needed. The HA are currently delivering on smaller schemes and have 'pinch points' funding. There is a need to establish what smaller scale intervention can be achieved in the short term, but also to look at longer term dualling options. The HA are happy to look at a sectional approach including dualling of some sections.

The compelling case should refer to the fact that business does not currently come down this far on the corridor. The RDA (7 functional areas) identified this corridor as 'an area of non-function' due to lack of competitiveness. There is huge lost potential and lack of opportunity. There is more potential for road improvement on the A303 rather than the M4 due to the relative standard of road and other constraints.

The opportunity for 'reduced' road standards was discussed. It was clarified that the standard of improvement (i.e. number of lanes and need for 'grade separated' bridges etc) was not necessarily related to status as a trunk road. The Authorities agreed there is a need to aim for appropriate standards within an overall approach to risk management. Authorities and agencies working together have much stronger case for articulating a set of appropriate standards. The HA confirmed they would be considering the issue of appropriate standards and this should be discussed as the project develops.

Wiltshire confirmed support for the project noting that there were challenging issues in relation to the Stonehenge sections to consider.

Devon confirmed support for the project noting that it is absolutely right to progress this now. There is a need to promote that there are two ways into the South West. The need for improved rail access should not be forgotten either.

Plymouth confirmed that their Local Transport Plan states the need to improve the A303 but this is not their highest priority. Noted that the wider connectivity agenda is important.

The road as more than a 'sub-regional' importance; should be setting out its 'sub-national' importance.

The following points were generally agreed.

- Politically there is a big appetite to listen and the door is open.
- There is lots of work already done which needs to be quickly reviewed and audited to establish what evidence remains to be developed.
- There is a need to get into the Department for Transport quickly with a coherent story.
- The project should consider what could be 'pulled downwards' rather than work up from bottom.

- North-South linkages are important in several places. There is a need to establish if the A303 was improved what supportive evidence would this give to the business cases for the North-South schemes.
- There is a need to look at the incremental improvements that best benefit the economy.
- A quantified business case is essential to give the Highways Agency the evidence to focus investment.
- There is a need to provide key messages and lines of briefing for MPs so that messages get to Government with consistency, clarity and coherence.
- The level of ambition should be to deliver for the South West rather than settle for a 'patch-up job' on the route.
- There is a need to agree how to manage the issue of priorities with Leaders and Chief Executives in due course, but this should not stop us developing the case.

Outcome of the meeting and next steps:

These were set out by Patrick Flaherty (Director of Environmental Services, Somerset County Council) as follows:

The key messages were;

1. In principle support from all attendees.
2. An acknowledgement that the time is now right to push for this scheme.
3. There is a desire to be very ambitious but not to repeat the mistakes of previous schemes. However, the desire was to work down from the highest denominator, i.e. from the previous scheme rather than work everything through from the lowest denominator route, i.e. cheap and cheerful.
4. A collaborative approach is needed and achievable.
5. We need to develop an ambitious and coherent plan that includes an early sight of the next steps.
6. We need to play up the sub-national approach towards developing the A303 (and supportive networks such as the A350 – very important from the Wiltshire perspective).
7. We need to quickly develop a business plan that will attract the sustained interest of the business and government world, which will be especially important if we are to explore alternative funding mechanisms.
8. There is a need to look in detail as to how each section of the route (and supporting routes) stack up.

Next steps;

1. We now need to draw a project team together and Somerset County Council are happy to convene / lead this process.
2. We need to develop the programme in detail, developing the scheme itself with supporting work streams that look at the technical solution, environmental implications, economic benefits and funding opportunities. We need a project plan which defines dates when this activity will happen

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3. We need to develop an effective lobbying framework so that we can take a planned approach to raising our profile both nationally, regionally and locally. There will be a government slant, local political slant, business slant and technical / professional slant to this that will all need to be picked up and sustained.