

The A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon Improvement Scheme

Submission to the Planning Inspectorate (DCO Registration ID 10030600).

I write both as a resident of the Offords and in my position as Treasurer, on behalf of the Offords A14 Action Group.

Summary

This road proposal is an outdated megalithic project that belongs to an earlier age of roadbuilding. Based on dubious projections of road traffic growth over the next twenty years, it rides roughshod over the environment and the quality of life of those who live in its path. The Ouse valley in which the Offords reside is one of the prettiest in Cambridgeshire. The view, as one heads over the top of Offord Hill towards the village, is truly beautiful. It hardly need be said that this road plan will utterly destroy this. A savage, hideous scar across the landscape in either direction as far as the eye can see. Times have moved on and there are better and far cheaper ways available for the management of traffic flow.

On cost grounds alone, it has to be rejected as being unaffordable. This government should have higher priorities with regard to reducing the country's colossal debt, funding ever-increasing education, health, pension and welfare commitments etc. Any "economic benefit" cited has to be regarded with deep suspicion as to the parameters used to measure it.

The initial objectives of the Scheme, to improve traffic flow and to minimise the incidence and effects of traffic accidents along the route can be achieved at a fraction of the cost to which this project commits the government. This submission outlines a number of ways in which this can be done.

Throughout this entire process, there has been a growing sense of unease with regard to the role of Highways England, the former Highways Agency. To say that they act as Judge and Jury would seem to be rather understating the case. They exist to build roads – hence all their decisions result in plans to build roads! It would appear that they have learned the lessons of the Newbury Bypass and the M11 extension well. The "consultation" process is largely a sham, selectively limiting the area in which consultation takes place and information distributed. Opinion is sought using skilfully worded questionnaires that only allow polarised replies. When allowing "democratic" voting they ensure that catchment areas will persuade the majority to vote in favour of themselves and condemn those in the minority to have their lives blighted without compensation. Even with all this in their favour they only managed to get a majority of 51% in favour of this scheme – hardly a ringing endorsement.

So in the end this Planning Inspection remains the only means by which the minority may express their views with a hope to having them heard.

“The Need For The Scheme”

The proposal is for the A14 at Ellington to transform into a three-lane dual carriageway (a motorway by any other name) and to re-route from Ellington in a southerly direction, curving round the south of Huntingdon and Godmanchester and heading eastwards towards Cambridge, rejoining the A14 at Fen Drayton.

There are other separate proposals to simplify the junctions at Girton, Histon and Milton. These seem sensible, small-scale, achievable schemes that will address specific issues at those points along the route.

The principal grounds for those in favour of this scheme are that it will speed up traffic through the bottleneck of the Huntingdon – Cambridge section of this vital arterial route, that it will lower the accident rate and “save lives” and that it offers Huntingdon the option to demolish the section of the A14 that currently runs over the town. This last was a somewhat opportunistic spin-off from the route proposal that has been grabbed by Huntingdon District Council as a means by which they can “transform” the environs of the town at somebody else’s expense. They maintain that the flyover has only a few years of life left before it becomes unsafe. Many other commentators dispute this “fact”.

The chief causes of delay on this stretch of the A14 are low-level traffic accidents, vehicle breakdowns, fires etc. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of a hard shoulder on this stretch of the road, meaning that lanes remain blocked for far longer than they would be if there was a hard shoulder onto which the obstruction could be moved.

However – it is worth making the point that I believe that the proposed A14 will also not have a hard shoulder! Therefore the problems of traffic obstruction will be just as bad with the new road as it is with the existing one. HE may argue that with three lanes rather than two, any such obstruction will present less of a delay to traffic, but we would make the point that many accidents and all vehicle fires will close a three lane to the same extent as a two lane road and for the majority of other cases a two lane road with a hard shoulder would be just as good as a three lane road without one.

Objections

The objections to the Scheme are very straightforward. The proposed route of the A14 crosses the railway line and the river Ouse on a viaduct that carves a hideous scar across some of the most picturesque scenery in the locality. In addition it will blight the lives of those resident in Brampton, Buckden, Offord Cluny and Hilton with noise, light and pollution. Residents of Offord Cluny will have the beauty of their very impressive northern aspect entirely destroyed. What is it all trying to achieve? This is not an accident “black spot” nor is it a necessary urban bypass. When it comes down to it, the purpose is to save around ten minutes on the drive between Huntingdon and Cambridge and minimise the effect of accidents that block the route from time to time. This at a cost of over £1.5 billion! Out of all proportion to the benefits which are in any case likely to be short-lived as traffic will increase to take advantage of the benefit of the road. A hammer to crack a nut, indeed.

There is a groundswell of opinion forming that certainly the first two objectives can be achieved at a fraction of the cost of this scheme, and without the appalling impact on the Ouse Valley environment that it will cause.

The Proposed Scheme – Pitfalls

There is a lack of detail in the Draft Orders that needs to be aired and challenged in public before any work goes ahead:-

- There is not enough detail in the layout of some of the junctions – New Ellington and Buckden for example. Some of them seem so complex as to be in themselves, seriously hazardous to road users.
- HE's figures on noise, light and environmental pollution seem very optimistic and many parishes involved would like the opportunity to have them examined in greater detail by experts not in the employ of EA.
- Some of the routings seem very strange – for example it appears to be impossible for northbound traffic on the A1 to join the new A14 in an easterly direction. This is concerning to residents of the Offords as we see the B1043 used as a route from the south to join the eastbound A14.
- The proposed road has very few exit routes, running as it does virtually unbroken throughout. In the event of the inevitable accidents occurring on the road, it would be nice to know what contingency plans the HE has for re-routing the traffic around the blockage. If it is, as we suspect, to divert southbound onto the A1 and thence eastbound on the (single lane) A428, then this will undoubtedly cause a gridlock of biblical proportions in the area.

A major cause of congestion at peak times is commuter traffic from surrounding towns and villages destined for Cambridge, mixing with the longer-distance traffic already on the A14. This is a consequence of Cambridge being both a major employer in the area and having a relatively small (and thus expensive) housing stock. One effect of improving the journey times will be to encourage more people to live further outside Cambridge and thus increase the amount of traffic on the new

A14, until the point at which journey times are back to where they were is reached. This is a well-known phenomenon with new road projects. Indeed it has happened with the A14 itself – when originally upgraded in the late 1990s there was comparatively little traffic on it for the first few years.

I (along with many others) am still not convinced of the viability of removing the viaduct in Huntingdon – it still seems that the volume of traffic produced will be too much for the town ring road and will also increase the load of traffic on the Godmanchester road bridge – very old, very fragile and in any case impassible for HGVs.

The re-routed Brampton Road into Huntingdon, a necessity if the viaduct is removed, requires the loss of a sizeable part of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and the felling of a large number of mature trees. This is a substantial amenity for residents of Huntingdon and surrounding areas that will be lost, with little or no compensatory benefits received. Increased traffic levels close to a large school and hospital also have implications for road safety that do not appear to be addressed in any detail. As well as this, land will be taken from Mill Common and Views Common in order to accommodate traffic within Huntingdon being able to reach the old A14 without the use of the A14 viaduct.

Accidents

There is a great deal of emotion attached to the subject of accidents. The popular local Press Has dubbed the existing A14 a “Killer Road” and Has been somewhat mendacious with its accident statistics, including incidents and fatalities beyond the boundaries of the proposed scheme, even as far away as Newmarket.

A different picture emerges when Highways England’s own analysis of the problem is outlined in their published Draft Orders :-

2.2.18 Accidents and incidents are perceived as a significant issue on the existing A14. Analysis Has shown that the number of accidents is not significantly different to other similar ‘A’ roads, but there is a high incidence of ‘slight’ accidents, often minor shunts, reflecting the congested traffic situation. This does not detract from some isolated serious accidents on the A14 in recent years. It is often the case that incidents on the A14 (accident or breakdown) can cause severe traffic jams over a wide area, with few diversion routes available, other than on unsuitable local roads. This presents difficulties for emergency services in reaching incident locations quickly. The consequent congestion is taken to be a large factor in the perception of accidents and incidents as a major issue.

2.2.19 A summary of the analysis of accident data along this section of the A14 in the five years prior to 2008 is given below:

a) In all there were 737 personal injury accidents reported in the 5 year period up to December 2007, of which 86% were slight, 12% serious and 2% fatal.

b) An average of 147 accidents occurred in the A14 study area annually. The highest number of personal injury accidents recorded in a single year was 167 (2003).

c) Over the five-year period 12 personal injury accidents were classified as fatalities, approximately 2% of the total personal injury accidents. The number of fatalities increased over the 5 year period from 1 in 2003 to 3 in 2007.

d) A further 12% of all accidents involved serious injuries.

2.2.20 An assessment of the average accident rate, weighted for traffic flow and distance, Has shown that the dual-two lane sections of the A14 within the Scheme extent generally have accident rates lower than the national average for roads of this type.

2.2.21 The exceptions to this are the sections between Brampton Hut and Spittals and between Bar Hill and Girton interchange, which have observed accident rates that are higher than the national average for roads of this type. In the absence of a detailed accident assessment it is not possible to state definitively why accidents on these sections are higher than the DMRB default rates.

However it is likely that accident numbers on the Brampton Hut to Spittals section reflect the approach to the at-grade roundabouts at each end while the accident rate on the Bar Hill to Girton interchange section may reflect the weaving movements of traffic.

So - contrary to what proponents of the Scheme claim, the current section of the A14 is not a "Killer Road". The Highways England's own Environmental Statement makes it clear that accidents and fatalities on the road are actually below the national average.

The point is also worth making that all these Highways England statistics were gathered prior to 2008, since when some major initiatives to improve traffic behaviour have been implemented over this stretch of road. In particular, the accident rate has fallen since the imposition of average speed cameras between Huntingdon and Cambridge and the siting of traffic lights at the Brampton Hut and Spittals Interchanges. Indeed such is the improvement that the local Press have become strangely quiet on the matter! This alternative proposal would retain these features and also include cameras on the traffic lights at Spittals and Brampton Hut to identify those vehicles who jump the lights or travel at inappropriate speeds approaching the roundabouts.

Many of the accidents that still do happen involve lorries joining or leaving the road via hopelessly inadequate junctions or laybys with acceleration lanes that are too short, trying to merge with faster moving traffic already on the road. The junction with the St Ives road for traffic heading east is a case in point. A relatively small investment in improved junction design would cut the accident rate still further. Laybys have also been a cause of accidents. The lack of truck stops on the A14 route has meant that these laybys are frequently full of large articulated lorries with

drivers at the limit of their permitted hours. With no space to gather speed, when they restart and turn back onto the main carriageway, often into inadequate gaps, approaching vehicles on the road have to brake sharply and inevitably from time to time a pile-up results. Some of the laybys have been placed in incredibly stupid positions – there is one east of Godmanchester at the end of the overhead section that is less than 200 metres past a blind summit, leaving no space for braking for any traffic coming over the top and encountering a juggernaut pulling out at 5mph. So we would propose closing all the laybys between Huntingdon and Godmanchester except for emergency access, and putting a truck stop facility somewhere to the west of Huntingdon.

Traffic Flow

One of the factors behind the accident rate is the high proportion of Heavy Goods Vehicles that travel along the route, most of which are using the A14 as a route between Europe via Felixstowe and the North-West of England via the A1, M1, M6 etc. A study of accident details reveals that lorries are involved in the majority of them. Amongst the causes are:-

- Frustrated car drivers being held up by one lorry overtaking another on a two-lane road, with very small speed differentials leading to extended periods of slow traffic
- Continental drivers HEving inadequate mirrors to give them a view of traffic on their right hand side, consequently colliding with unseen vehicles when pulling out, either to overtake or from a layby or slip road.
- Continental lorries that do not meet UK standards of roadworthiness and driver qualification.
- Lorries that break down due to inadequate maintenance or poorly tethered loads
- Fatigued drivers, out of hours, losing concentration, misjudging distances or not being aware of traffic at a standstill up ahead until too late to stop.
- Accidents at Brampton Hut caused by HGVs going too fast for the road conditions, trying to “beat the lights”, entering the roundabout at too high a speed and either jackknifing or overturning. Similar accidents occur at Spittals.

Not part of this proposal but it would seem that if a government was serious about reducing accidents on this (or indeed any) stretch of road, it would debar from entering the UK lorries and drivers which do not meet UK standards. Also it would prosecute more rigorously those responsible for non-fatal accidents that cause road closures and major delays and HEve the power to impound vehicles that break down due to poor maintenance.

Again not part of this proposal, but as is being submitted by other parties, thought needs to be given to lessen our dependency on road transport for long-distance

movement of goods. Investment in freight carriage by rail is something that needs consideration. A study of the earlier investigations into alternatives for the A14, such as CHUMMS will note the pervasive influence of the Road Haulage Association in the decision-making process. Also the lack of input from any of the Rail companies, either trains or infrastructure presumably due to the chaotic state of the rail network at the time.

Joined-up Thinking

During a meeting with Brampton Parish Council, one of the residents of the village asked about where this scheme fitted in with proposals to widen the A428 and other schemes in the region. "We are only concerned with the A14" was the response from the Highways England Representative. And there in a nutshell was the single most important reason why the road system in this country is in the mess it is. These individual schemes add up to something that is considerably less than the sum of the parts.

In particular in this case, what needs to be considered is the relationship between the Ellington / Fen Drayton project and the two projects to improve the route between the M1 junction 13 and the Black Cat roundabout on the A1. Two major projects. the Bedford bypass and the A421 from M1 J13 to Brogborough have been completed, designed to speed up traffic on the A421. But when traffic arrives at the A1 travelling east (to Cambridge, Felixstowe etc) where does it go? Onto the A428 at St Neots where it is back to a single carriageway until Caxton Gibbet. Or north up the A1, where it now appears that there will be no eastwards turn onto the A14 in the proposed scheme! Joined up thinking indeed. There are still no plans in place to dual the A428 between St Neots and Caxton Gibbet, although the sheer ludicrousness of the situation is starting to become apparent to the powers that be.

If this dualling was done, it would also divert much of the local traffic travelling to and from Cambridge and would thus itself relieve some of the pressure on the A14. A much simpler and cheaper scheme.

Alternative Scheme

A perfectly viable alternative becomes apparent when the “Need for the Scheme” is examined in more detail. Essentially keep the road largely as it is, but improve certain aspects that are contributing to the rate of accidents and delays.

For any alternative scheme to be credible it will need to address the issues of accidents , traffic flow and how it works within the road network as a whole..

Summary of Alternative Proposal

1. Keep the current A14 in place, but
 - a. Close the laybys except for emergency use
 - b. Provide hard shoulders along as much of the length as practicable.
 - c. Improve the access and egress lanes at junctions to allow for traffic joining and leaving the 14 adequate space for acceleration and braking
 - d. Ban HGVs from overtaking along the Huntingdon-Cambridge stretch
 - e. Put a Truck Stop in place west of Huntingdon to replace the one at Alconbury that was recently closed.
 - f. Retain the current average speed cameras
 - g. In addition put cameras at the traffic lights at Spittals and Brampton Hut interchanges to identify vehicles that either jump the lights or approach the roundabouts at inappropriate speeds

2. Dual the A428 between St Neots and Caxton, making a dual carriageway all the way from the A1 to Cambridge. Improve the junction/connection between the A1, the A428 and the A421 (Bedford bypass). When this is combined with the completed M1 J13 to Brogborough project this will effectively creates a dual carriageway all the way from the M1 to Felixstowe, but only utilising the A14 beyond Cambridge where it is much more lightly used.

3. Improve the link between the A428 and the M11 Southbound

These last two would also make increases to road safety – both the single lane section of the A428 and the A428/M11 link via the A1303 are accident black spots.

Perhaps I will conclude with two observations I made during the Preliminary meeting held at Huntingdon Town Hall, which I attended.

- a) The hall was full – it was a very well-attended meeting. Practically everybody in favour of the scheme (HE staff, Cambs County Council, Hunts District Council etc) was being paid to attend by their employer. Those against were largely there at their own expense – and yet a straw poll showed a substantial majority of those attending were against the scheme.

- b) When one of the attendees queried whether or not any alternative schemes had been considered and had had designs drawn up, Mike Evans purported to know nothing of any such schemes. The Alternative scheme outlined in this document was forwarded by the A14 Action Group, Offord Parish Council and the Brampton A14 Group as early as 2010. This alone sums up the attitude of HE – their only interest is in building large, complex and expensive road schemes in order to maintain their place in the order of things.

Ian Weitzel 12 June 2015

Notes

- This document was produced by myself. It does, however reflect opinions gleaned from others during meetings of the “Offords A14 Action Group” and a succession of public meetings held in Offord Darcy, Offord Cluny and Brampton over the past four years.

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