

The A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon Improvement Scheme

The Offords A14 Action Group

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

Summary

In truth this document should be little different from that submitted by the Offords A14 Action Group in June 2015. Our situation remains unchanged, with Highways England (HE) unable or unwilling to change their proposal in any meaningful way.

The road will still carve a scar across the Ouse Valley. The viaduct to the west of the Ouse remains a steel and concrete structure impossible to screen or have its impact mitigated in any way. The bridge over the railway line is still twelve metres high, not only also impossible to screen but also for which no meaningful analysis of pollution, sound and light transmission has been done, taking the height into account.

HE have still not provided any three-dimensional graphics representing the actual appearance of the road along its route – just lines on a map – usually “not to scale”. We are some three years into the current proposal yet we have no details of planned junctions, of overhead lighting and displays, even the basic construction of the bridge and the viaduct. How can a decision be arrived at without this information being known?

HE have also refused our request to put markers on the B1043 indicating both the position of the road, its distance from Offord Cluny, but also the extent of the disruption to the landscape, displaying the total breadth of the road and the accompanying embankment. We are concerned that this refusal is so that there is no hard evidence of the road’s position in place and thus no redress should it turn out to be closer to the Offords than the current (“not to scale”) maps are implying.

As previously submitted, there are other improvements that can be made to the existing A14 (hard shoulders, junction improvements etc) that will provide a solution at a fraction of the £1.5bn (plus) cost of this development. Moreover it does nothing to address the major cause of delays on the A14 within the County, the Girton interchange, the Histon interchange and the routes into Cambridge City.

“The Need For The Scheme”

This has been examined in the original document submitted to the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) by the Offords A14 Action Group (OA14AG) in June of this year. Nothing that has been delivered to PINS since then, either in writing or verbally at meetings attended by OA14AG members has changed any of the points raised in that document, largely because Highways England have not seriously addressed these points.

Issues raised by us have either been met with denial (pollution, noise, environmental damage), by a metaphorical shrug of the shoulders (destruction of the view across the Ouse Valley) or ignored completely (increased traffic through the Offords when access to the A14 is no longer possible via the northbound A1).

For us, a key omission remains the complete lack of any pictorial representation of the route. No graphical representations giving the appearance and size of structures such as the bridge over the railway line and the road as it crosses the Ouse Valley north of Offord Cluny have been provided by HE.. In this age of computer graphics this is little short of a disgrace, given the three years that HE have had to prepare for this. Surely the provision of such material should have been a mandatory requirement of their original DCO submission at the end of 2014 ? How can a decision be arrived at without this level of detail?

We do not believe that HE are worthy of trust in this regard. This is a sad reflection on what is (or should be) a public body. However throughout this entire process, dating back to the turn of the Millennium, Highways England (and in their previous guise as the Highways Agency) have consistently employed tactics that have undermined any trust that we may have had in them. For example on many occasions the Offords have been left out of graphics displaying the proposed route, giving the impression that the road will run through empty countryside. Indeed this whole process began when, having arrived at four possible routes and invited residents to vote for their preference, the “winning choice” published by the Highways Agency was not one of the options – it was half a mile closer to the Offords than originally positioned. The HA’s rather pathetic attempt to try and deny that they had moved the route resulted in the Offords A14 Action Group instigating a Judicial Review at considerable financial risk to themselves, and resulted in the HA having to re-run the voting process. It is almost certain that without this delay, had the HA stuck to their originally planned route, there would have been much less opposition and the road would by now be completed and fully operational.

Continuing Objections

The objections to the Scheme remain as before. 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.

During the course of the Planning Inspection process there has been increasing disquiet amongst residents of the Offords concerning the impact on local traffic of the Bypass. The combined effect of fewer places in which to join the new road – no eastbound on-ramp at Brampton Hut or at Godmanchester would seem to indicate that much more traffic will join the B1043 travelling through the Offords, in order to join the new A14 via the proposed single-lane remnant of the existing A14. Whilst making life much more difficult for Offord residents it also has implications for Godmanchester. Without some kind of re-routing through Godmanchester – and none appears to be planned – the whole area will gridlock with the extra weight of traffic. It is very close to doing so at present, with the current volumes of through traffic. This has been brought to the attention of HE, but to the best of our knowledge does not seem to have provoked a response.

We previously expressed concern at the loss of recreational land, trees etc caused by the proposal to remove the viaduct in Huntingdon that currently carries A14 traffic over the railway line by the station and the consequent necessity to re-route traffic within Huntingdon. The situation is now somewhat worse than previously thought, since HE have now applied to take a considerably larger part of Mill Common than their original estimate. We continue to have concerns regarding the safety of the Brampton Road, with increased traffic levels in the vicinity of Hinchingsbrooke School and also the impact that this re-routing will have on the access to Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and the very large residential estates whose only entry and exit point is the Brampton Road.

The key objection though, which has become apparent during the PINS process is that this scheme is just not very good. It is replacing a two-lane carriageway with no hard shoulder with a three lane carriageway with no hard shoulder. At best during breakdowns, minor accidents etc it may allow some passage of traffic but for events such as multi-vehicle crashes, vehicle fires, chemical spillage etc it will make no difference – all three carriageways will be closed. The major factor behind the disruption caused will be the time taken to clear the road – which as there is no hard shoulder will be a similar time to that of the existing two lane A14. The alternative scheme, which would involve adding hard shoulders to the existing A14 would almost certainly allow the road to be reopened in a shorter time than it would for the proposed three-lane A14 Huntingdon Southern Bypass.

Alternative

In our submission of June 2015 to the Planning Inspectorate we outlined a series of remedial changes that could be made to the existing A14 layout that would greatly improve the current situation at a fraction of the cost of the proposed Huntingdon Southern Bypass. Since then the Brampton A14 Campaign Group have expanded on this proposal with the assistance of Arup and produced a more detailed alternative scheme along these lines. This appears to have been dismissed out of hand by Highways England, which would appear to call into question that organisation's objectivity in such matters. As has been previously stated, it is hardly surprising that a body that exists in order to build roads should choose a road-building solution when given the opportunity.

The Proposed Scheme – Risks

Our document submitted in June outlined a number of potential pitfalls that we perceived to be present in the proposal. As we approach the end of the PINS process it has to be said that matters in this regard are unchanged and present a case in themselves for not allowing the DCO to go through :-

- 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 model figures used to predict the impact of noise, light and environmental pollution seem very optimistic. Moreover HE has appeared to concentrate on those areas where pollution is likely to improve with the Bypass – the ones where the new A14 is further away than the present A14.
- There appears to not have been any analysis on current pollution levels in the Offords and thus no baseline figure is available to be able to assess the impact of the road once it is up and running.
- Regarding traffic flow – it seems more than likely that this road will have the same effect as so many similar projects have done in the past. By making journey times shorter – especially for those commuting into Cambridge from west of the City – it will only encourage those commuters to move further out of Cambridge in order to take advantage of cheaper property prices, until the extra congestion reduces journey times to the same as for those currently journeying into Cambridge on the existing A14. So all this money will have been spent to achieve no purpose.
- The A14 is a very long road, stretching from the junction with the M6 in the North West to Felixstowe in the South East. There are a number of points along the route where accidents frequently occur, not just the Huntingdon to Cambridge stretch. So accidents and holdups will continue to occur at the Bar Hill, Girton, Histon and Milton interchanges, irrespective of whether or not this new Huntingdon to Cambridge section of the A14 is built.

So after all this effort, all this destruction of landscape, all this colossal expenditure at a time of severely constrained government finances, the likelihood is that at best, only a marginal improvement will result. We continue to assert that from all these perspectives this road is not worth it.

Offords A14 Action Group

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