

**M25 junction 10/A3 Wisley interchange
TR010030**

**9.43 Ministerial Statements regarding
Ockham South-Facing Slips**

Rule 8(1)(k)

Planning Act 2008

Infrastructure Planning (Examination Procedure) Rules 2010

Volume 9

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Infrastructure Planning

Planning Act 2008

The Infrastructure Planning (Applications: Prescribed Forms and Procedure) Regulations 2009 (as amended)

M25 junction 10/A3 Wisley interchange

Development Consent Order 202[x]

9.43 MINISTERIAL STATEMENT REGARDING SOUTH-FACING SLIPS AT OCKHAM INTERCHANGE

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Author:	M25 junction 10/A3 Wisley interchange project team, Highways England and Atkins

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.1 This document has been prepared in response to item 9 set out in the letter from the Planning Inspectorate titled Action Points from Issue Specific Hearing 2 (ISH2) dated 20/01/20.
- 1.1.2 The item requested of the applicant is:
- Submit a copy of the Ministerial Statement regarding south-facing slips at Ockham interchange referred to at page 80 of REP2-014.*
- 1.1.3 Section 2 contains the Hansard from the House of Commons parliamentary debate on 26 October 2017. The transcript for agenda item 'RHS Wisley / A3' records the exchange between Sir Paul Beresford MP and the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport Jesse Norman.

2. RHS Wisley / A3

2.1.1 House of Commons debate, 26 October 2017, volume 630.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)

I offer special thanks to the Minister. I know from my own past experience that notice arriving on a Minister's desk saying that they are answering the last debate of the week is met with a groan; he is smiling now, but there might have been a groan at the time.

As the Minister is aware, M25 junction 10 is where the A3 and M25 link. The growth of traffic on both roads is such that this is probably the busiest interchange in the UK; it has the highest accident record, I believe, and experiences frequent disruption and car jams in both directions on the A3, contributing to M25 jams. There are delays for miles around. As a main link between the south-east and London, the demand pressure on the A3 and the junction is growing and will continue to do so.

On the western border of the A3, just south of junction 10, is the world-famous Royal Horticultural Society Garden, Wisley. To those without a compass—or any understanding of a compass—it is on the left of the A3 after Ockham, just before the M25 as one drives to London. Access is currently off the A3, either directly if driving towards London on the A3, or via the Ockham roundabout. There is a slip road off the A3 to the entrance and a similar slip road on to the A3 on exiting. It is adequately, but not obtrusively, signposted.

I am sure the Minister is aware of the importance of the gardens. RHS Wisley is the United Kingdom's centre of excellence for horticultural science, research and education. I am referring not only to the world-class high-standard horticultural education and research, but also the annual influx of 18,000 schoolchildren from over 450 schools and the 1.2 million of the general public who flood in annually. I suggest to the Minister that if he ever visits, he gets there and parks his car early, because he will walk for about half a mile to get in, such is the demand. I must declare an interest, as most of my family belong to the RHS and visit regularly. They find the miniature insects absolutely fascinating, and they tear around the garden and try not to fall into the pools and ponds.

Wisley is a grade II-listed park and garden of about 240 acres of historical and horticultural delight. It employs 400 full-time staff and about 250 volunteers. The RHS is a third of the way through a £160 million investment development programme; £160 million for a charity in this country is some programme. That will lift the number of full-time jobs at Wisley by 60 and the anticipated visitor numbers will lift to not far short of 1.5 million annually. That will bring an accumulated benefit impact locally of about £1 billion over 10 years.

Because of the garden's location, there is no public transport and no realistic prospect of public transport. As one drives, or often crawls, along the A3 one could be forgiven for not knowing the gardens are next to the A3. The gardens and their ancient woodlands are buffered by a well-planted shield with over 500 mature trees, many, if not most, over a century old.

I accept that major improvements to junction 10 and the A3 are a necessity; that is glaringly obvious. The RHS accepts this, and Highways England engineers have been working on plans to sort the problem out. The plan that it appears most likely to favour, however, will hit Wisley gardens hard and dramatically. The buffer provided by all the trees will go, and the entrances and exits will be complicated, adding about 7.5 miles to the round trip per visitor car. I believe, as does the RHS, that this complicated entrance will be a deterrent for visitors. Just as the investment is expected to increase, and just as it is going to help to fund the attraction, the deterrence will come in. The need for direct access and exit from the A3 is obvious. The effect on local traffic through our local villages and surrounding countryside will be significant if the possible preferred plan goes ahead.

There has been considerable discussion with Highways England, which is still meeting and discussing the prospects with the RHS. That is very helpful. Indeed, Highways England has told me that it is not against what the RHS and I see as the required south-facing slip roads at Ockham, which would meet many of the problems. However—this is where the crunch comes for the Minister—that would apparently be outside the geographical perimeters of the current scheme: the A3 road improvement scheme. New funding would be required—compared with the size of the programme that we are looking at, which is not great—as well as a business case and further consultation with local authorities and perhaps landowners. It is a further problem, but it offers a solution that goes with the grain, rather than against it. A relatively small delay to produce a sensible scheme is better than blundering on and then looking back in time and asking why we did not do this right when we had a chance.

I was going to ask the Minister if I could bring a couple of RHS representatives to his office, but I have changed my mind. Better than that, I am inviting him to come down to Wisley to see it for himself. If necessary, I will personally drive him from his office, or better still—for a Minister in the Department for Transport—from the local station. We will arrange an on-site visit with free entry, a short tour with a photo opportunity, and a cup of coffee with an RHS bun. Actually, because it is an old charity of long standing, we will get some Victoria cream sponge sliced for him. Seriously, though, an on-site visit is the only way for him to put this whole problem in perspective. Looking at maps is not the same as looking at the trees. I want us to get this right for generations to come, over the next decades and running into the next century, bearing in mind that Wisley gardens have already been going for a century. I would hate my hon. Friend the Minister to be the one to be named by Wisley visitors as they ask why he did not get it right when he had the chance.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate about Highways England's planned improvements to junction 10 of the M25 near Wisley. The scheme has attracted a great deal of public and parliamentary interest, and I know that Highways England has been listening carefully to all that has been said, including, I am sure, the eloquent words of my hon. Friend tonight.

As the Minister for roads, I am delighted that this Government are delivering the most ambitious modernisation of England's motorways and major A roads in a generation. Good transport links are critical to our economy and its growth, and that is why this Government are investing in transport infrastructure up and down the country. Between 2015 and 2021, we are spending £15 billion on schemes across England that will connect people and businesses, creating the right conditions for economic prosperity and growth. As the House will be aware, planning is already well under way for the second road investment strategy. These great programmes of investment must be delivered in a way that respects our environment, keeps the road network free-flowing and makes our roads as safe as possible for those who travel and work on them. These are all considerations that Highways England is taking into account in the development of this proposed scheme.

In December 2014, the Government launched the first road investment strategy, which outlined the scope of investment up until 2021. The M25 junction 10 scheme near Wisley is a critical component of that national programme of investment, which the Highways England plan shows will start in 2020-21. As my hon. Friend said, the junction is one of the busiest road interchanges in the country and has one of the highest accident rates anywhere on the strategic road network. Our investment here is therefore important by any measure, and we are committed to delivering a scheme that will deliver a lasting benefit in the region.

I reassure the House that I understand the importance of RHS Wisley. The land around junction 10 and in the vicinity of this scheme is of a high environmental designation, including a special protection area, sites of special scientific interest, common land, ancient woodland, scheduled monuments, registered parks and gardens. It is home to unique habitats and, as my hon. Friend said, RHS Wisley is of course internationally recognised as a world-class visitor attraction, bringing over 1 million visitors—he has said 1.2 million—every year to what is a renowned centre of horticultural excellence. The investments that are being made at RHS Wisley are exciting and ambitious, and I look forward to seeing the improvements that will be delivered in the coming years. The Government want to support those investments and the institution as a great national asset, and the plans being proposed by Highways England will, I am sure, do exactly that, as well improving safety and congestion.

I have already alluded to the levels of congestion on this road. On a daily basis, it causes significant delays to those travelling on both the A3 and the M25. The objectives of the scheme are to relieve that congestion, to provide more reliable journey times and flow and to improve safety for everyone at a key junction where the M25 meets the A3—not omitting the walkers and cyclists who may want to use the interchange. Highways England’s proposals to improve the M25 and A3 interchange at junction 10 will also deliver much-needed additional capacity through the widening that is required as part of the scheme. Highways England has committed to delivering improved access for RHS Wisley itself. The improvements will increase the capacity of the roads leading to the gardens and make access safer for everyone who visits and works at RHS Wisley.

Highways England ran a non-statutory consultation on the scheme earlier this year, along with a number of public information events. As part of that process, Highways England has been continually engaging and working closely with the RHS as one of the key stakeholders, rightly recognising the importance of the site regionally and nationally. That engagement has been constructive and helpful to both organisations. RHS Wisley has expressed three main concerns to Highways England in relation to access to the gardens: the potential for land-take and associated impacts on historic trees and habitats; the need to retain direct access from Wisley Lane on to the A3; and the additional distance that visitors to RHS Wisley would have to travel under the proposed new road layout. All three elements were mentioned by my hon. Friend. I recognise those concerns, as does Highways England, and they are being carefully considered.

We cannot use this debate to pre-empt the formal processes that Highways England is committed to undertake under process of law. It is important that they are not compromised, because they are designed to enable sound decision making on large-scale infrastructure investments. These due processes need to be fair to all parties. Within those constraints, I have little doubt that Highways England will find the optimal solution for all and one that minimises the impact on the unique habitats and trees found at RHS Wisley. As for access, I am advised that all options continue to be carefully considered, analysed and evaluated. That is an essential step ahead of Highways England’s preferred route announcement for the scheme, which I expect in the coming weeks.

While I am sympathetic to the concerns that I have heard over the last few months, and of course from my hon. Friend this evening, I must be clear that it is not appropriate for either me or Highways England to consider any access options that do not improve the safety of this stretch of road or that do not provide value for taxpayers’ money.

I recognise RHS Wisley’s commercial concerns about the distances that some visitors may need to travel under a proposed new road layout, as well as its concern that there should be south-facing slips at the Ockham roundabout, as my hon. Friend mentioned. Of course, as part of any value-for-money consideration, the business case needs to demonstrate optimal

use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes, but the key point for this debate, as my hon. Friend has noted, is that the commercial considerations do not form part of the current scheme proposal that Highways England has been asked and funded to deliver. They could, of course, be considered as a separate scheme in a future road investment period, if appropriate, and I am sure that they would be given close consideration.

As Highways England moves towards a preferred route announcement, I am assured that it will continue to engage closely with RHS Wisley. Highways England is carefully considering the responses to its consultation and will publish the results in due course. This will make sure that the potential impacts on the community and environment have been fully considered; that the final scheme design considers all relevant responses, where applicable; and that the final environmental statement takes into account those impacts and mitigation measures needed to address them.

Highways England will then produce more detailed designs for the scheme, and it will hold a second consultation in which the public will be able to give their views and influence the specific development of the design. I hope that encourages my hon. Friend in the view that the Government and Highways England are sensitive to the concerns that he has so eloquently raised this evening, while recognising the critical importance of our roads, and specifically of this junction scheme, in building an economy that works for everyone and a highways network that is safe for all, as far as possible.

I have also asked Highways England to write to RHS Wisley to explain its current position in response to the numerous pieces of correspondence it has received, as I will be doing on behalf of the Department.

I cannot close without responding to my hon. Friend's final, very courteous and generous invitation on the matter of cake. To my knowledge, no Minister is resistant to the charms of cake, and least of all to a piece of RHS Wisley Victoria sponge. A bun is one thing, but cake—I put it to the House—is an entirely different matter, especially when accompanied by tea and a tour. I will insist on paying for myself in either case, but I would be delighted to take up his kind invitation, provided that we are first able to see how the matter lands after this proper process of consultation has been completed.

Question put and agreed to.

- 2.1.2 Video footage of the parliamentary debate is available
<https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/38d35085-130b-4e8f-9dc5-1437a522fe20?in=17:00:32>

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