

Document ref: 20842-HYD-XX-XX-CO-TP-1001-P01

Councillors
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
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17 September 2021

Cabinet Meeting 21st September 2021 | Agenda Item 13 Watlington Options Assessment Report - Shirburn Parish Meeting

Dear Councillor

Hydrock is a national engineering consultancy, and we write on behalf of Shirburn Parish Meeting, following our review of the transport proposal for Watlington. This primarily included the Options Assessment Report (OAR) produced by AECOM on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council (OCC).

I have condensed our concerns into three main points:

Stakeholder Engagement

The Department for Transport sets out explicitly the requirement for Stakeholder Engagement as part of Stage 1 of the Appraisal Process (the production of the OAR), and it is one of the four key principles of the Appraisal Process.

There has been no consultation as part of the Appraisal Process that would have allowed stakeholders to participate in the Options Development.

We must correct the responses at Item 54 and 55 of the Annexe A - OAR Amalgamated Consultation Response. The responses are false. We understand that Shirburn Parish Meeting did not choose not to attend, it was Andy Higginson of Oxfordshire County Council who refused to proceed and cancelled the meeting at the last moment when all participants had convened.

Consultation on either the finished OAR or during Stage 2 is too late as it will provide no opportunity for stakeholders (including the public) to shape the options, which is vital.

Stakeholder engagement is an integral part of the process, not a final sign off. It is fundamental on all schemes that there is a genuine opportunity to stakeholder to influence, which is not the case here.

Mode shift/traffic increase

AECOM has stated that a new road will not generate traffic, which is misleading. Whilst it may be hypothetically true in an isolated example, these proposals are not in isolation and will clearly have impact on the route choices of both local and long-distance trips. Historically, increased road capacity has almost always been absorbed by an associated increase in traffic movements.

Increasing the road supply for Watlington through-traffic will attract a greater level of long-distance trips, and therefore result in local traffic growth. It will also make driving more attractive for local trips, and therefore create a mode shift towards the private car, leading to traffic growth.

This is particularly important as Cabinet has been presented with a Cabinet Briefing Paper which contains fundamentally misleading information. The text is reproduced below:

Corporate Policies and Priorities

10. The delivery of the Watlington Relief Road project will actively support the following key themes within Oxfordshire County Council's Corporate Plan 2020-24:

*(a) Providing services that enhance the quality of life and protect the local environment – The Watlington Relief road project will **promote the modal shift away from private cars and into the more sustainable modes of travel of public transport, cycling and walking**. This will be for both existing traffic as well as supporting future development in the area, enabling a culture change from the outset driven by the provision of quality infrastructure, rather than attempting to 'retrofit' afterwards.*

*(b) Taking action against Climate Change – by reducing congestion and **promoting modal shift in how people travel**, there are clear benefits in terms of reducing carbon emissions, promoting 'zero carbon travel' and improving air quality in the area.*

The presentation of a road scheme as promoting a mode shift away from the car is misleading. Whilst the scheme includes some basic pedestrian and cycle facilities, these do not respect any desire lines and are unlikely to see any significant levels of use.

It will make driving easier in comparison to other modes, and will likely reduce journey times for private cars. Together these factors will lead to an increased use of and reliance on the private car, which is directly in conflict with the Corporate Policies and Priorities within the briefing and directly undermines Oxfordshire County Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency in April 2019

Overall Approach

The Appraisal Process to date undertakes a car-led and outdated *Predict and Provide* approach to transport planning, and rapidly arrives at a conclusion to build more road capacity to accommodate both existing and forecast traffic growth. However, no meaningful consideration of alternate active travel options has been considered.

The modern approach to transport planning, *Vision and Validate*, sets out the end vision, and puts in place the measures that are needed to achieve that vision. It is clear that there is a lack of a vision for transport in Watlington and the surrounding area. The OAR does not consider a broader mix of solutions that might be used to resolve the underlying cause of the traffic problems.

The OAR does not sufficiently recognise or respond to the Government's legally binding carbon budgets and delivering net zero by 2050. It is vital that the carbon implications for the scheme are considered, including embodied or invested carbon. New documents such as the Department for Transport's Decarbonising Transport need to be taken into consideration before the scheme continues to progress.

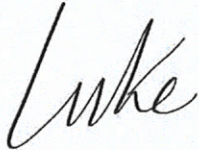
AECOM have commented that the OAR is a "snapshot in time". Following the above, this signals that the report's approach, methodology, and therefore conclusions are all out of date. Such fundamental changes in approach and policy requirements require a full re-evaluation of projects such as this, not simply pushing forward from a flawed evidence base.

Conclusion

The OAR and recent discussion with OCC/AECOM indicate that the Appraisal Process is being used to retrospectively justify a preconceived scheme, which is clearly not an acceptable way forward. Given the significant issues with the OAR, and its failure to comply with DfT guidance, it is clear that at the very least Stage 1 of the Appraisal Process needs to be re-started, to include the following:

- Genuine public consultation
- Consideration paid to the latest national policy on climate change
- Following an up-to-date approach to transport planning and sustainability
- Realistic consideration of modes other than the private car

Yours faithfully



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