

Agenda Item 8 Budget and Business Planning Watlington Relief Road

The council's Performance And Corporate Services Committee asked if councillors have been provided with an Options Appraisal that alternatives to a relief road offering better value for money have been considered. Oxfordshire Roads Action Alliance (ORAA) considers the Options Appraisal and decision to progress to Stage 2 was flawed. The council did not carry out a public consultation as required when highway authorities are developing expensive proposals for new roads. The scheme was proposed as a long term solution to air quality problems in Watlington, but the county excluded the most relevant expertise on traffic and air quality at Watlington in its options appraisal.

Low cost alternatives have been put forward as part of the budget papers to consider value for money, including ANPR enforcement of the 7.5t weight limit at Watlington. The council accepts better enforcement of the weight limit is required, a weight limit makes it a simpler process and it has £1.6m for HGV interventions. Low emission strategies to manage traffic have also been proposed that have strong expert evidence supporting their effectiveness. Because neither of these alternatives were properly considered in the Options Appraisal councillors are left without the information on which to base a decision.

Expenditure of public monies would be to improve active travel and market towns. It was justified in this budget line last year to Oxfordshire Roads Action Alliance as removing traffic improves market squares, but Watlington does not have a market square in the way Abingdon or Wantage for example have. The proposed new road would create separation through new residential neighbourhoods with high levels of fast traffic discouraging active travel, and traffic and HGVs will still be in Watlington.

The proposed expenditure would not benefit Oxfordshire's towns, or Oxford. Watlington is classed as a larger village. It is in what the Boundary Commission described as a rural division of the county that does not share the issues of towns. Benefits to active travel are necessarily small in a settlement the scale of Watlington compared to investing in Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans. To ensure value for money in initiatives aimed at replacing short internal car trips with walking and cycling, when practical, the Department for Transport requires an urban population of above 10,000. Watlington has planned development of 313 homes to 2041 allocated in its neighbourhood plan. These homes have been granted as standalone developments by the land use planning authority with no objection from the highway authority on highway safety or air quality grounds and with no condition on occupation the county builds a relief road.

The Watlington Relief Road was not meant to cost the council anything from its reserves. The county has 304 parishes and 15 town councils to consider. ORAA believes there are effective and low cost alternatives that the Climate Impact Review confirms would be better for the climate, and that the expenditure now required is unsustainable for a council with many other demands on its dwindling finances.

Thank you for your time.

Oxfordshire Roads Action Alliance 10th February 2026