



## Patrick Kinnersly

My heart sank when I read the report in the last *LTT* on plans by Bournemouth and Poole councils to join a shadow sub-national transport body (STB) to lobby for faster north-south connections to the M4 and beyond.

Here we go again! Let's fire up the DeLorean and zoom off down the Memory Bypass back to the 1980s! This is a magical road; history is a blur as you whiz past two SACTRA (Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Appraisal) reports, the Bristol Bath to South Coast Study, and all those tedious facts I set out in a letter to *LTT* more than two years ago (*LTT* 8 Jan 16). In no time at all you're back in a golden age before 'The Great Car Economy' stalled at Twyford Down and Newbury, before John Prescott said 'we cannot build our way out of congestion'.

Every year or two the blacktop recidivists sneak off to the plan chest and dust off old schemes for fast highways that would have 'regenerated' landlocked shires and seaside resorts suffering from the seasonal affective disorder that comes with being at the end of the road with only a pier to show for it.

It was inevitable that the prospect of funding through new shadow STBs would lure Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole – soon to be merged into a new unitary authority and re-branded as 'The City by the Sea' – back into the corridor game.

Joining the 'South West Gateway' shadow STB means they are now aligned with Dorset County Council (also to be transformed into a unitary authority) in pursuing the same *North-South connectivity prospectus* they published in 2016 and the economic study that followed in 2017.

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## VIEWPOINT

# Seaside blues – bypassing the facts on the fantasy road to the M4

The prospectus mentioned other roads but 'our corridor' – the A350 between Poole and the M4 – was clearly the priority route.

Given the persistence of amnesia in shire councils there's probably no point in reiterating the evidence. Little has changed since I listed obstacles to an A350 expressway in a letter to *LTT* in January 2016 – apart from the sighting of another crock of gold at the end of the STB rainbow.

Heading south from the M4, re-engineering Junction 17 and dualling the A350 Chippenham bypass make the expressway look more feasible, but the rest of the route is essentially a string of roundabouts. East of Trowbridge, the Government has bailed out the A350 Yarnbrook-West Ashton Relief Road (YWARR) with a Housing Infrastructure Fund grant of £8.7m, bringing the total cost of 2km of single carriageway road to £25m. The road is 'needed' to handle traffic from the Ashton Park urban extension.

South of Trowbridge, Wiltshire Council must find a way round Westbury to get anything resembling an expressway as far as the A36. If Wiltshire Council hopes to revive the rejected eastern bypass scheme it will have to learn from its costly mistakes on the A350 Yarnbrook-West Ashton Relief Road (YWARR): bat gantries don't work and must be replaced with bat tunnels. That's what our expert witness told the Westbury inquiry inspector in 2008. That still leaves the landscape damage that made him recommend refusal.

Ten years ago the eastern bypass was budgeted at £40m; re-engineered to overcome environmental problems, it could be over £80m at today's prices. Filling the tranquil Wellhead Valley with houses to help pay for it would increase the risk of rejection.

Prospects for the A350 expressway look even gloomier as it heads into Dorset. Last year Dorset County Council advised North Dorset District Council to delete the safeguarded route for the Shaftesbury eastern bypass from its next local development plan because funding was unlikely within the plan period.

That could change when STBs join LEPs (local enterprise partnerships) and mayoral combined authorities in the swirling soup of acronyms. To the corridor revivalists the soup looks rich in opportunities. To environmentalists and planners trained in demographics, geography and modern notions of integrated spatial and transport planning, it's a disgusting reheat of rancid leftovers.

The addition of the STB, with its focus on strategic transport links, can only widen the gap between transport and spatial planning.

We saw this when the Swindon and Wiltshire LEP (SWLEP) backed the creation of an industrial park near to Junction 17 of the M4 on land that the Wiltshire local plan had not allocated for employment. Council planners are now waiting for a planning application.

A more significant gap is opening between the LEP and its two member councils. While the Swindon and Wiltshire LEP has previously accommodated the aspirations of both – Wiltshire looking south to the Channel ports and Swindon looking east to the Oxford-Cambridge 'arc' – the arrival of the STBs has caused a split. Wiltshire has joined the SW Gateway grouping; Swindon will go with England's Economic Heartland.

The impoverishment of local authorities and their planning departments has already ruptured the relationship between spatial and transport planning. Relief roads and bypasses are increasingly bundled together into a single package that allows councils to outsource design and construction to a single developer.

I sympathise with planners struggling to handle the everyday workload of planning applications, never mind attempting to create new settlements around an integrated rapid transit network. They get the blame for a system they neither made nor broke.

The corridor-building fantasies of local councillors and business-dominated local enterprise partnerships – I would like to rebrand them as 'non-accountable non-governmental organisations', or NANGOs – are just symptoms of a broken planning system that links road-building and spatial strategy through money rather than geography.

A shameful ugliness is spreading across the land, unfit for the planet and insulting to those who must live in unaffordable rabbit-hutch estates alongside great road arteries built not so much for their journey to work as for the needs of global trade.

More tinkering won't fix it. Will the government undertake a fundamental rethink of spatial and transport planning? What a silly question! **LTK**

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Patrick Kinnersly is secretary of the White Horse Alliance (WHA), set up in 2007 to oppose the A350 Westbury bypass, and joint convener of the A36/A350 Corridor Alliance (ACA), set up 25 years ago to oppose plans to turn the A36 into a dual carriageway between the M27 and the M4.