

## **M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity Study**

### **A submission from the A36/A350 Corridor Alliance and the White Horse Alliance**

#### **Introduction and background**

I have seen your prospectus for the study and am wondering if you know how many others have been this way before you, many times, both before and after the government office for the SW commissioned the Bristol/Bath to South Coast Study (BB2SCS) in 2002. The study report itself summarises this history at para 1.1.

As you will know the BB2SCS concluded that the A350 was unsuitable as a strategic route and recommended that traffic should be directed away from it and from the A36/A46 and should be routed instead via the M27, M3, A34 and M4. HGVs would find this quicker and more fuel-efficient.

The study repeated the conclusion reached in previous reviews and reports, that the A36-46 road should be de-trunked and its management handed over to the five local authorities along the route. As on previous occasions, the councils and the Regional Assembly resisted the recommendation. When the councils couldn't agree on a joint plan for managing a de-trunked route the government decided to leave it in the strategic route network, where it has remained to this day.

There was also a regional multi-modal study in the days when we had regions and when 'integrated transport' and 'modal shift' had some meaning. It went under the acronym 'SWARMMS' - South West and South Wales Regional Multi-Modal Study, (SWARMMS). The government also commissioned a South Coast Multi-modal Study (SOCOMMS) and an A31/A35 Route Management Study.

SWARMMS was indeed multi-modal, in its way. In 2004 it proposed dualling the full length of the A303 and also dualling the single-track rail line between Salisbury and Exeter. Dualling of the 'second strategic route into the SW' has proceeded as far as the cultural obstacle at Stonehenge; the railway line to Exeter remains single-track with passing loops.

We have more information on railway improvements that have been proposed between Southampton and Bristol and between Swindon and Salisbury and Southampton, station reopenings, park-and-ride stations and other proposals that looked slightly modern in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and remain unrealised in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Where later in this review we suggest rail improvements that could help shift HGVs off the roads of the sub-region, you might want to ask if such interventions could also shift passengers from road to rail.

Let us know if you think such ideas might be squeezed into your study.

## **Reinventing the road**

Some of this history can be found in an article I wrote for *Local Transport Today* in 2018 - see attachment. It wasn't the first I'd written for them on this subject so it conveys the sense of exasperated disbelief my colleagues and I feel every time the 'north-south expressway' takes advantage of administrative amnesia to clamber out of the plan chest blinking in the light of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Your prospectus says you will be examining 'interventions' that might result from your present study.

Every major intervention I can think of has been examined and rejected at some point over the last three decades. Many millions have been spent on planning and devising and assessing roads that turned out to be duds and had to be withdrawn or rejected.

Over the last three decades our two campaigns - the A36/A350 Corridor Alliance and the White Horse Alliance - have collected inspector's reports or government statements on many of the schemes listed below. Some, such as the inspector's report on the A36-A46 link east of Bath, had all but disappeared. Departments for Transport and the Environment, Highways England and the National Archive at Kew found no trace of it. With the help of a diligent librarian ACA convenor Chris Gillham was able to track it down to a library in Bath and WHA chair Cate Mack was able to copy the rejection letter. The inspector's report itself is still in the library but we don't have a copy.

When crucial and expensively created documents like this can disappear so quickly from public view it is no wonder that councillors and planners keep on mistaking old follies for brilliant new solutions to current problems.

How they can continue to do this so far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and having declared a climate emergency is another question and one which you have not been asked to consider.

If you cannot locate the past histories of 'interventions' along the two corridors we have catalogued below, please do not hesitate to ask. We also have records of schemes along road corridors that feed into our sub-region, notably the South Coast highway (A27/M27) from Hastings to Southampton and the infrastructure projects linked to it, such as the Dibden Bay deep-water container port on Southampton Water, rejected after a planning inquiry in 2004, and now revived as a potential site for a 'Freeport' in the 2021 spring budget.

We gave evidence at the Dibden Bay inquiry and know about the international protections for the species and habitats of Southampton Water that led to rejection of the project. If post-Brexit attacks on environmental restraints on growth clear the way

for a Freeport on Southampton Water the A36 will once again be seen as part of the wiring for further economic growth.

It would be more appropriate to note that the existing port has excellent infrastructure for rail-freight and that any new port on the west side of Southampton Water could be connected to national networks by upgrading the line serving the Esso refinery at Fawley.

On the subject of ports and rail freight, we have established that the rail siding linking the Port of Poole to the main line at Wareham is still functional. Rail freight links could also be restored to other ports championed by local boosters, such as Weymouth and Portland.

We could also tell you why container trains from the port of Southampton can't go beyond Salisbury on the line to Avonmouth docks, but that doesn't sound like the sort of corridor connection that the region's road lobbyists would want you to investigate!

### **A36/A46 (T) CORRIDOR**

Wellow bypass: Part of a DoT plan to build a fast dual-carriageway from M27 J2 (Ower) to M4 J18 (Tormarton). Withdrawn by government in April 1994 after failure to pick an acceptable route through the tranquil Blackwater Valley either north or south of the ancient church where Florence Nightingale is buried. This area is further constrained by its location in the consultation zone of the Mottisfont bats special area of conservation (SAC).

Any route south of the A36 would run through the New Forest National Park, protected by national and international designations including SAC, SPA, Ramsar and SSSI. An online scheme would have to pass through a residential area on the south of the village, requiring demolitions and provoking fierce opposition. Hants County Council has opposed increases in capacity along its section of the A36 for the best part of 30 years. (*Correspondence available*).

Other schemes on the corridor were axed for environmental reasons around this time, notably the A46 north of Bath through the Cotswolds AONB to Tormarton. The DoT issued a statement explaining its reasons.

A36-A46 link east of Bath: Department of Transport proposals for a viaduct across the flood plain of the Bristol Avon in the landscape setting of the city of Bath (World Heritage Site) were rejected in 1992. In its decision letter the government accepted the recommendations of the inspector at a local planning inquiry and summarised his conclusions: '*... he concluded emphatically and without any reservation against the case for the A36 Link, considering it to be unimpressive in trunk road terms, prejudicial in*

*some important respects, intolerable in its landscape impact and devastating to recreational amenity (13.128).'*

A36 Beckington to East of Bath: Scheme withdrawn after the rejection of the A36-46 viaduct.

A36 Southern Salisbury bypass: Rejected by government following re-examination of the environmental evidence. None of the government watchdogs objected at the first inquiry. After independent ecologists discovered rare flowery meadow (MG8) grassland that had been missed by DoT's ecologists, English Nature gave it a rapid SSSI designation and also recognised the potential impact of the proposed road on the Wiltshire Avon candidate SAC. Other watchdogs then woke up, belatedly recognising the damage to the landscape setting and heritage of the cathedral city that would result from building and operating an elevated road across the flood plain of the Avon. The DoT's assertion that the road would 'afford the motorist splendid views of the cathedral' now counted for less than the fact that Constable painted views of this 'quintessentially English landscape.'

The southern bypass would have extended northwards up the valley of the River Wylfe (one of the five rivers of the Avon chalk stream SAC) to Stapleford, approximately 10km NW of the city.

Following cancellation in July 1997 the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) set up the Salisbury Transport Strategy, leading a steering group consisting of Wiltshire County Council, Salisbury District Council, the Highways Agency and consultants WS Atkins. It was promised to be a model on how to solve traffic problems without building more roads. However when a 'Preferred Strategy' was put forward in April 2000, over half of the proposed expenditure was allocated to new roads in the form of a Wylfe Valley Relief Road and the Brunel Link/Harnham Relief Road. Taken together these two roads would have followed much of the route of the scrapped southern bypass.

The cost of the Wylfe Valley Relief Road grew from an estimated £15 million in 2000 to £38.6 million in 2004 and it was subsequently dropped.

Planning applications for the Brunel Link/Harnham Relief Road were submitted first in 2002 and then in 2005; both received large numbers of objections, and were withdrawn.

A36 Codford-Heytesbury 'improvement': Located near the head of the Wyle Valley, this 5km road was a Wiltshire County Council plan. The council was forced to withdraw it after the Department of Transport re-assessed its Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR). DoT found that a corrected weighting of the landscape impact of the road - located in the Cranborne Chase AONB and between the edge of Salisbury Plain and the Avon SAC -

made the road very poor value for money. WCC had by then spent about £3m on scheme preparation.

### **A350 CORRIDOR in Wilts [from M4 near Chippenham to A36 at Warminster]**

A350 Chippenham bypass: Having dualled the A350 from Junction 17 of the M4, WC is continuing the dualling of the Chippenham bypass round the west of the town.

East of Chippenham road: The council plans to build more than seven miles of new road to open up land for 7,500 houses in open countryside east of town. WC reported to a Cabinet meeting in October 2019 that it had applied for a grant of £75m to the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF). Council officers said this road would not be an A350 eastern bypass. The proposed route does however leave the A350 north of Chippenham and rejoin it south of the town. And the council claimed it would reduce traffic congestion in the town, which suggests it would in practice function as a second bypass of Chippenham.

A350 Melksham eastern bypass: Selected as a priority scheme by the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) in 2017, its estimated cost was then £30m. By 2020 consultants estimated its cost at between £50.2 and £135.8m, depending on the route selected.

Public consultations in 2020 and 2021 indicated that a majority of local people did not want the proposed bypass. In January 2021 the council obtained £1.3m from DfT towards the estimated £1.8m cost of an outline business case (OBC) for the road, with the remaining £530,000 to come from council funds.

A350 Yarnbrook-West Ashton relief road: This project is in limbo after belated revisions by Wiltshire Council - needed to overcome a potential threat of extinction of rare bat species - raised its estimated cost to £25m and caused expiry of a Local Growth Fund grant of £5.5m. We do not know if an HIF grant of £8m provided for raising the road to allow installation of bat underpasses is still available from Homes England. The 2,500-home Ashton Park urban extension is also in limbo. Without the housing estate the road would have a poor BCR; without the road, traffic from the car-dependent estate would cause peak-time congestion on local roads.

A350 Westbury eastern bypass: This £40m scheme was axed by government in 2009 after a damning inspector's report said its weak transport case could not justify the environmental impact of the road. You can read the inquiry report and government decision letter via this link: <https://www.corridor-alliance.co.uk/news-july-2009> . WC intends to build a Westbury bypass as soon as funds become available. Westbury is the key obstacle on the route of its fast road to the south coast ports. Scheme preparation for the 2007 application cost the county council about £5m. We do not know how much it spent on a longer and more expensive variant withdrawn in 2005.

## **A350/C13 IN DORSET [from A36 at Warminster to port of Poole]**

The following schemes have been considered and rejected over the years. Several reports by Dorset CC (now Dorset Council) consultants Parsons Brinckerhoff (now known as WSP) have assessed these schemes and concluded that they would be poor value for money because there is not enough traffic to justify the high construction costs. Funding might be available if new sections of road opened up land for large new developments. Unlike the A350 through Wiltshire the route through Dorset does not carry the traffic volume to qualify for the 'Major Route Network' (MRN).

A350 Shaftesbury eastern bypass: Part of the route would be in Wiltshire, part in Dorset. The Dorset section is probably now deleted from the North Dorset local plan (subsumed into the Dorset local plan) because funding was unlikely in the plan period. We do not know whether Wiltshire Council wants to build its section of this bypass.

C13 Melbury Abbas bypass: Many environmental constraints: Fontmell and Melbury Downs, owned by the National Trust, have SSSI and SAC designations as calcareous grassland. Nitrogen deposition from traffic fumes has already caused harmful enrichment of the grassland. Would have a serious impact on the Cranborne Chase and West Wilts Downs AONB.

A350 Spetisbury/Charlton Marshall bypass: This would have to be a single project as there are only a couple of hundred metres between the two villages. Difficult to find a route avoiding buildings and river (and disused railway line – now there's an idea!).

## **OTHER A350 SCHEMES IN DORSET**

Note on the port of Poole: A FOIA response to our questions about your study referred to '*its economically-important port facilities.*'

The port of Poole is not a major port. According to the DfT's 'Port Freight Statistics', Poole is not even on the map of major UK Ports. It is not growing – indeed it has seen a significant decline in freight tonnage over the last 15 years. Access by road is restricted by traffic congestion in the town and by the lift bridge. The single-track rail line from the London-Weymouth mainline at Wareham is still operational but is not used.

The docks have limited capacity for handling freight and ferry services. The Poole Harbour Commissioners, while supporting 'improvements' to the A350 corridor, do not anticipate expansion of freight traffic; they favour development of holiday and tourism businesses based on the growing importance of the holiday/leisure economy round the harbour and its connections to Swanage and the Jurassic Coast.

Expansion of the port could damage the vulnerable ecology of the shallow lagoon through dredging or spillage of oil or other toxic cargoes. The Harbour is designated as a

Special Protection Area (SPA) to protect the diverse populations of migratory sea birds. The sea around Swanage is now protected by a Marine Conservation Zone and an SSSI designation.

The National Trust has for years opposed increases to the capacity of the A350 because of the potential risk to its Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour, an important destination for tourists.

## Conclusions

We have submitted a catalogue of dud road projects that have wasted time, effort and money for all concerned over the past 30 years. From the slow dismantling of government plans for a superhighway from M27 to M4 to the cancellation of the A350 Westbury eastern bypass, our alliances have devoted thousands of hours of volunteers' time and tens of thousands of pounds in the cause of sustainable transport. Many miles of major roads would have been built by now if ordinary people had just assumed that governments and councils must be right, that roads must bring prosperity and our world must be shaped for the car and the truck.

We have learned that 'transport studies' recommend roads that are needed now and railways that in an ideal world should be built one day. Taking part in consultations and studies didn't stop an inch of road or win a single cycle rack. What stopped the Salisbury bypass was the conviction that this hideous violation of the Avon meadows must be wrong – and having the organisation, resources and skills to prove it so. What stopped the Westbury bypass was an alliance of 13 national, regional and local organisations able to raise tens of thousands for expert witnesses and legal representation to demonstrate that this was a useless and destructive road.

In the process we achieved more for modal shift than any of our submissions to transport studies. Thanks to the efforts of environmental stakeholders on the SW regional assembly the £40m funding allocated to the Westbury bypass was transferred not to the next bypass, as expected by the shire counties, but to the next *transport* project on the list – dualling of the Swindon to Kemble railway line.

Experience suggests that once again I have wasted my time by trying to influence yet another transport study. But we live in hope that the day must come when this country stops building roads to accommodate infinite traffic growth and when a transport study team – maybe yours – dares to recommend investment in sustainable transport and planning.

Patrick Kinnersly  
Secretary, White Horse Alliance  
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