

Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

A414 Corridor Strategy Consultation,
Hertfordshire County Council,
County Hall,
Pegs Lane,
Hertford, SG13 8DN

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

A414StrategyConsult@hertfordshire.gov.uk

20th February 2019 (by email)

Dear Strategy Consultation Team,

Re: Herts County Council A414 Corridor Study Consultation

Thank you for consulting CPRE Hertfordshire on this study. Our comments are as follows:

General

The Campaign for Protection of Rural England published a report "The End of the Road" in March 2017 (attached). Research found that road building over the last two decades was not only damaging to the rural environment but had failed to relieve congestion. The report argued road building should be a last resort and called for a new priority in transport policy to:

- minimise demand - by focusing development in towns and near transport hubs.
- widen travel choices - by strategic investment in rail and light rail corridors and high-quality walking and cycling routes.
- improve efficiency - including road pricing to reinvest in public transport, car sharing schemes and more efficient freight transport.

The A414 study reflects some of these priorities but there is a lack of rigour or clear targets to demonstrate any fundamental change. Planning for the future growth of traffic by 18% is seen as inevitable rather than a policy choice. The justification at Hertford for the proposed southern bypass in particular is highly questionable.

Summary of main comments

CPRE Hertfordshire raise the following general concerns.

1. That new road building and enhanced road capacity proposals will result in damage and loss of countryside and build more pressure for greenfield development.
2. That predicted traffic growth is merely being accommodated, rather than policies to ensure traffic is reduced. This does not align with national policies and priorities on climate change and air pollution. (The document makes no reference to climate change and few to air quality). This policy context will increasingly demand both general and localised traffic reduction and the study needs to acknowledge this.

3. That promotion of public transport and active travel demands more than a list of projects. It must be prioritised in practice. It requires a culture change within Herts County Council, the dedication of new active travel teams, staff resources, political leadership and targeted council budgets. More explicit priorities are needed with realistic and ambitious targets for modal change within the corridor.

The main specific concerns of CPRE Herts are:

- That the proposed southern bypass to Hertford will harm open countryside and attractive walking / cycling areas around the town, threaten registered historic parklands, SSSI's and woodland habitats. It is unjustified in costs terms when viewed against the alternatives.
- That the Hertford bypass will result in damaged, less valued 'leftover' parcels of countryside, that in time become released for future house building. This is evident over the long term from the experience of other towns such as Bishops Stortford, Buntingford and Royston within the County.
- That while severance of Hertford is damaging, the alternative proposed bypass will result in the severance of the town from its surrounding countryside setting. Severance and air pollution should be addressed immediately as part of a strategy for modal change, traffic reduction and cleaner air, not await a road to be built in a decade's time.
- The Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system would not provide the desired direct connection between town centres and railway stations in the corridor, while an east - west rail or bus service could do. The rail option should be further explored. The MRT option would also take a long time to be delivered and a dedicated bus route for the corridor should be provided in the meantime.
- That some of the active travel measures seem more related to separating cyclists from traffic at key points / junctions, rather than providing the meaningful connecting routes which will attract more cyclists. Existing routes, on former railway lines, are generally substandard in terms of surfacing, maintenance, lighting, width. Provision for their upgrade is needed. Some bridge schemes appear hugely costly for modest benefits.

Detailed Comments on the A414 Study

Housing growth agenda

CPRE Herts objected to the release of greenbelt and countryside that comprises much of the additional 50,000 to 80,000 houses within the County of Hertfordshire. These releases were agreed, as Inspectors deliberated Local Plans that were sound and deliverable. If they were

fundamentally dependent on uncertain further road or highway capacity building the plans would not have been sound or deliverable.

CPRE Herts object to the 'circular argument' that housing growth now justifies further road building when it is demonstrated that road building itself leads to traffic growth and wider development pressures on the countryside, increasing the likelihood of future car dependent and unsustainable sprawl.

Policy Objectives

CPRE Herts object that the objectives lack a clear sense of priority and no information or targets are set for achieving modal shift. Eleven objectives are set out but the priority objectives should be:

1. Enhance sense of place and town centre viability
2. Enable and facilitate modal shift to active travel
3. Enable and facilitate modal shift to public transport
4. Implement demand management to support efficient use of the network and enable behaviour change

The Study should aim to hold vehicle traffic growth in check and reduce it, not plan for an 18 % increase. The active travel measures proposed may assist with this but appear piecemeal. The programme requires monitoring and highly skilled and relevant design approaches to ensure walking and cycling become modes of first choice for shorter journeys.

The Comet Model assumes no change to travel behaviour, but national policy to reduce Green House Gas Emissions (transport is now the largest contributing sector) will require reductions in traffic. CPRE challenge the 'predict and provide' approach and argue that it doesn't acknowledge this wider policy context and the urgency of Climate Change.

Three key proposals

The study includes three main engineering proposals.

1. MRT - Mass Rapid Transit system. The study says this could provide a high quality, attractive, fast and continuous public transport link from Hemel Hempstead and Watford in the west, to Broxbourne and Harlow in the east via the key urban areas along the corridor.

CPRE Herts support this in principle as an ambitious public transport approach but are sceptical that, as it is routed along the A414, it wouldn't link town centres or transport hubs directly. It is unclear whether the cost of fixed infrastructure will undermine the project given the large distances between towns. A guided bus way using existing road space would indicate priority to modal shift. Road user charging could be used to fund the infrastructure and lower fares. The need for clean public transport is essential with the presence of eight Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA) on the A414 route.

Herts CC should still be working further with other parties to investigate the strategic potential of an east-west rail link as it has much wider regional implications and could be tied to a strategy of reduced car dependency and urban regeneration.

2. The southern bypass to Hertford.

CPRE Herts oppose this due to the loss and damage to the countryside, its tranquillity and areas of high landscape quality including historic parklands and areas of natural interest. The study says it will open up opportunities to improve walking, cycling and public transport routes and services within Hertford by removing traffic, but these should be tackled in any event and without delay to promote active travel in the town. Replacement of subways with surface crossings will encourage walking and cycling and remove the fear of their use, particularly for women. The subways are also unpleasant to use, prone to vandalism and costly to maintain. Other measures to humanise the corridor could be taken with imagination and good design. As the town centre is an AQMA, one of eight in the corridor, the study should investigate road charging to bring immediate traffic reductions. The bypass would represent a poor return for the expense involved which should be better directed into the Sustainable Travel Town and Public Transport programmes.

3. Junction improvements to relieve traffic congestion. E.g. at M1 Junction 8 (Hemel Hempstead) and the A414/A1081 London Colney Roundabout.

CPRE Herts in principle would question the benefit of using significant funds for road building or capacity building which is best invested in active travel initiatives, modal shift, reduction of traffic and which could also be encouraged by strategic charging in areas of higher air pollution. Too many existing junction designs discourage walking and cycling and there is a need to review and reprioritise these. Junction capacity changes often make them more hostile or inconvenient for walkers and cyclists.

Active Travel - Walking and cycling

The study reveals that in the A414 corridor 76 % of commuting journeys are by car. 12% walk. 5% are by train. Only 5% are by bus and 2% cycle. Many cities are aiming for zero carbon and seeking up to 80% sustainable travel modes. While Hertfordshire isn't a city it contains large urban areas and there must therefore be significant scope to increase sustainable travel levels. Targets should be set for a shift to be able to measure future effectiveness. It must be possible to at least calculate what percentage modal shift is required to absorb the forecast growth of traffic (18%) The Study states that the outcomes of all the proposals will increase public transport trips by 9%. It isn't entirely clear, but if 10% of commuting trips are by train and bus does this mean that for the £1.8bn expense, the public transport modal share would only increase from 10 to 11% ?

Measures to promote active travel are welcome but some costly infrastructure seems designed to remove cyclists from the road rather than provide changes that will see a significant growth in cycling levels. E.g. An elevated cycleway above the 'magic roundabout' in Hemel Hempstead (£25M) , the Junction 8 cycle bridge at (£10-£50M) or a

cycleway across the A1 at Hatfield (£50M). It isn't the amount of money spent but the design of schemes and the strategic thinking behind their value which is important. Lessons need to be learned about poor cycleway provision in the past e.g the narrow green tarmac strips alongside busy roads and staggered crossings. Some of the best schemes have been designed off-road by Sustrans but haven't been engineered or adopted by the County Council as integral elements of the Highway Network. They lack attention, periodic review and ongoing maintenance. This needs to change.

The growth of cycling will come from people less focused on speed and getting from A to B quickly but by those who wish to get healthy exercise for their own well-being and enjoy cycling away from busy arterial routes. Too many suggestions in the study forget this, with proposals for cycle routes along major busy roads such as the A405 and A414. These will suit some who focus on speed but will not generate the reduction of car travel needed. Such long straight routes are likely to still be noisy and polluted, unvaried scenically and full of the sight of traffic.

The study needs to understand why some existing routes aren't better used. The Alban Way has greater potential for use and linkage but only 4.5% of commuters cycle between St Albans and Hatfield. The study should be looking to review and upgrade its condition as well as make more connections to this route for instance by developing an east west route that connects Hatfield town centre, The Galleria and Hatfield Business Park and Garden Village via St Albans Road. The Cole Green Way is currently only used by 1.7% commuters cycling from Hertford to WGC. It is due to be upgraded although the current plans won't include lighting, limiting its use and attractiveness. Lack of lighting for routes makes them feel less safe, valued by women in particular. The lack of robust surfacing makes routes muddy, making impractical year-round use. Routes also need to help cyclists all the way through towns not just deliver them to the edge.

Highways Teams designing routes must be walkers, cyclists and passenger transport users themselves. The active travel teams should be well resourced and multi-disciplinary including Urban Designers and Landscape Designers as well as Transport Planners and Engineers. The team should also be established with a clear brief, and budget to progress long term modal shift to ensure that provisions really encourage active travel. Plans should make use of existing cycling links and connect these to the key destinations people want to go along attractive routes of interest. For instance the cycleways in Stevenage are segregated but not well used; they follow long straight corridors that are not always well maintained. They ask cyclists to behave like cars whereas the advantage of a bike is that it can take short cuts and weave through interesting varied urban environments with minimal disturbance to the surroundings. Routes to stations will need very careful design and must be genuine public realm schemes, these take time and can't be done on the cheap.

The total spend of the study is given at £1.8bn of which perhaps £40-£50 M is on a range of mostly low-cost interventions for active travel. (The breakdown of the estimates by active travel is not available). The big-ticket items, elevated bridges etc would cost a further £75 -

£150M but seem to offer a poor return and involve links which are neither scenic, interesting or away from noisy polluted traffic corridors.

‘Filtered permeability’ within towns and outside should be used selectively to provide quiet safer routes for cycling and walking at minimal cost. The proposed new east-west cycleway route linking Maylands and Hemel Hempstead Town Centre with Central St Albans is supported in principle. This could use a combination of upgraded existing tracks (Nickey Line and Hertfordshire Way) and lanes such as Hogg End Lane to form part of a relatively low cost but popular new dedicated East West cycleway between the towns. Hogg End Lane is a narrow country lane with high hedges and restricted forward visibility that is very attractive for cycling but shared with speeding rush hour vehicles, using it as a fast back road, presents obvious hazards that are best addressed by partial closure and active travel priority. Walkers, joggers and horseriders are all groups that would benefit by such strategic decisions. If there are objections to a lane closure this can easily be introduced on a trial basis of six months to see what the results are.

Public Transport

CPRE Herts supports the re-regulation of bus services in Hertfordshire to enable the kind of co-ordination and management of buses enjoyed in London with better fare structures, timetables and connected tickets. The study makes no reference or estimate as to what such a policy development could mean for modal shift. It should do as the urgency of climate change; air quality issues and traffic reduction means it appears quite likely, something that would enjoy broad public support and is something of an ‘open goal’ for national decision makers.

The high fares paid for bus journeys are not referred to in the study. Bus fares are currently many times the marginal cost of making an equivalent journey by private car. The study should acknowledge this as it’s a further potential change that would promote modal shift and absorb the forecast traffic growth. There are many other initiatives that could make a difference - tax policy, workplace parking levy, road pricing, extension of free bus travel, employee incentives to use passenger transport, robust Green Travel Plans as well as compact mixed-use development. There are so many options in fact that the predicted traffic growth seems highly unlikely especially when climate change policy will demand modal shift and reduced emissions for the transport sector.

Whether it is MRT, enhanced bus services or even an east-west rail option for Hertfordshire, CPRE Herts would support any or all of these in principle for their strategic value and an approach that focuses on regeneration of existing settlements and limiting the incursion of traffic into the countryside. However, a public transport service that directly connects the A414 town centres and rail stations within the corridor is favoured, not proposed for the MRT, but would be more convenient and beneficial. This is why rail or a dedicated bus option should not be ruled out.

Conclusion

The above comments are CPRE Hertfordshire's reflections on the A414 Corridor Study and written to promote the best future for the County, its countryside and places. All roads within towns should be regarded as important places, none here are primarily a means of movement. It is said the County Council's aim is to adopt a finalised A414 Corridor Strategy in Summer 2019. While there are positive elements within the study, the outcomes indicate future traffic growth and minimum modal shift over the period up to 2031. This will not meet new policy agendas. It is felt that there is a need for a profound change of culture in transport planning shifting direction away from mobility growth to accessibility and quality of travel. Targets for walking, cycling and improved passenger transport are very much part of this solution.

Yours faithfully,

Tim Hagyard
Planning Manager

Enc. "The End of the Road - Challenging