

Scrutiny Briefing - A27
Wednesday 2 March 2016
2.00pm Court Room, Town Hall

Councillors

Smart (Chairman)
Ungar (Deputy Chairman)
Coles
Holt
Taylor
Di Cara
Smethers
Belsey
Rodohan
Choudhury
Miah
Shuttleworth

Highways England

Martin Wright,
Peter Philips, Route Sponsor
Paul Harwood, Regional Lead Economic Development
Tom Beasley, Lead, Major Projects
Andy Cleaver, Atkins Consultants

Ian Lucas for MP Caroline Ansell

Introduction:

Highways England (HE) briefed the Cllrs with regard to the feasibility study looking at hotspots along the A27. There was currently no Economic Case for a dual carriageway the A27 to the east of Lewes. There would be a 'sustainable transport measures' (STM) project to make improvements to this section of the highway, HE had met with local MP's and ESCC and agreed to develop plans for these improvements.

The STM would include an investment of £75m as part of the 'Road Investment' Strategy for the south east, it was noted that this was relatively small scale and would large focus on improving the capacity issues along this stretch of the highway.

A suite of options would be available which included:

Improvements to junctions (accessibility and safety)
Improvements to access the South Downs National Park
Improving the junctions at Polegate and Willmington Village

A detailed plan had not yet been developed and the improvements were still in the early stages of consultation. The £75m was a ball park figure and could be increased or reduced depending on value for money and the final agreed plans for improvements.

There was a process for any investment scheme a 'project control format' which included the need to establish the requirement and evidence for any investment,

a 'developing options' phase – looking at capacity enhancement and improvement and improving safety.

Discussions with key stakeholders regarding options would be held later in the year with a view to formulating a suitable package. Any scheme would ideally commence before 2020.

Q and A

Councillor – the timescales were too long and would be a major issue for the residents and businesses in Eastbourne

Councillor – The current road is too short and too narrow to cope with the volume of traffic – ideally there would be a new road between Polegate and Beddingham to run alongside the rail tracks, was this included in any plans?

HE –this was not included as the current sustainability plans for this route had already been set by ministers. A larger scheme may be put forward at a later date likely 2020 -25 when more funding may become available to make larger improvements.

Councillor – Therefore it could be considered that any spending at present could be a waste of money? There are currently major hold ups due to the sheer amount of traffic without including the delays accidents cause.

MP – would the first phase include a potential new scheme to link to the improvements?

HE – There was currently no case for a new road – as per the government prescribed feasibility requirements.

MP – can we see the criteria for the feasibility for a new road?

HE – The Department for Transport Website - Green Book.

Councillor – There is a case, a recent survey of businesses supported a new road. It could be considered that making improvements would push us further down the 'priority list' for a new road. Can we retaining the £75m and look for other sources of funding to aid the development of a new road? How can we ensure we gets what is best for Eastbourne?

HE – Future growth is key, the Polegate junction requires improvement regardless of any other plans for the A27, any scheme has to show value for money, as previously stated HE would have to evidence the need for an investment of £300-£400m – the funding required for the development of a new road. Any improvements would of course be of benefit to anyone using the A27.

Councillor – Will we be consulted as part of any feasibility study?

HE – there is a structure and process that should be challenged to show that it is value for money for the public purse – if not it would not be funded. There are a

number of issues that need to be considered such as safety and environmental improvements against the cost of any proposed scheme.

Councillor – discussions about improvements to A27 have been going on for years! If the scheme has to be economically viable it becomes a 'chicken and egg' situation as a new road would bring improvements to the economy. What about the social benefits? The Green Book allows for a balance of both economic and social benefit. Has a financial viability assessment been undertaken?

HE – the feasibility study looked at all of the aspects mentioned – it should also be remembered that the South Downs National Park (SDNP) would impact on any decisions made with regards to improvements.

Councillor – What if the £75m improvements are harmful to the environment? SDNP wants any improvements to benefit the Park.

HE – Topography is a consideration, it is better to make improvements to sections of the road now than do nothing whilst discussing longer term schemes. Options had not yet been developed and it will always be difficult to balance all of the wants/ desires /opinions. SDNP had been consulted on smaller schemes and had raised concerns.

Councillor - improvements had been promised many years ago, many businesses had left the area due to poor infrastructure.

HE – Schemes had been withdrawn due to the economic downturn, any scheme would only be an aspiration until the funding was available, Councils would of course be consulted with regard to long term growth opportunities.

Councillor – why had the business case for a new road failed? What could we do?

HE – there was a 5year period for funding at which point ministers would revisit and look at route strategies. In 2020 -25 the country as a whole would be reconsidered – which could include a proposed new road. The A27 east of Lewes currently supports 22-23K vehicles per day (2013 figures). The A23 near Crawley support s 60k vehicles per day.

Councillor – Can these figures be updated and reported back the Councillors with the most accurate information?

Councillor – please don't just 'tweak' Cophall farm roundabout, which is the cause of major problems.

HE – we currently have £75m of funding available and will use this opportunity to get the best possible outcome with regard to the environment, safety, capacity and accessibility.

Councillor – we have a great deal of investment / improvement happening in Eastbourne at present and we need the infrastructure to help with this. We will have 900 new homes built in and around Polegate soon – with a potential 3000 new homes within a mile radius of Polegate.

HE – long term growth prospects, including housing development would be considered.

Councillor – A strategic route along the South coast should be a priority.

HE – the DoT, ESCC and HE would be involved in the final design / use of the £75m, SDNP would be seeking improvements for villages – including local schools. Middle Farm to Selmeston was considered the worst section of the road.

Councillor – when would consultation on proposals be taking place and what was the deadline for spending?

HE – Timescale for the list of options would be November 2016 at which point it would be discussed with stakeholders. Public consultation would take place in Spring 2017, 2020 would be the start of agreed improvements with 'spades in the ground'. The consultation was very prescriptive.

Councillor – would the cost of consultation be taken from the £75m available?

HE – this was not yet known and would be dependent on the scheme.

Close.

The Chairman (Councillor Smart) made the following observations following the discussion

- * For the 5th largest economy in the world in the 21st century the transportation links for Eastbourne are pathetic.
- * We were very surprised how remote Highways England is from the local population (for which the A27 is a big issue) and of their complete lack of transparency and urgency.
- * There is complete disagreement with HE about the "business case" and it is extraordinary that it has not been published by HE for debate.
- * HE need to run in parallel, rather than sequentially (which is the absurd way in which they work) discussion of the full solution (an additional road for 7 miles ?) and how they spend £75 million in the shorter-term.
- * That HE writes to us with responses to the questions asked and that we meet again within a few months.