

# Collated Information: Whittlesey Relief Road Proposal

## Introduction

In collating this information, I have studied the following sources of information:

- Whittlesey Relief Road Study
- Strategic Outline Business Case for A47 Dualling
- Growing Fenland Whittlesey Final Report
- Transport Strategies for Fenland and Huntingdonshire Appendix 2 Draft Fenland Transport Strategy
- Mega-disruptions and policy change: Lessons from the mobility sector in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK
- New normal at work in a post-COVID world: work–life balance and labour markets
- Relevant information from the Government ‘Green Book’

The case for the relief road proposal does not appear to meet some of the essential criteria which could be called ‘showstoppers’.

By pursuing the relief road proposal, funding will be drawn away from other potential projects which are priorities in the local community and in Fenland District and CPCA strategies.

Studies include the view that the relief road will not be included in the short and medium term planned timescales.

Funding for interventions to address immediate community needs are being sacrificed for a project that does not appear to be realistic or achievable in a timely manner.

I do appreciate £10,000 Cllr Boden is seeking funding to allow a feasibility study for developing the Manor Field which will be of great benefit to the community and will include The Friends of the Manor to ensure local needs are considered. This will not replace the significant amount of funding diverted into the Relief Road Project that was previously intended to benefit many aspects of the Whittlesey community especially their health and wellbeing and provision for young people. Many needs will remain unresolved as an illustrated by the Growing Fenland Final Report.

## Aspects of The Case for a Relief Road

- Strategic Priorities
- Corporate responsibilities
- Through traffic
- Financial Case
- The Benefit to Cost Ratio
- Transport Assessments in Planning
- Reduction in travel by road post Covid

## Strategic Priorities in CPCA

### Strategic priorities:

There are five strategic priorities that will take us where we need to be:

1. Communities at the heart of everything we do
2. A good quality of life for everyone

3. Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full
4. Cambridgeshire: A well-connected, safe, clean, green environment
5. Protecting and caring for those who need us.

## **Relevant Corporate Priorities**

Taken from the strategies listed in the sources.

- Promote Health and Wellbeing for All
- Work with partners to keep people safe in their neighbourhoods by reducing crime and anti-social behaviour and promoting social cohesion.
- Promote and lobby for infrastructure improvements across Fenland.

People's access to retail, education, employment and healthcare will be prioritised through well connected and integrated active travel and public transport provision, providing a vital and viable transport option other than the private car.

New development will be required to make provision for integrated and improved transport infrastructure to ensure that most people have the ability to travel by foot, bicycle or by passenger transport to key services and facilities.

The user hierarchy will be used as a guide for setting priorities and allocating funding towards programme areas and schemes. The hierarchy will be applied to the development and review of all specific transport strategies such as the district-based transport strategies and should be considered during the design of any new or improved transport scheme. Any variation from this will require justification of why full compliance to this is not either possible or appropriate to the scheme.

## **Corporate Responsibility**

### **Why is Whittlesey the sole contributor to the £250,000 next stage study?**

It was stated that the proposed relief road would remove immediate barriers to growth in the Fenland market towns. This implies that one town will not fund the relief road study on its own but expect to share financial liabilities with others – this is not just a Whittlesey project.

It is strange that money for improving corporate priorities specifically aimed at improving Whittlesey is being used to fund a Fenland/CPCA project without contribution from other key towns. I noted that the draft of Transport Strategies for Fenland and Huntingdonshire states the County Council will work collaboratively to design and deliver high quality transport schemes and projects that support the objectives of the strategy. Funding opportunities will be sought to develop and deliver these schemes and projects either directly funded by partner organisations, as part of a funding package with multiple partners, or collaboratively through future government funding bids.

### **A Relief Road to Reduce Through Traffic**

The Transport Strategy mentions reducing through traffic in market towns in line with the strategy approach, prioritising sustainable transport routes where available. Long distance, through traffic will be required to use the primary road network. Improvements to the primary road network will be driven by the national agenda but must take account of local circumstances, local opportunities and local impacts. The relief road does not appear to be part of the primary network.

Using the A47 is three miles longer to reach a point of route convergence with the A605 but dualling would allow higher and more consistent speeds offsetting any time difference.

The Whittlesey Relief Road Study notes that the A605 runs parallel to the A47 Trunk Road between Peterborough and Rings End but is not normally heavily used as an alternative route for through trips. It seems that dualling the A47 will reduce through traffic still further.

The Strategic Outline Business Case A47 para 2.3.23 identifies the critical need to invest in capacity and traffic flow improvements on the A47 to maintain the ongoing economic success of Cambridgeshire. The A47 is identified as a critical link for supporting the development of Wisbech, with major scheme investment required for capacity and junction improvements to the A47 / A1101 junction, the Guyhirn junction and along the other unimproved sections of the route between Thorney in Peterborough and Walton Highway in Norfolk.

Work carried out as part of the MTTs and for the former Cambridgeshire Local Transport Plan (LTP) both pointed to alternative packages of investment to improve Whittlesey's transport situation without immediately seeking to promote a relief road. This approach led to the development of an investment package including replacement of the Kings Dyke level crossing with a bridge which has successfully removed a major bottleneck on the A605.

The study also states that developing a traffic management and reduction strategy based on measures relating to local Whittlesey traffic and traffic originating from a wider geography should be included in any consideration of infrastructure needs.

## **Financial Case**

Construction of the relief road, according to the study, 'would require significant capital expenditure, owing to the prevailing Fenland ground conditions and the number of structures that would be needed to cross the railway and various dykes along either respective route.

With cost and affordability of new construction being a key issue, it is necessary to consider if any other options of lower cost may also address the key problems and opportunities of Whittlesey and the Fenland District Council area more widely'.

**Economic Case** – based on a range of assessment criteria the Value for Money case seeks to demonstrate (or otherwise) that the scheme is Value for Money;

**Financial Case** – assesses whether the scheme is financially affordable. This case provides a synopsis of the proposed schemes costs and how it is to be funded and financed.

The Relief Road Study states that it would not be possible to provide a definitive answer on its potential value for money. However, it is possible to project the cost by deduction using the existing costs of similar projects.

- The cost of building new roads has risen by 21% in 2022, the average cost can be calculated at £15.36 million per km. This equates to £165.9 million for the relief road without adding in inflation during the waiting period.
- The prospective relief road south of Whittlesey would be up to 10.8km in length incorporating several structures along its length with drainage and unstable terrain issues.

- As an indicator Kings Dyke cost 32 million with one bridge, a dual underpass and two roundabouts on similar unstable terrain to the relief road route but without drainage issues. It is 0.9 km in length.
- Although data from the British Geological Survey (BGS) indicates that the southern route could be suitable for bespoke designs of infiltration SuDS, it would be difficult to achieve sufficient infiltration drainage in this area due to high groundwater levels. Drainage via attenuation methods is also likely to be difficult due to high groundwater levels; it would be hard to keep the attenuation pond empty.

Costs and benefits should be calculated over the lifetime of the proposal. Proposals involving infrastructure such as roads, railways and new buildings are appraised over a 60-year period.

The Relief Road Study document states that an initial feasibility study revealed that the large cost of the scheme would stop a bypass being funded in the short to medium term. The Green Book states that interventions should be discarded if they do not fit with existing local, regional and national programmes and strategies, and do not fit with wider government priorities. They would be unlikely to pass key viability and acceptability criteria (or that represent significant risk) as they are unlikely to be financially affordable.

The Relief Road Study also states that the current CPCA LTP and Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) makes no mention of a relief road for the town. This suggests the relief road is not part of strategies and should be discarded.

The study also notes that the Highways England/ CPCA progress in upgrading the A47 to full dual carriageway status between Peterborough and Wisbech could have an impact in drawing away some through movement traffic from the A605 in Whittlesey.

## **The Benefit to Cost Ratio**

The Relief Road Study further states that in mathematical 'value for money' terms, the scheme's benefit to cost ratio (BCR) may not be high. Therefore, it would be the cumulative benefits of the established strategic case and the BCR that would inform the weight of the relief road's business case.

The Study states that it would not be possible to provide a definitive answer on the best option for a relief road, nor its potential value for money. However sufficient information is available to calculate a reasonable assumption for the minimum cost against benefits set out in the study. This could then provide a reasonable view of the cumulative benefits.

With high level assumptions of dependency, the dependent development (benefit) value for Local Plan based residential units could be as much as £74.24m, with a further £34.85m associated with employment land, based on current Local Plan growth. This is a total of £109.09 m in benefits. As discussed above the cost appears to be £165.9 m not including the additional works for drainage and construction of roundabouts and bridges. The BCR appears unfavourable.

Construction of a relief road "would require significant capital expenditure, owing to the prevailing Fenland ground conditions and the number of structures that would be needed to cross the railway and various dykes along either respective route". This has not been taken into account in the £165.9m figure which could be seen as a low estimate in the light of the double of estimated cost for the Kings Dyke Project.

With cost and affordability of new construction being a key issue, it is necessary to consider if any other options of lower cost may also address the key problems and opportunities of Whittlesey and the Fenland District Council area more widely. It seems that the Kings Dyke Bridge is an excellent example of this kind of intervention which has removed a major bottleneck from the A605 speeding journey times and reduced congestion.

## **Transport Assessments**

In future a Transport Assessments (TA) or a Transport Statement will be required to support any planning application. A full TA may also be required if there are other local issues that may need to be addressed. This will ensure that development will be sited more appropriately within the road network and any interventions can be considered on a case by case basis shaping the network to meet demand.

## **Lifestyle Post-Covid the Impact on Transport Intervention**

### **“New normal” at work in a post-COVID world: work–life balance and labour markets.**

The paper argues that although hybrid and remote working would be more popular in the post-pandemic for nonmanual work, it will not be “one size fits all” solution. Traditional work practices will remain, and offices will not completely disappear. Manual labour will continue current work practices with increased demands. Employers’ attention to employees’ WLB in the new normal will target employees’ motivation and achieving better WLB.

## **Relief Road Study – Post Covid**

The long-term impacts of Covid on travel demand and changes to travel behaviour need to be considered whenever traffic forecasting and peak travel demand are required. These are live issues for all transport interventions and more so where larger schemes are concerned.

## **Transport Strategy - Post Covid**

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted that many people are able to effectively work from home for longer periods of time, and the personal benefits this has. Future trends in home working and the impact on commuting patterns are indicating that a more balanced approach is possible that will continue reductions in the need to travel for work, in particular daily at pre-pandemic levels.

## **Draft Transport Strategy - Connectivity**

The Transport Strategy now recognises a need to reduce travel by embracing digital connectivity and living locally.

County Council supports the continued improvements in digital access for all, and the positive impact this can have on the transport network to reduce the number of journeys that need to be made, in particular short local journeys and commuter journeys at peak times of the day when levels of congestion are at its highest.

This has been added to the title of the plan to recognise how important the internet is now on transport. Whittlesey is seen to have more people likely to carry out homeworking than average. With greater trends towards working and learning from home, as well as social and leisure activities, shopping and accessing services, quality and accessibility of digital infrastructure has an impact on the amount of travel taking place.

## **Mega-disruptions and policy change: Lessons from the mobility sector in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK**

Concludes that the pandemic still represents a critical path changing event with huge potential long-term ramifications for transport. Almost two years on from the initial lockdown, the economy has recovered to pre-Covid-19 levels, yet across society we are still travelling less than before the pandemic.

Car traffic is not back to pre-pandemic levels. Weekday car traffic in England stabilised around 10% below pre-pandemic levels throughout summer and autumn 2021 with falls in peak time congestion.

Working from home, for those who can, has played a critical part in reducing traffic levels. Even if people who have worked from home go back to travelling for half of their working week, there will still be a reduction of 16% in car commute miles.

The replacement of large elements of commuting by digital connectivity and hybrid working was the foundation stone of adaptive capacity for individuals and businesses.

It has previously been assumed that when planning for economic growth it will be necessary to anticipate more car travel. Certainly, that was the case in the latter half of the last century. However, car travel per head of population has fallen since the turn of the millennium (Marsden et al., 2019). It has fallen most amongst the wealthiest part of the population. As can be seen by the split between weekend and weekday activities in Section 1.1, weekday traffic has not returned to pre-pandemic levels in the way that weekend travel has. This is, in large part, due to the continued prevalence of home working which impacts on both the commute and business travel. Whilst in our survey only 11.6% of worked days were spent working at home pre-Covid, this rose to 41% in June 2021. The impacts on the peak period would be much more noticeable.

Given the length of time over which people have become accustomed to new behaviours, it seems highly unlikely that commuting to major cities will simply 'rebound' over any kind of realistic planning horizon. Indeed, the reduction in the average numbers of days worked in the office is a good example of a long-established trend that was massively accelerated by Covid-19.

Robin Sutton

Chair of Cambridgeshire Neighbourhood Watch

Chair of the Friends of the Manor Whittlesey

Director of Phoenix Youth Provision Whittlesey