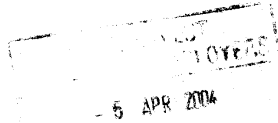


Chris Mitchell



GOVERNMENT OFFICE  
FOR THE SOUTH WEST

31 March 2004

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Dear Jim,

Thank you for your letter of 27 February with comments on the Bristol/Bath to South Coast (BB2SC) Study.

I sense that your letter implies some misunderstanding of the original purpose in the study so it may be helpful if I set out the background.

The history goes back to 1998 when the Government published proposals to de-trunk about 40% of trunk road network, reflecting the increasing reliance on motorways for long-distance movements. One of the routes proposed for de-trunking was the A36/46 route between the M27 near Southampton and the M4 North of Bath. The route passes through some very sensitive parts of the South West region, with numerous important designations designed to protect both the natural and built environment. Not surprisingly it has proved very difficult to deliver the major road improvements to bring it up to the standards required for roads forming part of the trunk road network.

The consultation surfaced concerns on the part of the South West Regional Assembly and Bath and North East Somerset Council about de-trunking this route. A study into the impact of de-trunking was undertaken by Parkman in 1999/2000 but its findings were felt by a number of interests to be inconclusive. So, following a meeting between Don Foster, MP for Bath, and Lord Whitty, Parliamentary Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions, agreement was reached to undertake a more thorough study. Its purpose was to establish the



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Appendix 3



GOVERNMENT OFFICE  
FOR THE SOUTH WEST

existing role of the A36/46 and, specifically for the City of Bath, what could be done to reduce the impact of traffic on the World Heritage Site.

A Steering Group was appointed comprising officers from each of the five Highway Authorities that would become responsible for the A36/46 following de-trunking, along with representatives of the statutory environmental bodies, the Regional Assembly and the Highways Agency. Although Dorset was not directly affected by the study as defined, a representative of Dorset County Council was invited to join the Steering Group in recognition of the possible implications for the routing of traffic through parts of Dorset. In addition, and in order to assess the potential for re-routing North-South traffic to avoid the A36/46, the study area was also extended to encompass the A37 in the West and the A34 in the East.

I am sorry to have explained this at some length. The point is that there was no question of the study being set up in a way that deliberately excluded the economic needs of a South East Dorset conurbation, as your letter implies. If anything the reverse - it was extended to allow issues affecting Dorset to be looked at.

A traffic model was built for the study area, using existing models where available, to test the impact of a range of possible transport scenarios. To supplement this modelling, roadside interview surveys were undertaken at six locations in September 2002, just prior to the temporary closure of the A36 at Limpley Stoke near Bath. Two additional sites were in Dorset, on the A350 near Sturminster Marshall and the A37 north of Dorchester, specifically to address the concerns of Dorset that the model might otherwise under-represent the importance of these North-South routes.

The analysis provided by the BB2SC Study does not give strong support for identifying the A350 as a regionally important route. One important finding of the study was that the A350 is not extensively used for long-distance (inter-regional) traffic, though HGVs do account for over 20% of the flow on the section between Blandford and Shaftesbury. One of the reasons for the higher proportion of HGVs on this stretch is the preference shown by light vehicles for the C13, which carries some 5,000 vehicles per day compared with only 3,000 on the same section of the A350. The model showed that, when compared to the A34 and to a lesser extent the A37, the A350 carried relatively low flows with the majority of journeys starting and finishing within the South West region. This corroborates independent evidence supplied by Poole Borough Council that the majority (nearly 80%) of HGVs to/from South East Dorset use the A31 and M27 to access the conurbation, with only about 10% using the A350.



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# Appendix 3



GOVERNMENT OFFICE  
FOR THE SOUTH WEST

I appreciate the frustrations experienced by commercial traffic wishing to negotiate this difficult corridor. We are surprised that the Dorset Structure Plan has, over a number of years, promoted growth in this part of the county, putting additional pressures on the A350. The need to focus future development on the Bournemouth and Poole urban area is an essential long term planning tool to reduce transport pressure on this road. I certainly cannot agree that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has required counties to provide large numbers of additional homes in rural areas such as the A350 corridor. Indeed, the relevant guidance specifically advocates that in the interest of sustainability new dwellings should be primarily located in the main urban areas or locations with good access to public transport. The case for significant residential development in locations along the A350 corridor, where improved road infrastructure is difficult to develop and conventional public transport solutions are not available, would appear to be difficult to justify.

As regards alternatives, you express concerns about a possible over-reliance on the A34 as the main route to the North. I should make it clear that it was neither our intention nor that of the study that drivers from Weymouth should use the A34 to reach Bristol. While I agree this could be inferred from figure 4.3 of the Option Development and Appraisal Report, the recommendations on access to South Dorset which follow paragraph 4.96 are clear that Weymouth would normally look to the A37 for access to the North. And this route would become even more attractive if the A358 between Ilminster and Taunton were to be dualled in the future, especially in conjunction with the Weymouth relief road which received provisional approval from the Government last December.

The A34 is a more viable route going north from Poole. As you know, it has been extensively improved over recent years, with a bypass for Newbury and the current improvements at M4 junction 13. Although longer in distance than the A350 from Poole to Bristol, the report identified that it is only marginally longer in time. Applying a HGV fuel consumption average of 4.5 mpg on the un-improved sections and 8 mpg on improved sections, the fuel consumption on both routes is very similar for all 3 routes from Poole to Cardiff, being about 22 gallons on both the A350 and A34 and 21 gallons via the A37. Even were the A350 to be capable of improvement, the environmental constraints dictate that it will never be to the standard capable of delivering the lower fuel consumption of 8 mpg. Furthermore, with distance-based charging for HGVs, which is still intended to be introduced in 2006, possibly with a lower rate on motorways than other roads, it may well become cheaper to choose the A34/M4 or A37/M5 routes.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Appendix 3



GOVERNMENT OFFICE  
FOR THE SOUTH WEST

I note your concerns about the lack of reference in the report to use of the A338. Improving this route from the South Coast through to the M4 near Swindon was ruled out at a fairly early stage in the study. The A338 does provide a route from the Poole/ Bournemouth conurbation to the A36 further to the east: the section between Ringwood and Salisbury is relatively free-flowing and might become more attractive if the Harnham relief road were built. But to the north of Salisbury the road standard is considerably lower and, like the A350, there are severe limitations in the way of delivering improvements, primarily resulting from numerous environmental designations and the need to bypass Marlborough.

Unsuitable as it may be as a regionally significant route, I acknowledge that the A350 is still part of the Primary Route Network and needs to be 'fit for purpose' as far as this is practicable. But I was surprised by your assertion that local authorities consider that it would be quite simple to upgrade the A350 to a 'modern, safe 60 mph road'. To design a road to these standards requires good forward visibility and considerable restraints on horizontal and vertical alignments, a daunting challenge in terrain as special and difficult as in the vicinity of Melbury Abbas. I am afraid we would be badly misleading businesses in this part of the region to raise expectations that improvement to these standards could be justified around Melbury Abbas, let alone delivered. The quality of the environment surrounding this village makes delivery of any road improvement very challenging. GOSW has, however, suggested that Dorset consider with the relevant statutory environmental bodies how a sensitive improvement might be possible around Melbury Abbas to improve the environment for the villages on the existing A350. However, this would need to be as part of a strategy that acknowledged this corridor as one where traffic is constrained, and not one where significant traffic growth should be accommodated.

I am sorry to have replied to your letter at such length but I hope it will be helpful to you to have these specific responses to the points you made.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours, which included the Secretary of State for Transport and the Deputy Prime Minister. This letter should also be taken please as a reply on their behalf.

*Yours sincerely,  
Jane Henderson*

J E HENDERSON



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