

Title:	A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme Community Forum, March 2023		
Date:	8 March 2023	Time: 18:00 – 19:30	Location: MS Teams
Attendees:	National Highways Somerset County Council Somerset West and Taunton Council South Somerset District Council Ashill Parish Council Beercrocombe Parish Council Broadway Parish Council Donyatt Parish Council Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council Neroche Parsh Council Future A358 Campaign Group Ruishton, Thornfalcon and Henlade Parish Council Stoke St Mary Parish Council West Hatch Parish Council West Monkton Parish Council Somerset County Scouts South Somerset Bridleways Association		
Apologies:	Community Forum Independent Chair Blackdown District Scouts Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership		
Chair:	National Highways		
Circulation:	Those present and invitees		
Meeting objective(s):	To provide an update on the A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme		

No.	Item	Actions
1.	Welcome, introductions and agenda	
	<p>The meeting was opened and chaired by National Highways, noting that apologies had been received from the Independent Chair and two members of the National Highways team due to illness.</p> <p>The Chair welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for joining. The Chair asked National Highways to introduce themselves, and asked attendees to type their name and the organisation they represent into the chat.</p> <p>The Chair ran through housekeeping before moving onto the agenda for the meeting.</p>	

2.	Safety moment	
	The safety moment focused on the new National Highways HGV safety campaign known as 'Know the zones' campaign – Know the zones campaign video . The safety moment emphasised the importance of knowing HGV blind spots, stating that more than a third of motorists are unaware of the number of blind spots HGVs have.	
3.	Project update	
	<p>Development Consent Order (DCO) submission</p> <p>National Highways confirmed that National Highways' position hasn't changed since the statement that was released in December 2022, reiterating that <i>"with the support of government, National Highways has taken the decision to pause the DCO application while we support a review into the appropriateness of the environmental mitigations proposed for the project. This will move the submission date into 2023"</i>.</p> <p>National Highways stated they remain confident that the proposed scheme presents the best solution to the ongoing issues along the A358 and the wider corridor. National Highways is working closely with the Department for Transport and His Majesty's Treasury to ensure a decision on the submission of the DCO application is fully informed. They added that they will continue to keep stakeholders and the local community informed of the project's progress.</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement and communications</p> <p>National Highways provided an overview of the current programme of stakeholder engagement, which included the recently issued community newsletter, an online briefing with Somerset County Council Members (7 March), briefings offered to local MPs and a supplementary consultation summary booklet due to be published in March.</p> <p>National Highways also referenced the change in local governance structure with the new Somerset Council coming into effect on 1 April and local elections taking place on 4 May for the new Taunton Town Council.</p>	
4.	Feedback from supplementary consultation	
	<p>National Highways informed attendees that a supplementary consultation summary booklet will be published in March. The booklet will provide a similar level of detail to the statutory consultation summary report that was published in February 2022.</p> <p>The booklet will provide an overview of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How and when National Highways delivered the supplementary consultation • How many responses National Highways received • What was consulted on • Headline feedback received on the supplementary consultation <p>National Highways stated that the booklet would summarise the consultation feedback received on each question but not how National Highways had responded to the feedback. National Highways' response would be available in the Consultation Report that forms part of the suite of DCO application documents.</p>	

	<p>They added that it is usual for DCO application documents to be published after a project has been accepted for examination. For this project the intention is to publish the DCO application documents at the submission to ensure the information is available to local communities as soon as possible.</p> <p>National Highways provided an overview of who had responded to supplementary consultation, stating that 677 responses were received, which had been categorised as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescribed consultees (such as Parish Councils, Natural England and Environment Agency) – 22 responses • Local authorities – 7 responses • Landowners – 66 responses • General public – 562 responses (this includes the 326 responses from the FutureA358 Campaign) • Additional organisations (such as Bridleways Associations) – 20 responses <p>National Highways noted that the responses from the public, including the Future A358 Campaign, have been analysed as individual responses. Postcode analysis of questionnaire responses showed that while some responses had been received from other parts of the UK, the majority of responses were from the local area.</p>	
5.	The Development Consent Order examination process and hearings	
	<p>Stages of the DCO process</p> <p>National Highways gave an overview of the stages of the DCO process and mentioned that the A358 project is currently at the pre-application stage.</p> <p>Once the application is submitted it is no longer a National Highways controlled timescale and a statutory process would take over, which is managed by the Planning Inspectorate.</p> <p>Following submission of an application there is an Acceptance stage, where the Planning Inspectorate has 28 days to assess if the application documents meet the statutory tests set out in section 55 of the Planning Act (2008) and decide whether to accept the application into the examination process.</p> <p>If accepted, the project moves into the Pre-Examination stage, which is the important stage for anyone who wants to be involved in the examination process. Anyone looking to get involved should register as an interested party at this stage, by completing a relevant representation, outlining (in summary form) their interests and concerns. A Preliminary Meeting will then be held, at which the Inspectorate will determine the content of future hearings and the length of the examination period to come.</p> <p>Those who have submitted a relevant representation will receive updates and notifications from the Inspectorate about the timetable for examination and hearings.</p>	

	<p>The examination stage can be up to six months long. Within that period, there will be deadlines where the applicant is invited to feed into the process. There are also hearings during this period - typically open floor, DCO, compulsory acquisition and issue-specific.</p> <p>After the close of the examination, there will be a report and decision period (six months). This includes three months for the inspectorate to write their recommendation and provide this to the Secretary of State.</p> <p>A further three months is then allowed for the Secretary of State to make their decision on whether or not to grant development consent for the project.</p> <p>The Secretary of State does not have to agree with the recommendation from the Planning Inspectorate. A six-week post-decision challenge period follows the Secretary of State's decision.</p> <p>Examination</p> <p>National Highways then provided further detail about the examination stage, noting that it is an inquisitorial process not and adversarial. The Planning Inspectorate is there to gather information and not to seek cross examination in adversarial format. Interested parties can make their points direct to the Inspectorate, who will ask questions of the parties to gather the information needed. The process is primarily through a written representation, questions and responses.</p> <p>National Highways reminded the attendees that there are different hearings, such as open floor hearings (including items not covered by other hearings), acquisition hearings (these relate to land acquisitions) and issue specific hearings (covering topics such as environmental and traffic) and the DCO drafting (which takes place at the end of examination and looks at the wording of the DCO and how the scheme would work in practice once operational). Within the examination alongside the hearings there are a set of deadlines. This is where key points during the examination where documentation is required.</p> <p>Participating the planning process</p> <p>National Highways re-iterated that it is important to register within the pre-examination period. Those registered will be sent a draft timetable by the Inspectorate and invited to attend the preliminary meeting.</p> <p>There will also be answers to questions that are posed to interest parties by the Planning Inspectorate. There will also be issue specific hearings which will include the topics that have been identified within the written representations.</p> <p>National Highways presented then provided tips for those taking part in the examination process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time is tight – the Inspectorate will set the deadlines for when information needs to be provided, to ensure information is taken into account at the right stage in the examination process. 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process is written – don't assume that there will be a hearing on any specific issue. • Surprises shouldn't happen – make points in the relevant representation to ensure they can be properly considered during the course of the examination. <p>Planning Inspectorate advice and guidance</p> <p>National Highways reminded attendees that the process is run by the Planning Inspectorate and that detailed advice and guidance about the process and how to participate is available on their website. This includes a series of advice notes and videos:</p> <p>https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/application-process/the-process/</p> <p>Planning Inspectorate website - the application process</p> <p>Advice note 8 - overview of the NSIP process for the public</p> <p>Video - How to take part at an Issue Specific Hearing</p>	
6.	Q&A	
	<p>The Chair invited attendees to ask questions.</p> <p>A representative of the FutureA358 Campaign group asked if National Highways have an idea of when the DCO application is due to be submitted.</p> <p>National Highways re-iterated that the current position remains that with the support of government, National Highways has taken the decision to pause the DCO application while they support a review into the appropriateness of the environmental mitigations proposed for the project. National Highways is responding to any questions from the Department for Transport to support the review. National Highways remain confident in the environmental mitigations proposed and that the scheme presents the best solution to the ongoing issues. They added that they will keep communities updated when more information is available.</p> <p>A representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council and the Community of Parishes asked a detailed technical question, asking how National Highways can justify the high traffic forecast that is being presented. National Highways stated that they could only provide a general answer at the meeting, as they would need to refer the detailed question to the traffic team. National Highways stated that in general terms, traffic growth predictions that were used were based on the factors produced nationally and then applied to specific regions. These traffic forecasts are updated regularly.</p> <p>Post-meeting note: <i>The full question and answer is provided at the end of these minutes.</i></p> <p>A representative from West Hatch Parish Council asked if National Highways is taking into account the views of the Somerset Council. National Highways answered that there is ongoing conversation between Somerset Council and National Highways throughout this period and National Highways is responding to the comments left by the council.</p>	

	<p>National Highways confirmed that they would take into account feedback shared directly by the public to Somerset County Council officers in addition to feedback received during the supplementary and statutory consultations. National Highways stated that the supplementary consultation is the key area that delivers the feedback and this makes up a part of the DCO process.</p> <p>A representative from of the FutureA358 Campaign group asked if there is a continued delay to the DCO submission, will there be an explanation to what the delay is for, noting that since the previous Community Forum in October 2022, there has been a lack of information being provided to local communities about the DCO submission and the environmental review</p> <p>National Highways answered that they don't have any information about a revised date for DCO submission, but will provide an update as soon as they are able to. They added that National Highways can't provide any details about the review while it is in progress and that it is being carried out by government. The review is helping to inform government policy at a national level. National Highways will share further information as soon as they are able to. They added that they are mindful of the budget taking place the following week (15 March) which may provide some clarity on infrastructure spending.</p> <p>National Highways re-iterated that they will publish the DCO application documents following submission rather than waiting until after the acceptance decision to provide communities more time to review documents and prepare for the next stages.</p>	
7.	Close	
	The Chair thanked all attendees for their time in attending the meeting and for their input during the session.	
	<p>Post meeting note</p> <p>The representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council asked: "National Highways gives a forecast of traffic in 2043 in the supplementary consultation Technical Traffic note. If you look at the forecast traffic in 2043 on the A303 east, the M5 south and M5 north and compare them to the 2015 baseline, you get forecasted increases of between 65 – 75%, with the 'without scheme' scenario forecasting a lower increase. These predictions lead to forecasted traffic on the A358 rising by approximately 50% without the scheme, and more than doubling with it. In December 2022, the Department for Transport published new road traffic projections. Besides emphasising continual uncertainty around road traffic demand, the new 2022 projects forecast only 22% increase in traffic from 2025 – 2060 for its core scenario, and only 8% in its behaviour change scenario. The DfT forecasts are substantially lower than what National Highways are using for the A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme – even allowing for the earlier baseline. The regional breakdown shows that the South West is not a special case. How do you justify the extraordinarily high traffic forecasts used to underwrite the A358 scheme?"</p> <p>National Highways' traffic specialist has expanded on this point following the meeting:</p>	

	<p>“Thank you for your query. To answer your question, the National Road Traffic Projections for 2022 were published by the Department for Transport (DfT) in December 2022. When the traffic forecasts were developed in line with DfT Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG), car trip growth was predicted in line with the National Trip End Model (NTEM) version 7.2. In addition, goods vehicle growth was based on the Road Traffic Forecasts 2018 (RTF 18) in line with the DfT Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG).</p> <p>There have been changes in government policy and projections of key data (e.g. population, employment, Gross Domestic Product) which affect the expected level of growth in traffic independent of the scheme. It is therefore normal as part of the traffic modelling and scheme appraisal process for major road schemes to go through several model updates throughout the project lifecycle (from the options identification stage early in the development process through to the construction stage). The next update of the traffic forecasts is programmed for the statutory procedures stage following our DCO application submission. This is when we are planning on adopting the National Road Traffic Projects 2022 (NRTP 22) guidance into our traffic forecasts.</p>	
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