

Minutes

A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme

Title:	A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme Community Forum, October 2022		
Date:	19 October 2022	Time:	18:00 – 19:30
		Location:	Taunton Rugby Football Club, Hyde Park Lane, TA2 8BU
Attendees:	National Highways Ashill Parish Council Beercrocombe Parish Council and Community of Parishes Future A358 campaign group Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council Neroche Parish Council North Curry Parish Council Ruishton and Thornfalcon Parish Council Somerset West and Taunton Council South Somerset District Council Somerset County Council South Somerset Bridleways Association Stoke St Mary Parish Council West Hatch Parish Council West Monkton Parish Council		
Apologies:	Community Forum Independent Chair Blackdown District Scouts Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership Whitelackington Parish Meeting		
Chair:	National Highways		
Circulation:	Those present		
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.</p> <p>The Chair welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for taking the time to attend the meeting in-person. Attendees were asked to introduce themselves and the organisation they represent.</p> <p>The Chair ran through housekeeping before moving onto the agenda items for the meeting, starting with a safety moment,</p>	

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	followed by a project update and a detailed explanation of the stages of the Development Consent Order (DCO) application process and how attendees could get involved.	
2.	Safety moment	
	The safety moment was introduced focussing on travelling through winter and the importance of taking appropriate precautions – including planning the route, researching service areas in advance of a journey and ensuring that your car is functioning properly. There was also advice shared for winter driving.	
3.	Project update	
	<p>Project background</p> <p>National Highways provided an overview of the project – starting from the announcement of the scheme in 2014, inclusion in the second Road Investment Scheme (RIS2), the context of the A303/A358 corridor and that the project is designated as a Tier 1 project, requiring involvement and oversight from the Department for Transport and HM Treasury.</p> <p>They reiterated that the A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme would not be an expressway, as an expressway would prohibit the use of agricultural vehicles. The proposed high-quality, high-performing dual carriageway proposed would allow for agricultural vehicles.</p> <p>A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme</p> <p>National Highways provided an overview of the need for the scheme, stating that the existing carriageway is mostly single carriageway, over capacity and heavily congested. 14 local roads and private accesses connecting to the existing A358, which contribute to the poor safety and performance of the route overall. The upgrade would help to improve the poor air quality in Henlade, and help separate strategic and local traffic. The existing route is part of the local road network and would become part of the strategic road network upon completion, so ownership and maintenance would become National Highways' responsibility rather than Somerset County Council.</p> <p>National Highways shared that the scheme was needed to help improve capacity and journey time savings and reliability; improve</p>	

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<p>local and regional economic productivity and create new economic opportunities; enhance safety; mitigate against environmental impacts where possible and improve overall quality of life for local communities.</p> <p>Supplementary consultation – levels of engagement</p> <p>National Highways thanked everyone who had been involved in the recent supplementary consultation and shared some of the engagement figures, stating that circa 700 consultation responses had been received, there were 955 attendees at in-person events, and high levels of online engagement and visits to the webpages, virtual exhibition room and fly-through video. They explained there would not be an interim summary report on the supplementary consultation as the detail would be provided in the consultation report which will form part of the DCO application to be submitted later this year.</p> <p>National Highways then shared the key themes emerging from the consultation, stating the importance of recognising the diversity of consultation feedback, with some very supportive and providing positive feedback and some that are not happy and do not support proposals. Feedback shows there is a really mixed picture along the entire length of project, including multiple parish councils with very diverse views.</p> <p>The project team is addressing the feedback in the round, taking all views into account. Supplementary consultation showed that National Highways is listening, as changes proposed were in response to feedback provided during statutory consultation held in October/November 2021.</p> <p>General feedback included positive and negative comments about the need for scheme, constructive feedback around proposed walking, cycling and horse-riding measures, agreement that the redesign of Nexus 25 roundabout to a signalised junction would also improve walking, cycling and horse-riding (including disabled users) access. There was also feedback around carbon and net zero, and National Highways shared information about their net zero strategy and acknowledged their responsibility and commitment to enhancing the environment where possible as part of the scheme. Attendees were informed that National Highways' net zero plan is available on the website.</p>
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	<p>Statutory consultation feedback around the bridge at Bickenhall mostly focussed on the need for private access that could accommodate walking, cycling and horse-riding groups; the Capland Link road option which ran closest to the existing A358 was the most popular, and there had been requests for an additional bridge at Jordans for private farm access, agricultural use and walking, cycling and horse-riding groups.</p> <p>Ongoing work</p> <p>National Highways outlined the work that been ongoing since supplementary consultation, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing and analysing all consultation feedback • Ongoing engagement – e.g. technical and environmental • Engagement with impacted landholders with planned further targeted consultation – which has resulted in some minor amendments to the scheme design. • Ecological, archaeological and land surveys - The archaeological trial trenching surveys are now complete – some medieval pottery was found but nothing significant. The last bat surveys finished on Monday 17 October at night. • Ongoing work with local authorities, including local road assessment, review of cycle provision, biodiversity and net zero. • Design refinement, taking into account consultation feedback as well as survey and assessment data. • Continued development of our application documents, including the full consultation report, in preparation for submission – including internal and legal reviews. 	
4.	The Development Consent Order process	
	<p>National Highways' Development Consent Order (DCO) representative introduced themselves and their background.</p> <p>Legal framework</p> <p>National Highways provided an overview of the legal framework, and how the DCO process under the Planning Act 2008 differs from mainstream planning processes.</p>	

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<p>The Planning Act was introduced in 2008 and included classification for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) based on the size and scale of a project. The A358 upgrade has been designated as an NSIP, the Planning Act requires that development consent for an NSIP can only be granted by way of a DCO. The DCO includes much more than just planning consent and covers land matters and protective provisions with statutory undertakes (utilities), and the application goes to the Planning Inspectorate rather than local authorities.</p> <p>Once an application for DCO has been submitted, the Planning Inspectorate become responsible for the timeline and process of examination. Following the examination, the Planning Inspectorate are also responsible for making a decision recommendation to the Secretary of State for Transport, who is then responsible for the decision on whether to approve consent for the scheme.</p> <p>Stages of the DCO process</p> <p>The process is largely managed through written submissions with some hearings. The A358 project is currently at the pre-application stage. Once the application is submitted it is no longer a National Highways controlled timescale, and statutory processes would take over and are managed by the Planning Inspectorate. Following submission of an application, there is an Acceptance stage where the Inspectorate would assess the application against Section 55 of the Planning Act, deciding whether to accept the application into the examination process.</p> <p>Acceptance would be announced on the Inspectorate's website, followed by the Pre-Examination stage. This time period varies based on how the Inspectorate would like to run the examination. Anyone looking to get involved during the DCO process should register as an interested party at this stage, by completing a Relevant Representation 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>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</p>	
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<p>decision period (six months). This includes three months for the inspectors to write their recommendation and provide this to the Secretary of State. 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. The Secretary of State do not have to agree with the recommendation from the Inspectorate. A six-week post-decision challenge period follows the Secretary of State's decision.</p> <p>Guide to the application</p> <p>National Highways set out what will be included in the DCO application, which will be many thousands of pages of documents, grouped into various volumes as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application information – an application form, covering letter and Section 55 checklist designed to test the suitability of the overall application. This will also include an introduction to the application, which will set out the structure of the application and where to find information. • Plans, drawings and sections - e.g. land plans, work plans and public rights of way plans. • Draft Development Consent Order – will have its own separate volume, up front set of articles and a separate part dealing with requirements (planning conditions), how these will be discharged, protected provisions and land and rights over land access. • Compulsory acquisition information – will list all of the plots of land by the scheme, the book of reference and statements of reasons and a funding statement. • Consultation report – tables at the back include how National Highways has had regard to feedback. • Environmental information – e.g. Environmental Statement. This will be thousands of pages, with multiple chapters along with figures, appendices and details of the assessments. • Other reports – includes the Case for the Scheme and the Statement of Commonality <p>National Highways will also be seeking to develop position statements with individual parish councils during the examination process.</p> <p>National Highways then went into more detail on the stages of the DCO and how the public can get involved in the process.</p>
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	<p>Acceptance and Examination</p> <p>All documentation will be submitted electronically to the Inspectorate at the start of the process. This would then be followed by an acceptance period (28 days from submission), a review of application documents and an assessment of the adequacy of consultation.</p> <p>This is followed by a pre-examination period lasting approximately three to four months where interested parties can submit Relevant Representations. The Inspectorate will also appoint an examining authority during this period who will make an initial assessment on the principal issues for examination. This will then be followed by a preliminary meeting where all stakeholders who have registered will be informed on the number of hearings and topics during the examination period.</p> <p>Examination</p> <p>During the examination period, the Inspectorate are in place to gather information and not to seek cross examination in adversarial format.</p> <p>There are four types of hearing: Open floor, DCO, Acquisition and Issue specific. Open Floor hearings are those that are not issue specific and do not align with other set categories.</p> <p>Participating in the planning process</p> <p>Once the application is submitted, the process is managed by the Inspectorate. The pre-examination is a key stage for anyone who wishes to be involved in the hearings. That is the stage where organisations and members of the public can register as an interested party with the Planning Inspectorate and submit a Written Representation. The Planning Inspectorate has appointed a Case Manager who would also be willing to talk through any case queries that anyone had.</p>	
5.	<p>Next steps</p> <p>National Highways reiterated that this process is standard for all Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. The aim is to submit the application this year (although an exact date could not be confirmed) pending discussions with HM Treasury and the Planning</p>	

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	<p>Inspectorate.</p> <p>National Highways informed attendees that a meeting was held recently (October 2022) with newly-elected councillors in addition to updates being offered to local MPs. They explained that National Highways won't issue external communications after they have submitted their DCO application (including the project newsletter) until the Inspectorate confirms they have accepted the application for examination.</p> <p>The Inspectorate's website would be updated with details about the application and to confirm acceptance for examination.</p> <p>National Highways would issue notifications to statutory stakeholders (Section 56 notice) at the start of the pre-examination stage, along with press notices and other communications activity.</p> <p>National Highways acknowledged that they couldn't share much information at this meeting as documentation and additional reviews were still being carried out. Attendees were encouraged to see other DCO applications which are on the Planning Inspectorate's website as an example of the volume and type of information that will be submitted. National Highways role will transition to applicant as soon as the application is submitted.</p> <p>Presentation close</p>	
6.	Q&A	
	<p>The Chair invited attendees to ask questions.</p> <p>The representative of the FutureA358 campaign group asked why it wasn't possible to share the results of the supplementary consultation prior to the DCO application. National Highways acknowledged that there are various stages to the analysis which does take time. There is an additional layer, the application documentation, which is also being produced at the same time. The consultation report is not ready yet. The representative from the FutureA358 campaign group asked whether National Highways could share data charts similar to the ones they had produced for those that had responded via the FutureA358 campaign website. National Highways acknowledged that there was a parallel version of the consultation run by FutureA358 which asked a set of additional, quantitative questions. These were additional questions and not part of National Highways supplementary consultation, therefore not a compatible data set. The supplementary consultation focused on qualitative (open text response) feedback, enabling people to provide the reasons why they agree or disagree</p>	

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<p>with proposals, which is the most important element and which takes time to analyse and inform decisions on whether further refinements to the design are needed. The consultation report will include what the consultation feedback and how National Highways has had regard to that feedback. National Highways thanked the campaign group for sharing their full set of responses, including the responses to open questions, which had been included in the consultation analysis.</p> <p>The representative from West Hatch Parish Council claimed that not having quantitative data is ridiculous. National Highways responded that they have numbers for how many have responded to each question, but there were no tick box style questions so these responses to the FutureA358 campaign group were not compatible with the National Highways supplementary consultation responses. Open-ended responses take more time to analyse.</p> <p>The representative from Stoke St Mary noted that the proposals for passing places at Haydon Lane were new in the supplementary consultation and there doesn't seem to be a process to discuss that measure before the DCO application. They stated the view that opening the old Ilminster Road would be the ideal mechanism and that there are governance issues with the road falling under Somerset County Council's responsibility. They asked for a thorough evaluation of the alternatives.</p> <p>National Highways acknowledged the feedback and referred back to the process. Feedback from the statutory and supplementary consultations was being reviewed, with a conclusion on the proposed measures being submitted as part of the scheme preliminary design at DCO. There will be an option to submit further feedback during the examination period. The Inspectorate will either bring forward a hearing, direct questions to National Highways or request parish council position statements. The Inspectorate can make decisions on that basis.</p> <p>The representative from Stoke St Mary re-affirmed the need to reach a resolution before application submission and asked how the project is delivered between Somerset County Council and National Highways. National Highways noted that they work closely with Somerset County Council, who are responsible for the local road mitigation measures introduced. The representative from Stoke St Mary argued that they weren't aware of the impact of Mattock's Tree Green junction on Haydon Lane. They also asked when documentation would be available from the DCO application submission. National Highways responded that it would be available after the application was accepted by the Planning Inspectorate.</p>
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	<p>A representative from West Monkton Parish Council asked how secure the project would be with the UK government making funding cuts and whether the DCO application submission would continue regardless. National Highways acknowledged that the scheme was announced as one of the 86 infrastructure projects fast-tracked for development in the recent Growth Plan. The project is carrying on as is, working toward an 'Open for Traffic' date of 2028/29. It was also stated that the NSIP regime is different to approval processes for smaller highways projects. For an NSIP, there are periods of time where reviews are required and the project reports into the Department for Transport and HM Treasury.</p> <p>A representative from North Curry Parish Council asked whether National Highways had a priority list of which schemes it favours for future development. National Highways shared that the third Road Investment Strategy (RIS3) pipeline was in place for these reviews. Projects used to be funded on an individual basis before RIS1 (Road Investment Strategy 1), and the RIS funding mechanism came in place to consolidate the process. RIS3 will be looking at the wider A303/A358 corridor – the ambition is to dual sections of single carriageway along this section of route. All schemes are at different stages of their development.</p> <p>The representative from North Curry Parish Council asked how much information interested parties would have to share in their relevant representation during the pre-examination period. National Highways responded that it could be as short or as detailed as they would like, headlines is fine for the relevant representation as it allows the inspectors to know which topics they need to focus on. This would be developed further for the written representation at a later stage of the process.</p> <p>The representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council queried the expressway point, stating they believe it is being built to a GD300 standard, whereas National Highways could have chosen a CD109 standard (for the construction of dual carriageways) or CD122 for the junctions, and that GD300 limits the junction design and access to the new A358 route. They stated that there is no case for this.</p> <p>National Highways assured the representative the scheme would not be an expressway. The GD300 road design standards have been developed by the experts to ensure the highest performance and safety standards. Level 3 or 4 would involve an expressway – and there is no aspiration for this, as this would not allow for agricultural vehicles and there is no alternative route for agricultural vehicles. Level 1 or 2 is a high-quality, high-performing dual</p>	
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	<p>carriageway. The representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council asked why the scheme standards weren't downgraded to CD109 road standards. National Highways responded that the route is being designing to the highest safety and performance standards.</p> <p>The representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council raised the A66 as an example of a part of the Strategic Road Network at the design stage not working to GD300 standards and queried whether any other scheme is using GD300. National Highways noted that the A30 Chiverton to Carland is being designed to the same standard. The representative from Beercrocombe Parish Council argued that has a local parallel road, and the Parish Councils just wanted to be accommodated during the existing design. They went on to challenge the safety statistics and that they didn't give a full picture, and that on one section of the route the safety record is better than average, as set out in National Highways' Traffic Technical Note. A representative from the FutureA358 campaign added that National Highways has a responsibility to show the full picture with safety.</p> <p>National Highways responded that the presentation had focused on a summary overview and headlines as a reminder for why the scheme is needed and that, as the representative had stated, the data has been published, and updated data will be submitted and published as part of the DCO application.</p> <p>National Highways added that one of the crucial points is that it is a local road which will become part of the Strategic Road Network. National Highways is looking at the corridor in its entirety.</p> <p>The representative from the FutureA358 group queried whether there is any scope to consider a less disruptive design for the road and why is there not more consultation if there is a feeling people are not comfortable with the design.</p> <p>National Highways responded that the project had a huge amount of people and very mixed views to take into account. There is a lot of support and there are people that don't agree with the design. The project has reached a point in the preliminary design where there is a balance of benefit, cost and value for money, a balance of all the objectives in the scheme, whether it be walkers, cyclists, horse-riders, environment, and achieving a safe and well performing route. They acknowledged there will continue to be challenges and these may well come out through examination and may be taken on board as we progress to detailed design.</p>	
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<p>National Highways added that the Inspectorate will determine whether the application should be progressed before acceptance, and the examination process is in place to ensure that the public are still able to share their views.</p> <p>The representative from Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council asked whether the benefits case will be submitted for scrutiny as part of the DCO and whether it will be updated. National Highways confirmed that it is being updated and will be submitted as part of the DCO application, and that through the changes made to the preliminary design, the project has an improved picture for overall BCR (Benefit Cost Ratio).</p> <p>A representative from South Somerset Bridleways Association noted that they have been advocating for restricted byways over bridleways. Haydon Lane and Oldbroach Lane are examples of where this could be implemented. The term equestrians would include carriage drivers and disabled users, pointing out that National Highways need to be careful about terminology and not just use the term 'horse-riders'. This is the same case with the A303. National Highways noted that both Bickenhall and Jordans Bridges would be restricted byways and that the point about terminology had been fed back at national level.</p> <p>A representative from Neroche Parish Council asked how quickly Somerset County Council could build new bridges and raised concerns about proposals for traffic restrictions at Bickenhall bridge. National Highways noted that they could not comment on this individual policy. In terms of the bridge at Bickenhall, they noted that feedback had been mixed, and another parish on the other side of the bridge was more vocal to having traffic coming through there. The Somerset County Council representative responded that they would pick up with the Neroche representative after the meeting.</p> <p>A representative from Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council noted that the Somerset West and Taunton response to the Preliminary Environmental Impact Report merited attention, with regard to the assessment of cumulative effects. They asked whether there will be a consultation on this before the DCO application was submitted. National Highways shared that further work had been undertaken since the statutory consultation and the information would be part of the Environmental Statement (ES) that will be submitted as part of the DCO application. There is also Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) with the joint councils, which will include comments on their consultation feedback. The SoCG process is ongoing through the application process and focuses on whether there is an agreed matter, whether something should</p>
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	be examined further or where there is disagreement. Examination will provide the Inspectorate with an opportunity to make a decision on what needs to be done on a disagreement. The suite of documents will give the Inspectorate a full picture of what is going on. The Somerset West and Taunton representative invited the Hatch Beauchamp representative to follow up after the meeting with specific queries about the council's response to statutory consultation.	
7.		
	<p>Meeting close</p> <p>The Chair thanked all attendees for their time in attending the meeting in-person and for their input during the session.</p> <p>The meeting closed at 7:30pm.</p>	