

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

1 June 2021

Subject: **A350 Melksham Bypass Consultation Report – Report on Public Consultation**

Cabinet Member: **Cllr Mark McClelland – Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding**

Key Decision: **Key**

Executive Summary

The A350 Melksham Bypass is a Large Local Major scheme which has been awarded development funding by the Department of Transport (DfT) to take it to Outline Business Case (OBC) stage. It would be a major improvement to the important A350 route which provides vital transport links between the M4, the towns of western Wiltshire and the south coast.

A range of options for the scheme were the subject of a public consultation earlier this year. Further scheme development and assessment work has since been undertaken, taking into account the response to the consultation, in order to prepare a short list of options for further consultation.

There were 1,018 responses to the public consultation questionnaire, the majority of which were from individuals (962) with a small number from businesses or organisations (42). Most of the responses were local from Melksham or within five miles. There were also 175 written and email responses to the consultation. The town and local parish councils and other organisations also provided their views on the long list of options (see **Appendices 1 and 2**). Most respondents supported the need for an improvement to the A350 at Beanacre and Melksham (594 Yes/406 No), but there was not overwhelming support for a particular option.

A sifting process has been undertaken to identify the most suitable options for further consultation.

The options for workplace parking levy or road user charging (Options 1 and 2) had little public support. The other non-road options – heavy goods vehicles restrictions, bus and train service improvements, walking and cycling (Options 3, 4, 5 and 6), had good levels of public support but on their own none of them would not meet the transport objectives of the scheme.

Improving the existing A350 route (Options 7a, 7b and 7c), especially through Beanacre and at the northern end of Melksham to the standard required to meet the needs of the major road network and future traffic growth was not considered to be a

feasible option to meet the objectives.

The western routes (Options 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b and 9c) do not appear to offer significant environmental or construction benefits over the eastern options and they had less public support than the eastern routes.

The eastern routes generally performed well in operational and cost terms, with varying environmental impacts. The short eastern routes (Options 10a and 10b) would be cheaper with less impact on the countryside but would have less economic benefits and would increase severance on the eastern side of the town.

The longest eastern route connecting to the A361 (Option 10d) would be the most expensive. There were considerable concerns expressed by some of the public and local parish councils about the environmental impact of this option.

The long eastern bypass (Option 10c) appears to offer good value for money and with suitable mitigation measures could offer a feasible route and following the sifting process of the options it is proposed that this one should be developed further.

Alternative routes and variants of the consultation proposals were suggested by the public during the consultation and these have been investigated; however, most are considered not to offer suitable alternatives to the identified routes in meeting the transport objectives.

It is proposed to carry out further consultation on the eastern route (Option 10c) and potential variants of the route at the northern end. Various detailed comments were received in connection with the scheme, proposed junctions, landscaping and rights of way which will be explored in more detail in the next stage of the design and consultation process.

The comments on the initial consultation included suggestions for walking and cycling improvements, which could be included as part of the scheme or progressed separately, and these will also be investigated further.

There are many factors that need to be considered in determining the details of a scheme of this type, including the transport objectives, landscape, archaeology, ecology, air quality, flood risk, environment including climate change impact, cost and benefits. The final scheme could be a variation of those being consulted on as the design will inevitably be refined in response to the consultations.

It is proposed to carry out further non-statutory consultations on a short list of options for the eastern route which will be used to help inform the business case. Statutory consultations will take place later in the scheme development, following approval of the OBC by DfT, when the scheme would be designed in detail and a planning application submitted. It is likely that statutory orders, including compulsory purchase orders, would be required, and the scheme could be the subject of a public inquiry.

Proposals

It is recommended that:

- (i) The response to the initial public consultations and the views of the town and local parish councils are noted and taken into account in the scheme development.
- (ii) The following options should not be included in the short list of options for further consultation for the reasons set out in the report:
 - Non-road options (Options 1 to 6)
 - Improvement of the existing road (Options 7a, 7b and 7c)
 - Western routes (Options 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b and 9c)
 - Short eastern routes (Options 10a and 10b)
 - Longest eastern route (Option 10d) and its variants
- (iii) Further public consultation should be undertaken on a short list of options comprising the long eastern route (Option 10c) and alternative alignments at the northern end which may be feasible.
- (iv) The possibility of improving walking and cycling facilities in conjunction with the scheme or separately should continue to be explored.
- (v) The views of the public, town and parish councils, Area Board and other organisations should be obtained on the short list of options in order to inform the future development of the scheme.

Reason for Proposals

The A350 Melksham Bypass is a Large Local Major scheme which has been awarded development funding by the DfT to take it to OBC stage. It will be a major improvement to the important A350 route which provides vital transport links between the M4, the towns of western Wiltshire and the south coast.

As part of the development of the scheme various options were consulted on. In order to inform the further development of the scheme, it is proposed to adopt a short list of feasible options for further consideration and consultation. The preferred route will need to meet the transport objectives and the DfT requirements in order to be awarded funding.

The proposed consultations with the public, town and parish councils, the Area Board and other organisations, will inform the development of the scheme, and assist in preparing an OBC to submit to the DfT.

Terence Herbert - Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

1 June 2021

Subject: A350 Melksham Bypass Consultation Report – Report on Public Consultation

Cabinet Member: Cllr Mark McClelland – Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding

Key Decision: Key

Purpose of Report

1. To review the response to the public consultation on the options for the A350 Melksham Bypass scheme and the further assessment work recently undertaken, and to approve further consultation on a short list of options.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The Council's Business Plan 2017 – 27 has priorities for Growing the Economy, Strong Communities and Protecting the Vulnerable. The goals for Transport and Infrastructure include:
 - (i) Road Infrastructure is improved
 - (ii) New infrastructure to support housing and employment growth
 - (iii) Improved strategic roads and rail
3. The proposed Melksham Bypass scheme is a major infrastructure improvement to the transport network to support housing and employment growth and would improve connections to the strategic road network.

Background

4. The importance of the A350 to the local economy has long been recognised in Wiltshire, and improvements have been undertaken in recent years to address sections where there were capacity constraints and where improvements were needed. There are several proposals for further improvements to the route currently being developed, including those at Melksham.
5. The A350 through Beanacre and Melksham has been a concern for many years. The road has sections with 30 mph speed limits passing through residential areas, with several busy junctions which provide access to Melksham town centre, retail and commercial sites, the A365 Bath Road and A3102. From the data included in the Strategic Outline Business Case updated in 2019 it is one of the busiest major roads in Wiltshire, with daily traffic volumes often above 35,000 vehicles per day, and heavy goods vehicles accounting for around 8% of all vehicles. There have been high collision rates with severity generally higher on the A350 compared to other roads in the area.

6. In July 2017, Department for Transport's (DfT) "Transport Investment Strategy" was published. As part of the Strategy, Government committed to creating a 'Major Road Network' (MRN) across England, which would be a network of England's most important routes which complement motorways and strategic trunk roads. The A350 was included as a route in the MRN.
7. Government acknowledged the need for a long-term funding stream for road investment, specifically through establishment of the 'National Roads Fund', being £28.8 billion between 2020-2025; £3.5 billion of which is to be spent on improving the MRN. This funding was confirmed in March 2020 in the DfT publication of their second Road Investment Strategy (RIS2) for the period 2020 – 2025. A central principle in the development of this strategy was to:

"create a road network that is safe, reliable and efficient for everyone – whether they are cyclists or drivers, passengers or pedestrians"
8. Government indicated that prioritised investment planning within a consistent national framework should be carried out by Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs). The Western Gateway Shadow Sub-National Transport Body (WGSSTB) was officially formed in a shadow status in December 2018 with Cllr Bridget Wayman elected as Chair.
9. The WGSSTB considered candidate schemes from all member authorities, and following its meeting in June 2019, the Board agreed to submit nine schemes to DfT in July 2019. Four of the schemes are in Wiltshire:
 - (i) A350 - M4 Junction 17 Improvement
 - (ii) A350 Chippenham Bypass Improvements – Phases 4 and 5
 - (iii) A338 Southern Salisbury Improvements and
 - (iv) A350 Melksham Bypass
10. At its meeting on 19 May 2020 Cabinet considered a report on the success of the Council bid to the DfT for development funding for the A350 Melksham Bypass Large Local Major (LLM) road scheme and the three MRN schemes, and identified funding to continue to Outline Business Case (OBC) stage.
11. On 13 October 2020 Cabinet agreed to public consultation being undertaken on the options for the A350 Melksham Bypass scheme, which in view of the pandemic was to take the form of a predominantly on-line consultation. The town and parish councils, Area Board and other organisations were also to be invited to comment in order to inform the future development of the scheme.

Main Considerations for the Council

Transport Objectives

12. The transport objectives for the scheme were derived from relevant key policy documents and strategies, including the DfT Transport Investment Strategy, Swindon and Wiltshire Strategic Economic Plan, Wiltshire Core Strategy, and the Wiltshire Local Transport Plan. The transport objectives set for the scheme were confirmed by Cabinet at its meeting on 13 October 2020 and are to:

- (i) Reduce journey times and delays and improve journey reliability on the A350 through Melksham and Beanacre, improving local and regional north-south connectivity, and supporting future housing and employment growth in the A350 corridor.
- (ii) Reduce journey times and delays on and improve journey reliability on the following routes through Melksham and Beanacre:
 - A350 South – A3102
 - A365 West – A365 East
 - A350 South – A365 West
- (iii) Provide enhanced opportunities for walking and cycling between Melksham town centre and the rail station / Bath Road, and along the existing A350 corridor within Melksham and Beanacre, which will help reduce the impact of transport on the environment and support local economic activity.
- (iv) Reduce collisions resulting in personal injury rates and severity for the A350 and Melksham as a whole, to make the corridor safer and more resilient.
- (v) Reduce the volume of traffic, including HGVs, passing along the current A350 route in northern Melksham and Beanacre to reduce severance, whilst avoiding negative impacts on other existing or potential residential areas.

Strategic Outline Business Case

13. In developing the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for proposals at Melksham, which was submitted to the DfT in July 2019, various options were considered, including demand management, public transportation, online highway improvements, and new bypass options to the west and east of the existing route.
14. The SOBC identified an eastern bypass route, which could cost in the region of £135 million as being feasible, but all options are being revisited in more detail as part of the preparation of the OBC. This includes further consideration of the non-bypass options, developing the previously identified bypass route options and considering variations of those routes, which could potentially improve their performance in economic terms or reduce the environmental impact, and developing complimentary measures to improve facilities for walking and cycling.

Public Consultation

15. In view of the pandemic, the consultation had to be primarily on-line, with the opportunity provided to submit written comments by letter or email. The consultation was launched at the Melksham Area Board on 4 November 2020. An initial presentation was given to Seend Parish Council on 27 October 2020, and a further presentation was given to Melksham Town Council on 23 November 2020.

16. Whilst it was not possible to hold an exhibition at the library or town hall as would normally be the case, the use of social media, television and radio coverage, and the increase in the use of on-line consultations have helped. An extension to the consultation period from the end of November to 17 January 2021 was made in view of the limitations imposed by the pandemic, and to ensure that the local newspaper would be operating so that it could report on the consultation and encourage participation.
17. The consultation provided the opportunity for the public, town and parish councils, Area Board and others to comment on the scheme and the options. Other organisations, including the Environment Agency, Natural England, Highways Agency, were also invited to comment as part of the consultation.
18. It should be noted that the consultation was not intended to be a public 'vote' for the most popular route or option. There are many factors to be considered in determining the preferred option, including the objectives, landscape, archaeology, ecology, air quality, flood risk, environment including climate change impact, cost and benefits. The preferred option may be a variation of those consulted on as the design will inevitably be refined in response to the consultation.
19. The options need to be measured against the Transport Objectives and assessed in accordance with DfT guidance in order to determine the most appropriate option or options to take forward, as well as against the DfT criteria.
20. The options consulted on were:
 - Workplace parking levy (Option 1)
 - Road user pricing (Option 2)
 - Heavy goods vehicle restrictions (Option 3)
 - Rail service improvements (Option 4)
 - Bus service improvements (Option 5)
 - Walking and cycling improvements (Option 6)
 - Improvements to the existing A350 (Options 7a, 7b and 7c)
 - Short bypass routes (Options 8a, 9a, 9b, 9c, 10a and 10b)
 - Long bypass routes (Options 8b, 10c and 10d)
21. As this was the initial consultation on the options for the scheme, it was considered important that the widest range of options should be consulted on at this early stage, even though the emerging assessment work indicated that some were going to be more successful than others at meeting the transport objectives.
22. The public consultation documents and supporting information were available to view on the Council's website and can still be viewed at:

<https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/highways-a350-melksham-bypass>

The webpage provided a short introduction to the scheme and a link to the 'Melksham Bypass Information Pack', which described the background to the scheme and set out the scheme preparation process, indicating that the scheme

was at a very early stage of its development and would be the subject of further informal and formal consultation should it proceed.

23. The aims of the non-statutory consultation were to:
- successfully engage with stakeholders affected by or interested in the scheme;
 - engage with potentially affected landowners;
 - encourage involvement from stakeholders and build strong open relationships;
 - raise awareness of the scheme and understanding for the need to improve the A350;
 - inform about the option assessment process;
 - understand stakeholder concerns, issues and suggestions;
 - receive feedback on the options to allow us to develop the scheme further; and
 - prepare for the statutory consultation phases.
24. The document described the existing situation and why there was considered to be a local need for the scheme, as well as setting out the wider strategic priorities for the Western Gateway Strategic Transport Body. It also described the option assessment criteria to be applied in terms of Strategic, Economic, Financial, Management and Commercial cases.
25. The emerging findings so far were described, which indicated that the demand management measures (Options 1, 2 and 3) were unlikely to adequately address the key issues and scheme objectives, especially in terms of reduced journey times and regional connectivity, and these options were likely to present challenges around acceptability.
26. The public transport, walking and cycling measures (Options 4, 5 and 6) were unlikely to deliver the scale of impact required against the objectives of reduced journey times and regional connectivity on their own. However, it was acknowledged that there would be potential for these options to be considered alongside the road-based ones as potential complementary measures.
27. The emerging findings in connection with improvements to the existing A350 (Options 7a, 7b and 7c) indicated that the scale of improvement is expected to be limited by existing speed restrictions and what could feasibly be achieved at some of the more constrained sections. To overcome these constraints, if feasible, would increase scheme costs. Compared to other road-based options, there would be less direct landscape and visual impact and less loss of greenfield land, but severance issues, noise and air quality on the existing A350 would not be directly addressed and compared to the likely scale of benefits it was considered that this option would offer a lower overall value for money than other options.
28. The emerging findings in connection with the short bypass and full bypass options were also described. The results of the initial assessment of the options were provided based on the anticipated impact and examples of the potential complementary walking and cycling measures were described.

29. A separate document 'Melksham Bypass information on Options 7 to 10' provided descriptions of the individual route corridors being consulted on and an initial assessment against the strategic, economic, environment, social, financial and management factors.
30. The webpage also included the legacy documents prepared in connection with the SOBC, and a list of Frequently Asked Questions. During the consultation period there was an on-line questionnaire that could be completed.

Response to the consultation

31. There were 175 letters and emails in response to the consultation, and 1,018 responses to the on-line questionnaire. A summary of the responses was prepared (see **Appendices 1 and 2**).
32. The local town and parish councils were consulted and made comments regarding the scheme and their preferences on options:
 - (i) Melksham Town Council preferred an eastern route, but not one that incorporated Eastern Way.
 - (ii) Melksham Without Parish Council preferred an eastern route which did not have an environmental impact upon the community of Bowerhill.
 - (iii) Seend Parish Council thought that Option 8b should not be discounted and raised some concerns about Option 10c should it be adopted. Option 10d was considered to have the most detrimental effect.
 - (iv) Semington Parish Council was not in favour of Option 8b because of the environmental impact and would object to Option 10d. It considered Option 10c to be the least worst option.
 - (v) Great Hinton Parish Council felt that Option 10d was the worst possible one in every way and Option 10b to be the best by far.
 - (vi) Steeple Ashton Parish Council agreed that a bypass for Melksham is desirable, but the route had no direct impact on the parish.
33. Comments were received from Natural England about Spye Park Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Canal and Rivers Trust regarding the canals, and from the National Trust regarding Lacock. TransWilts commented on the importance of access to Melksham Station and the British Horse society on the importance of bridleway and rights of way. The comments from the organisations identified factors that would need to be considered in developing the proposals further.
34. The majority of the questionnaire responses received were from individuals (962) with a small number from businesses or organisations (42). Most of the responses were local with 886 (92%) being from Melksham or within five miles.

The responses from businesses and organisations responding were also predominantly locally based.

35. Most respondents supported the need for an improvement to the A350 at Beanacre and Melksham (594 Yes/406 No).
36. The main concerns about the current situation on the A350 in Melksham and Beanacre were about walking and cycling facilities (56.6%), landscape and scenery (50.4%) and traffic congestion and delays (50.2%).
37. Those not supporting the need for an improvement gave various reasons but the most frequently mentioned were:
 - Adverse effect on land and countryside (110)
 - Existing road works well (67)
 - High cost of scheme (48)
 - Bypass not needed (44)
 - Concern about more houses in Melksham (43)
38. Of the non-road options, based on the first choice of option, the most preferred options were:
 - Option 6 – Walking and cycling (41.2%)
 - Option 4 – Rail Improvements (37.3%)
 - Option 5 – Bus Improvements (32.3%)
39. Option 2 – Road User Pricing and Option 1 – Workplace Parking Levy had the least support of any option (6.7% and 6.5%).
40. Of the road options the most preferred options based on the first choice were:
 - Option 7a – Existing road northern section (31.0%)
 - Option 10c - Long eastern bypass (30.8%)
 - Option 7b – Existing road central section (29.9%)
 - Option 7c – Existing road southern section (27.8%)
 - Option 10d – Longest eastern bypass (20.8%)
41. Of the road options the western routes – Options 9a, 9b and 9c had the least support (11.9%, 11.0% and 10.8%).
42. The reasons given for choosing Options 1 to 6 were mainly that they would provide an alternative to the use of the car, would discourage car use, or would have less impact on the landscape and environment.
43. The main factors influencing choice of route option were generally the potential impact on the countryside and residential properties. There were a range of other factors given, including cost, effectiveness, adverse effects of alternative routes, and the potential or otherwise for in-fill housing development.

44. Most responses would like to see more facilities for walking and cycling within Melksham come forward as complementary measures to a potential A350 Bypass (Yes 682 / No 318). There were a variety of suggestions and requests made, including about the standards of walking and cycling infrastructure, facilities required to encourage walking and cycling, and suggestions for routes.
45. Other matters that were raised frequently in the questionnaire responses included the potential adverse effect of options on the countryside, concern about additional housing as a result of the scheme, the reduction in traffic following Covid-19, the effects on wildlife and biodiversity, the impact on residential areas and their access to open spaces, and that the journey time savings do not justify a scheme.
46. There were 175 letters and emails received in response to the consultation, which generally reflected similar views and concerns to those raised in the questionnaire responses described above.
47. There were letters and emails regarding specific route options, with many indicating that Option 10d was not considered to be a suitable option (89), because of its adverse effect in terms of countryside (74), wildlife (57), cost (45), canal (33), tourism (28) and flooding (23).
48. An alternative route option, three variations of the consultation options and alterations to the existing road were suggested in the questionnaires or correspondence and these have also been considered.

Review of Consultation

49. The public consultation was successful in obtaining the views of the town and the local parish councils.
50. There appears to have been a good response from the public despite the limitations caused by the pandemic. However, it should be noted that a large majority of the responses were from local residents and businesses and may not necessarily represent the views of the public or businesses that may make use of a Melksham bypass.
51. Organisations, including statutory bodies, responded to the consultation and commented on specific aspects of the scheme, and outlined factors to be considered as the scheme develops. Further discussions will be taking place with them as the design and assessment work continues.
52. There was some engagement with landowners, especially in connection with the walk-over surveys, but in view of the wide range of options and large area covered there were not detailed discussions about potential impacts or mitigation measures at this stage. These would be anticipated to take place in the next round of consultations as the scheme details are developed in more detail.

53. The consultation on road options was based on wide route corridors at the initial stage, and there were requests for more information in order to determine the exact routes relative to particular features or properties, which was not feasible at that early stage. There was also interest in what arrangements would be made regarding rights of way, side roads and private accesses.
54. The response to the consultation was predominantly local, and the strategic objectives of the scheme may not have been fully communicated and understood. Some respondents were under the impression that the only purpose of the scheme was to provide traffic relief for Beanacre, which the scheme may do, but it should be noted that the primary objectives are transport related, especially in connection with the major road network.
55. Further informal consultations on the scheme are proposed which should increase awareness and knowledge of the scheme both locally and over a wider area before the formal consultation processes start. They will also provide the opportunity for the public and organisations to make further comments on the short list of options which have been investigated in more detail.

Options Assessment – Initial Sift

56. Further assessment work has been undertaken on the 'long list' of options which were consulted on, informed by the results of the consultations and walk over surveys. The options have been reviewed to better understand potential impacts and benefits and a sifting process has taken place. An Options Assessment Report (OAR) is being prepared which will summarise these findings and a draft version will be available on the Council's website during the next round of consultation.
57. The OAR will set out the full consideration of the issues the scheme is intended to address, the potential options and an assessment of these against key criteria such as: fit with scheme and wider objectives; economic, social and environmental impacts; affordability; and value for money. It will outline the current situation and the strategic policy context, including the transport policies and future housing and development within the A350 corridor.
58. An initial sift of the previously identified options was undertaken taking into account the strategic fit with scheme objectives, the fit with wider strategic outcomes and viability and acceptability. This enabled unsuitable options to be identified and discarded. A two stage further assessment process was then undertaken on the remaining options to identify a short list of options to be the subject of a full appraisal.
59. The initial sifting process indicated that whilst the introduction of a work place parking levy or road user charging (Options 1 and 2) would be a means of encouraging the use of public transport and active travel they would not meet the transport objectives and had little public support.

60. The environmental impact of heavy goods vehicles is a concern locally and restricting HGVs on the A350 (Option 3) would reduce traffic on the current A350 route but it would not be feasible without a viable alternative route being available. The A350 provides the main link from the M4 and the Strategic Road Network to the towns in west Wiltshire and the movement of these vehicles is vital for the local economy and supplying the needs of the community. It was concluded that this option does not meet the transport objectives for the scheme.
61. Improvements to train services (Option 4) clearly had a high level of support locally in the consultation response, especially in view of the limited services currently available. This option demonstrates a good fit with the wider outcomes but the scale of impact likely to be realistically achievable is not expected to be of the magnitude required to address the identified problems. Increasing service frequencies significantly could require major railway infrastructure improvements, including double track the outcome and delivery are not within the Council's control. Whilst it could be progressed separately it is not considered a viable option to meet the current transport objectives for the scheme.
62. Improvements to bus services (Option 5) also had a high level of support locally in the consultation response. However, the relatively frequent half-hourly bus services on the main routes provide limited scope for further improvements without significant ongoing revenue support. It was not considered to be a viable option to meet the current transport objectives for the scheme.
63. Improvements to walking and cycling (Option 6) had the highest level of local support, and there appears to be some scope for active travel to replace local car journeys, and possibly more importantly to provide exercise and leisure opportunities if suitable facilities are available. It was concluded that improvements to and walking and cycling were unlikely to meet the objectives in themselves but could complement other options and should be progressed in conjunction with the scheme.
64. The improvement of the existing road (Options 7a, 7b and 7c) had more support than the other road options, especially from those opposed to a bypass solution or concerned about the effect of a bypass on the countryside. Improving the northern section of the existing route through Beanacre (Option 7a) would be particularly challenging because of the constraints of the properties lining the road.
65. Dualling the A350 Western Way section of the route (Option 7b) would offer less technical challenges because widening to the west of the existing road should be feasible, and the southern section (Option 7c) already has land available from the previous Semington Bypass scheme. The online improvements were identified as being unlikely to deliver the scale of impact required but had support in the public consultation and could potentially be less expensive than other routes so were taken forward to the next stage.

66. Of the bypass routes, the western options (Options 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b and 9c) had less local support than the other route options. It was noted that the inner western routes (Options 9a, 9b and 9c) have particular technical issues and limited public support. Seend Parish Council thought that Option 8b should not be discounted, but Semington Parish Council was not in favour of that option. In view of the technical assessments and consultation responses it was not proposed to include the inner western routes (Options 9a, 9b and 9c) in the next stage of the sifting process, but Options 8a and 8b would be considered further.
67. The short eastern routes (Options 10a and 10b) would be the cheapest options, would bypass the narrow northern section of the existing route and would make use of existing roads. The short eastern routes had marginally more public support than the western routes, but less than the longer eastern routes. Great Hinton Parish Council considered Option 10b to be the best route by far. Melksham Town Council favoured an eastern route, but it did not favour one that would connect to Eastern Way as Options 10a and 10b would.
68. The long eastern bypass (Option 10c) had more public support than the other off-line bypass routes and performs well in terms of value for money and effectiveness. A similar route was identified in the SOBC as a viable route and this has been confirmed by the further assessment work recently undertaken.
69. The Town Council favoured an eastern route. Melksham Without Parish Council also favoured an eastern route but not one which would have an environmental impact upon the community of Bowerhill. Seend Parish Council raised some concerns about Option 10c.
70. The longest bypass route (Option 10d) was included in the route options for public consultation following a request made at the Melksham Area Board meeting on 4 March 2020. From the consultation response the route did have some public support as it was considered to be furthest from most residential properties and provided a full bypass.
71. Following the initial sift, it was concluded that all of the eastern routes should be considered further.
72. The options taken forward following the initial sifting exercise were:
- Bus service improvements, Walking and cycling improvements (Option 5 and 6) in conjunction with other options
 - Improvements to the existing A350 (Options 7a, 7b and 7c)
 - Western Bypass routes (Options 8a and 9a)
 - Eastern Bypass routes (Options 10a, 10b, 10c and 10d)

Further Options Assessment (Phase 1)

73. The remaining options were subject to further assessment to distinguish the relative benefits and impacts of the options under consideration. It was not intended to necessarily present the absolute performance of an option, although it can provide a useful indication. It considered the strategic, economic, financial, management and commercial aspects.
74. The assessment further assessment indicated that there would be some potential to deliver some capacity and journey time improvements with online options (Options 7a, 7b and 7c) but the scale of impact would be limited.
75. Improvement of the existing road through Beanacre and at the northern end of Melksham to the standard to meet the needs of the major road network would be unlikely to be feasible, especially in terms of traffic capacity without extensive impacts. Without the northern section also being improved there would remain a constraint on traffic flows and speeds on the route, with the environmental and safety problems remaining and worsening over time, and it was not proposed to continue with this option.
76. The Western Bypass routes (Options 8a and 8b) performed well against the primary scheme objectives. However, the shorter route (Option 8a) would require structures for rail, road and floodplain crossings which would result in some adverse landscape and visual impacts due to the scale and the height of the structures. The longer route (Option 8b) also presents a number of delivery complexities with a higher cost.
77. The western options had less public support than the eastern routes, and although Option 8b performed similarly to Option 10c it had a higher cost and greater technical and environmental risk, and on balance it was not considered as favourable to take the western routes forward.
78. The shorter eastern routes (Options 10a and 10b) performed moderately well against the primary scheme objectives, with Option 10a being slightly more favourable. The lower cost of the route means that it would have the potential to offer better value for money with reduced environmental footprint and was considered worthy of further consideration.
79. The long eastern bypass routes (Options 10c and 10d) both perform well against the primary scheme objectives. However, the longer route (Option 10d) would be more expensive and would have additional environmental impacts. There were considerable concerns expressed by some of the public and parish councils about the environmental impact of Option 10d, especially regarding the effects on the Kennet and Avon canal, Semington Brook and the countryside. Seend, Semington and Great Hinton Parish Councils all raised objections or expressed concern about this route. It is proposed to discard Option 10d and consider Option 10c further.

80. The short-listed options taken forward further assessment were:
- Short Eastern Bypass route (Option 10a)
 - Long Eastern Bypass route (Option 10c)
81. The options for bus service, walking and cycling opportunities would be considered in conjunction with these options, and could be developed separately should opportunities arise.

Further Options Assessment (Phase 2)

82. The two short listed route corridors have been developed in more detail since the consultation. Three broadly viable alternative route alignments have been identified for each of the options at their northern end, where there are various routes to connect to the A350 north of Beanacre. The southern ends of the route corridors are more constrained with less scope for alternatives.
83. The route options and variants have been compared using traffic modelling, high level appraisals of environmental impacts, cost and value for money. The journey time savings for the full bypass are considerably greater than for the shorter option, but there are not significant differences between the savings for the various route alignment variants. The adverse environmental impacts of the shorter routes would be less than for the longer route.
84. The cost estimates for the options have included a risk allowance to allow for uncertainties. Whilst the longer options would be more expensive, they would have greater benefit to cost ratios when assessed using the DfT methodology and would be more likely to attract funding. The assessment indicates that the economic case for taking the shorter options to full appraisal is marginal.
85. The public consultation response indicated concerns about severance of the walking and cycling routes between the town and the school with the shorter eastern routes. The use of the local distributor road, Eastern Way, as part of the major road network was also a concern to residents.
86. In view of the outcome of the sifting exercise and taking the public consultation response into consideration it is not proposed to progress further the development of the short eastern bypass options. It is proposed that the full eastern bypass option will be developed to the full appraisal stage. Further design and assessment work will be required on the potential alternatives at the northern end of this route and there would be benefits in carrying out further consultation on these.

Alternative Routes and suggestions

87. In the response to the public consultation some suggestions for alternative routes and variations of the consultation routes were suggested and these have been considered.

88. It was suggested that instead of improving the A350 at Melksham, a new link road should be provided between the A46 and A36 immediately to the east of Bath. This is a scheme which has been considered previously by DfT. It would not be within Wiltshire and would be likely to form part of the strategic road network, which would be the responsibility of Highways England. The scheme would have some merits in transport terms but has previously been discounted on environmental grounds.
89. Whilst it provide an improved north-south route, from the initial assessment of traffic flows it appears unlikely that the A46-A36 link would have a significant impact on A350 traffic flows at Melksham and so is not considered to be a viable option for the current objectives. However, a study into north-south routes in the area is being undertaken by Highways England on behalf of DfT and this option may be considered in that study.
90. Variations of Option 10d were suggested at its southern end. One was to connect directly into the current A350/A361 Littleton roundabout at Semington, rather than to the A361 east of that junction, and the other was for the route to be extended to the south to join the A350 south of the A350/A361 roundabout.
91. Both variants would have some merits in terms of the A350 route, but both would have the same cost issues and environmental issues associated with Option 10d because of the canal and brook crossings. From the assessment work undertaken it is not considered that these variants offer significant advantages, taking into account those cost and environmental impacts, and the concerns raised by some of the public and the local parish councils about Option 10d.
92. An alternative to the routes at the northern end of the scheme was suggested, with the route extended northwards to include a junction at the southern Lacock junction on the A350. It would be likely to require the agreement of the National Trust in view of the status of the land in that area, but it could provide the opportunity to reduce traffic in Lacock and improve access to the National Trust car park, and was considered worthy of further investigation and consultation.
93. In response to the consultation there were comments made about issues at the existing traffic signal-controlled junctions at Aldi/McDonald's and Asda, and it was suggested that right turn movements off the A350 should be banned at these locations. Unfortunately, this would increase U-turning traffic at the Farmers Roundabout junction, which would delay traffic seeking to enter that roundabout and reduce capacity. Overall, such changes would be likely to reduce capacity and increase traffic delays on the network, especially at peak times.
94. When the alterations to Farmers Roundabout were made these options were investigated but it was concluded that their effects would be detrimental, and they were not included in that scheme. The traffic signals at Farmers Roundabout, Asda and A365 Bath Road are linked and operate to maximise

capacity at the junctions. Further changes to traffic signal phasing and timings may reduce delays for some movements but would not increase overall capacity and would increase delays for others.

Traffic

95. The traffic counts used in the development of the scheme options for public consultation were the most recent available at the time. The Covid-19 pandemic, with its associated travel restrictions and lockdowns, changed traffic flows considerably during 2020. It was suggested in some of the responses to the consultation that travel patterns in the future would change permanently as a result of increased working from home and this would reduce the need for road improvements such as Melksham Bypass.
96. After the first lockdown in March 2020 traffic flows, including hgv traffic, did reduce considerably, but during the summer they slowly started to increase towards previous levels. In the subsequent lockdowns the traffic reductions were not as great and hgv flows were not affected to the same degree as businesses adapted to the new circumstances.
97. There does appear to have been some reduction in morning peak hour flows, probably as a result of increased home working, but the longer-term effect on traffic has not been as significant as some believed it would be. Overall, it appears less likely that there will be a large reduction in traffic in the long term following the pandemic, but this may depend on economic conditions and future growth.
98. The DfT will be reviewing and revising traffic growth forecasts from time to time, especially in the light on any changes following the impact of the pandemic, and any scheme will have to be reassessed using those forecasts. Initial indications are that improvements would still be justified at Melksham based on current information, but this will be kept under review.

Potential Scheme Benefits

99. The potential scheme benefits have been reviewed following the initial public consultation to ensure that any proposals being taken forward are likely to deliver the benefits originally envisaged.
100. The Scheme forms part of the Western Gateway Sub National Transport Body's Strategy to improve connectivity between M4 and the South Coast. A range of strategic transport priorities have been established which will assist economic performance by improving labour market efficiency, increasing business and economic connectivity, providing access to international gateways and enabling development within the corridor.

101. The scheme is forecast to deliver strategic benefits including:

- Helping unlock the potential of the south coast and facilitate greater economic alignment between the north and south of the Western Gateway by providing improved strategic connectivity from the M4 and A303 corridors to the south coast.
- Potential to help realise local growth ambitions and forge significant agglomeration benefits by removing one of the barriers to more efficient north and south travel in the Western Gateway area.
- Creating a more reliable, less congested, and better-connected transport network that works for the users who rely on it.
- Providing a well-connected, reliable and resilient transport system to support economic and planned development growth at key locations.
- Supporting and helping to improve the vitality, viability and resilience of Wiltshire's economy and market towns.
- Providing transport infrastructure to support new housing in the western Wiltshire corridor.
- Assisting the efficient and sustainable distribution of freight in Wiltshire and beyond to build stronger, more balanced economies by enhancing productivity and responding to local growth priorities.
- Supporting and promoting a choice of sustainable transport alternatives.
- Reducing the level of air pollutants, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions from transport, thereby contributing to the Council's carbon reduction targets.
- Improving safety for all road users and reducing the number of casualties on Wiltshire's roads.

102. Significant localised benefits are anticipated to accrue from a parallel package of transformational improvements including:

- Improving access to the railway station from the town and residential areas.
- Improving walking and cycling routes from the town to the south and Semington.
- Improving walking and cycling routes for leisure use by connecting existing routes.
- Improving air quality, physical and mental well-being by reducing traffic and traffic noise on the existing A350 through Beanacre and Melksham.
- Improving access to local services, shops, amenities and schools with the removal of through traffic.
- Reducing severance impacts on communities in Beanacre and northern Melksham caused by high traffic volumes and encouraging HGVs to use more suitable routes.
- Improving localised air quality by shifting traffic and pollutants away from sensitive receptors, especially residential areas.
- Generating opportunities for public realm schemes following the diversion of traffic.

103. It appears likely that the options being consulted on in the next stage would be capable of delivering the benefits anticipated for the scheme.

Next Stages

104. The next stage in the scheme development is to undertake a consultation on the short list of options. This will provide the opportunity for the public, town and parish councils, Area Board and others to comment on the more detailed proposals. Other organisations, including the Environment Agency, Natural England, Highways Agency, will also be invited to comment again as part of the consultation.
105. Depending on any Government COVID-19 restrictions at the time, we will look to hold one or more face to face events, although the consultation will primarily be held online. The opportunity will also be provided to submit written comments by letter, email, or through an online form, and members of the public will be able to digitally access consultation documents on the council website, or view printed copies at the town's library, if restrictions allow at the time. The opportunity will be offered to the town and parish councils, and the Area Board, to attend virtual meetings or to hold webinars to explain the scheme and the options to them should they wish. The possibility of providing display boards in the library or other location will be considered if it is appropriate at the time.
106. The intention is to provide greater detail on those options being taken forward now that they have been developed in more detail following the first consultation and the recent assessment work. This will include more details on the road alignment with larger scale mapping, indications of potential rights of way alterations and landscaping.
107. As with the first consultation on the scheme, the proposed consultation would not be a public 'vote' for the most popular route or option. There are many factors to be considered in determining the preferred option, including meeting the transport objectives, landscape, archaeology, ecology, air quality, flood risk, environment, cost and benefits. The preferred option could be a variation of the options to be consulted on as the design will be refined in response to the consultation.
108. The consultation would provide the opportunity to gather additional information on the scheme and its potential impacts and help identify mitigation measures. The views of organisations with specialist knowledge of the area will be particularly important in helping to refine the proposals.
109. The assessment of scheme options will be in accordance with DfT guidance, primarily as set out in DfT's Transport Analysis Guidance (WebTAG). The OBC for the scheme will have to make the case for obtaining DfT funding as the Council would not be able to fund a major scheme of this type from its own resources. The preparation of the OBC will require the consideration of the strategic, economic, financial, management and commercial cases.

110. It is anticipated that the OBC will be submitted for approval to the DfT later this year, and the scheme would then be designed to planning application stage, when the proposals would be the subject of formal consultations. The statutory orders would be prepared to enable the compulsory purchase of land if required and to make alterations to side roads and private accesses. With a scheme of this size it is expected that there would be a public inquiry in connection with the statutory orders.
111. Subject to successful progress through the statutory procedures, construction could start in 2024, with the scheme opening in 2027.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

112. The scheme is still at an early stage of its development. Future progress on the project will be reported to the Environment Select Committee in connection with the annual report made on the highways service.

Safeguarding Implications

113. There are no safeguarding implications.

Public Health Implications

114. The scheme could improve the highway network significantly in the local area and has the potential to improve road safety and reduce the number killed and seriously injured on our roads. The potential reduction in injury collisions and road safety implications would be considered in assessing the scheme.
115. The removal of through traffic from residential areas could reduce traffic noise and air pollution with consequent health benefits for residents, but the options could have the potential to introduce traffic into previously unaffected areas and may have other detrimental effects. The options assessment and business case for the scheme will take these impacts into consideration.
116. Reduced traffic on some of the existing roads could provide the opportunity to provide improved facilities for walking and cycling to encourage active travel and healthier lifestyles. The potential for improved walking and cycling provision is being considered at the earliest stage of the scheme development and could be included in the scheme or promoted separately.

Procurement Implications

117. The Melksham Bypass would be a major construction project. The exact procurement arrangements may depend on the final details of the scheme, and at this stage it is too early to confirm the likely procurement process to be followed. The procurement strategy is being developed as part of the OBC preparation, and would include consideration of opportunities for advanced works, staged construction and specialist contracts.

118. It is anticipated that the scheme would be largely funded by the DfT and procurement would be carried out to meet the DfT requirements, using standard documentation where available, and in accordance with the Council's own procurement rules.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

119. Equality impact assessments will be undertaken in accordance with the DfT guidance as the scheme is developed and will be used to inform option selection and scheme assessment.
120. It is anticipated that scheme options may have different implications for different groups. The public consultation and ongoing assessment work should help identify these so that they can be considered in preparing the business case for the scheme.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

121. The Melksham Bypass would be a major transport improvement, which would be likely to reduce journey times and vehicle operating costs on the A350 and at the associated junctions. The reduced congestion, better facilities for active travel, and improved road safety would be expected to reduce energy consumption as a result of the scheme. This is will depend on the final proposals and will be assessed as part of the options appraisal process.
122. The scheme is likely to involve major civil engineering works, with the use of large plant and equipment and the energy consuming manufacture of materials, especially concrete and asphalt. There would be scope for the use of energy efficient plant, materials and processes to reduce the carbon footprint of the construction stage of the scheme. The impact would be considered in the light of emerging policies and strategies at government and local level.
123. The scheme would include environmental mitigation measures, including landscaping proposals, sustainable drainage schemes, and environmental protection measures to control potential incidents as a result of collisions. A road designed to modern standards with appropriate environmental protection measures is likely to be less of an operational risk to the environment and people than the existing road.
124. The potential effects of climate change will be taken into account in the design of the scheme. This would include making allowances for increased rainfall and flood risk, as well as the use of more durable materials to provide resilience in connection with increased temperatures and other impacts of climate change.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

125. Should the decision be made to not proceed with the scheme, the opportunity to obtain significant government investment in the county would be lost. The existing problems on the A350 at Beanacre and Melksham would remain, and the situation would be expected to deteriorate because of anticipated future traffic growth.

126. Not undertaking further informal consultations on the route options at this stage could mean that potentially all the information required to inform the OBC would not be available. This could lead to incomplete information for later stages of the scheme development and would not be in accordance with the DfT guidance for major schemes. There are other formal consultation stages, including at planning application and in connection with the statutory orders, but it is considered that continuing non-statutory consultation is vital in the development of major projects.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

127. There is a risk that after identifying a route and taking it to the planning application and statutory orders stage, the scheme does not proceed because funding is no longer available, or if the statutory orders are not confirmed. Consideration will be given to the risks associated with progressing the scheme at the various stages of its development. Risk management is an important consideration with schemes of this type and processes are in place to manage the associated risks.
128. If it is agreed to undertake further public consultation on the short list of route options, it should be noted that the Council would have to reveal the routes on property searches, which could lead to concerns from home owners about potential difficulties in selling properties. In order to limit this potential adverse impact, it would be helpful to adopt a preferred route as soon as possible to reduce the uncertainty.

Financial Implications

129. The report to Cabinet in May 2020 recognised that most of the funding for the scheme would be provided by the DfT, with £1.33 million currently awarded by the DfT to prepare the OBC for the scheme. The report identified Council funding of £0.66 million to contribute to this stage of the scheme development.
130. The indications are that the currently identified funding resources will be adequate to progress the scheme to the OBC stage. It is anticipated that the successful acceptance of the OBC by DfT would result in an award of further funding to progress the scheme to Full Business Case (FBC), which would include the planning and statutory processes and the contract procurement.

Legal Implications

131. There is no legal requirement to undertake public consultation at this stage. However, undertaking a consultation on the developing route options ensures that the Council captures all information potentially required to inform preferred route selection. It also ensures that information is available for later stages of the scheme development and is in accordance with the DfT guidance for major schemes.
132. There are formal consultation stages, including at planning application stage and in connection with the statutory orders, but it is considered that informal consultation during the early stages is a vital stage in developing major projects.

133. The adoption of a Preferred Route for the scheme is an important stage in developing a scheme of this type. It should be noted that in certain circumstances this could result in blight claims if land is adversely affected by the scheme. Any such claims would be considered on their merits should they be received but are unlikely to be successful at this early stage when the proposals are not certain.
134. The scheme could be the subject of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) under the Highways Act 1980 should it not be possible to acquire the necessary land and rights from owners by agreement. It is also likely that the scheme would require Side Roads Orders (SRO) in order to make alterations to minor roads, rights of way and private accesses needing to be altered to accommodate the scheme.
135. Objections to the CPO (should they be required) and SRO statutory orders could result in the Secretary of State (SoS) requiring a public inquiry to be held. The Inspector's report would be considered by the SoS in determining whether or not to confirm the orders.

Workforce Implications

136. There are no immediate workforce implications in undertaking public consultation or developing the A350 Melksham Bypass. A small major highway projects team has been established in the Council, which works closely with the Council's consultants who have the specialist knowledge and expertise required for a scheme of this type.
137. In the longer term, if the project proceeds through the detailed design and construction stages, it is likely that there would be significant training opportunities for the Council's technical staff with good opportunities to broaden their experience.

Options Considered

138. A wide range of options for the scheme were consulted on in the first round of public consultations, including road and non-road options. The assessment work undertaken indicates that the non-road options would not meet the transport objectives for the scheme, but they could be progressed separately. The potential DfT funding for the scheme is for an improvement of the MRN and funds could not be diverted by the Council for other purposes.
139. The improvement of the existing road is constrained through Beanacre and to the north of Melksham by properties adjacent to the road. Improving this section of the existing route to the standard required for a major road to carry the volume of traffic predicted is not considered to be feasible or desirable.
140. The western routes for a bypass did not offer significant cost, operational or environmental benefits when compared to the eastern routes and had less public support than the eastern routes.

141. The eastern routes generally performed well in operational and cost terms, with varying environmental implications. The longest eastern route (Option 10d) and the variants suggested were the most expensive and had greater adverse environmental impact, and it is not proposed to short list that option.
142. The initial consultation comments included suggestions for walking and cycling improvements which could be included as part of the scheme or progressed separately. These will be investigated further.

Conclusions

143. The A350 Melksham Bypass is a Large Local Major scheme which has been awarded development funding by the DfT to take it to OBC stage. It would be a major improvement to the important A350 route which provides vital transport links between the M4 and the towns of western Wiltshire.
144. The initial assessment work and consultations indicate that it should be possible to develop a viable scheme. In order to develop the options further it is proposed to carry out further public consultation on a short list of options to inform the preparation of the OBC.

Parvis Khansari (Director - Highways and Environment)

Report Author:

Peter Binley

Head of Service - Highway Major Projects,

peter.binley@wiltshire.gov.uk, Tel: 01225 713412

Date of report – 24 May 2021

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Melksham Bypass Report on Public Consultation

Appendix 2 – Melksham Bypass Report on Public Consultation Appendices