**REPORT ON PARISH MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 10th March 2022 WITH REBECCA POW MP AT WEST HATCH VILLAGE HALL AT 7.15PM TO DISCUSS THE PROPOSED DUALLING OF THE A358**

**Present:**  Rebecca Pow MP, Members of West Hatch Parish Council, John Thorne, (County Councillor), Ross Henley (District Councillor) and approx. 20 parishioners

The Chairman of the Parish Council welcomed Rebecca Pow to the meeting and set out the purpose of the meeting which was to hear Rebecca Pow’s views and parishioners’ opinions and concerns relating to National Highways scheme to dual the A358.

**Summary of the present position**

The Chairman gave an overview of the scheme to date:

National Highways (formerly Highways England) have awarded Taylor Woodrow a contract in the region of 328m to design and build a dual carriageway from Junction 25 of the M5 Motorway to Southfields Roundabout. The proposed design would severely curtail local access to the A358.

15 Parishes local to the A358, including Ilminster Town Council, have joined together to form the Community of Parishes (COP) and have put forward alternative proposals to National Highways which would not have such detrimental effects on local roads, traffic and residents. The COP has received no support from either Somerset County Council or the local District Councils, although a meeting has now been arranged during which the Councils will be asked to clarify their position with regards to the proposals.

A public consultation was carried out in October and November 2021 and received in excess of 900 responses. In addition, National Highways have carried out 4 Community Liaison Forums with representatives from local Interested Parties including the parishes.

Following the public consultation, the COP submitted a Report on the Deficiencies of the Consultation to National Highways, detailing ways in which the consultation was considered to be biased and inadequate. A detailed document on ‘The suppression of the Concerns of the Community of Parishes’ was also submitted to the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) on 15th December. PINS response was to say that the document should be referred to National Highways. There has to date been no formal response from National Highways to either document.

National Highways hope to submit a request for a Development Consent Order (DCO) to the Planning Inspectorate in late summer, following which the Planning Inspectorate has 28 days in which to accept the proposal.

If the proposal is accepted, there will be a public examination of the proposal (including responses to the public consultation) which will take a further 6 months. The Secretary of State then has a further 6 months in which to make a final decision.

It is expected that a final decision will be made in 2023, and if approved, construction will commence in 2024.

Representatives of The Community of Parishes are meeting with SCC, SSDC and SWAT on the 21st March to seek clarification of their position in relation to the proposed scheme.

**Issues raised by parishioners**

The view of the Parish Council is that the Henlade By-pass and improvements to the Junction 25 and Southfields Roundabouts should be completed before any consideration is given to the need to dual the remaining stretch of the road. This would save millions of pounds, preserve the rural environment and take proper account of the needs of the local communities.

Rebecca Pow (RP) was asked if she supported this view.

Her response was that when the proposal was first mooted in 2014, it was welcomed by local residents as the A358 is one of the busiest roads in Somerset and it was acknowledged that traffic needed to be rerouted away from Henlade. RP was instrumental in arranging a second consultation from which the preferred route was decided and she believes that the scheme is needed for connectivity purposes. She was keen to hear the concerns of parishioners and to act as a conduit for their views and how they would like them to be raised.

RP was challenged regarding the environmental impact of the proposals, particularly with regards to the increased carbon emissions that a faster road would bring and the carbon costs in constructing the scheme. RP advised that the construction industry must be carbon zero by 2030 and that she is keen for the proposed scheme to be used as a model for biodiversity net gain. She was clear that all mitigation measures must be taken on the environmental front.

On Cost Benefit, she said that originally the figure was 1.2 but because of Covid she believed it had gone up.

Asked why the obvious solution of dualling the A303/A30 to Honiton, as supported by Devon CC she said that the AONB precluded that option. However, improvements are being made as local MP Neil Parrrish is keen to keep traffic using the road.

A parishioner questioned the need for the dualling just to save ten minutes on a journey when the obvious answer was to make much greater use of the railways. He also queried the amount of Carbon that the scheme would produce and why speed could not be reduced. Rebecca Pow responded by saying that there was a great deal of investment on the railways and that modelling had shown why the road was needed. She said that she would take these points to National Highways and come back with more information.

The point was again made very strongly that the need for the Henlade by-pass and improvements to the roundabouts was paramount, would save a great deal of money and damage to the environment and biodiversity. We were in danger of the whole scheme being cancelled and the essential Henlade bypass never materialising. Both NH’s modelling and cost analysis were not credible.

Great concern was expressed about the effect of increased traffic on local roads and the adequacy of the archaeological surveys. Those conducting a survey had been questioned and said that they were only looking at the first few inches of soil. The questioner said that to his knowledge the minimum necessary depth was 40 inches and were the surveys just tokenism?

Several landowners present expressed their frustration with the environmental mitigation measures that are proposed. As the area adjoining the A358 is rich in biodiversity and wildlife, large swathes of good agricultural land will be required for mitigation. It is estimated that twice as much land will be taken for mitigation purposes than is required for the road construction. This will have a huge impact on the landowners’ ability to earn an income from the land that they own. There were opportunities for any mitigation to be more sensibly spread if the road were to be constructed.

Furthermore, National Highways seem unsympathetic to the local landowners, wishing to proceed with archaeological trenching as soon as possible and unwilling to wait until the crops in the field have been harvested. Additionally, those conducting the surveys have no knowledge of soil structure and the damage their indiscriminate driving on the land is doing to the soil.

RP offered to discuss these issues further with local landowners and take them up with NH.

A point was made relating to the need for Government to spend large sums of money on the scheme when there was much greater need for that money to be spent in many other areas of Government funding.

Rebecca Pow responded by saying that the new Environment bill was addressing all these problems and that she fully understood that the bypass and roundabouts were necessary while dualling the rest of the road was not. She said she would make these points to NH.

Many parishioners felt unrepresented and disenfranchised, that their concerns had not been listened to and that Somerset County Council had been particularly lacking in its engagement with local communities; they would not release minutes of their meetings with NH despite FOI requests. The point was made, very strongly that Michael Gove, Sec of State for Levelling Up, was adamant that decisions affecting local communities should take full account of their views, this was not happening. The SCC Councillor present agreed that the Parish Councils had not been properly consulted and that he himself was not kept fully informed. He said that he represented many parishes across the County some of whom wanted the A358 fully dualled. It was pointed out to him that they were parishes unaffected by the development. RP said she would raise these issues with SCC. Members of the public present reminded RP that as their elected representative, she was accountable to them and that it was important that she listened to and acted on their concerns.

Additionally, the fact that the Cost Benefit was supposed to have been improved was questioned as NH have said that they are still undertaking their analysis. NH modelling was also inadequate as independent investigation had shown that their proposals were based on flawed information.

The lack of accountability of National Highways was raised as an issue and this may account for their totally dismissive attitude in dealing with interested parties and their lack of response and engagement with the local communities. It was also pointed out that RP was accountable and needed to properly fulfil that responsibility in relation to the local communities.

The modelling used in the proposals was highly criticised and there was a lack of local knowledge displayed by NH officials, who seemed reluctant to visit the area and gain ‘on the ground’ knowledge.

It was pointed out to RP by several parishioners that the proposals would have no benefit for the local community, who are considered to be an irrelevance or inconvenience to National Highways. It was emphasised on several occasions that the day-to-day life of local residents would be adversely impacted by the scheme, due to lack of access to the new road and increased traffic through the surrounding lanes. The connection between local communities would be severed by the proposals.

The local District Councillor made the point that he considered the NH scheme was deeply flawed and that the parishes he supports were being treated as collateral damage. NH were not listening.

The main points that the parishioners raised and RP acknowledged were:

1. The Henlade By-pass was strongly supported, as was the need to radically improve the M25 Junction roundabouts and the Southfields roundabout.
2. There was no need to dual the road from East of Henlade to Southfields roundabout.
3. The Environmental impact caused by the proposals was totally unacceptable
4. The closure of local access points to the A358 would adversely affect local communities and lead to increased traffic on rural roads.
5. National Highways and the County and District Councils had not engaged with the Parish Councils in developing the proposed scheme.

**Response by Rebecca Pow**

Rebecca Pow confirmed that as a result of the meeting, she would take the following issues further:

1. Speak to Somerset County Council regarding their lack of engagement
2. Consider the environmental issues raised and have a separate discussion with the local landowners.
3. Discuss with National Highways the modelling issues that have been raised.
4. Request a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport to raise the concerns of the local parishioners. RP acknowledged that parishioners felt that their voices had not been heard and that she would present their views to the Transport Secretary.

The meeting closed at 9.05pm