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A46 at Tewkesbury

Debated on Tuesday 9 May 2023

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🕒 12.55pm

Mr Laurence Robertson >

(Tewkesbury) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered proposed changes to the A46 at Tewkesbury.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I thank the Minister for attending. He will be relieved to know that, unusually, this is not a debate during which I will ask the Government to fund a road scheme—at least, not yet. The main point of my debate is to ask the Minister to reject a business case that has been presented to him by Gloucestershire County Council.

I am told that my constituency, or at least the borough in which it falls, is without doubt the fastest growing in the country in terms of housing. Infrastructure is therefore needed to ensure that we have balanced and sustainable growth. In the southern part of my constituency, the Government are providing about half a billion pounds to fund a solution to the so-called “missing link” problem. That involves implementing a major road scheme along the A417, which will bring an end to the huge daily congestion and to the number of tragic deaths and accidents that, for far too long, have occurred on that stretch of road.

The Government have also agreed the improvements to junction 10 of the M5 in the middle of my constituency, as well as to the A4019, which serves it and goes from there into Cheltenham; that will serve the increased housing planned for the area and the proposed cyber park. That project involves, among other things, upgrading junction 10 from a two-way junction to a four-way junction, an improvement that provides some important context for the points that I wish to make about the A46.

That is happening in the south and middle of my constituency, but what about the north, with the A46 through Ashchurch and into Tewkesbury? I mentioned that my area is the fastest growing in the country, and much of that growth is taking place around junction 9 of the M5, which is served by the A46. Those roads are already very busy, with traffic queues to leave the motorway and often long and slow queues along the A46. A lot of housing lies alongside and close to that road, with much more to come. There are also some major industrial sites along the road and near the junction—companies such as Moog, L3Harris and DHL, to name just three, but there are many more—employing a great many people. In the past few months, a company called Dobbies has opened a garden centre right next to junction 9, and it has already started to build a retail outlet on the same site. It is a great development that will attract thousands of people to the area, but obviously it generates a great many vehicle journeys to and from the area.

I welcome such growth and activity. It is a tribute to local people and businesses that so many industries and people want to work and live in the area, but as I say, infrastructure is needed to support development—infrastructure that includes not only schools, flood prevention schemes, drainage systems and water service schemes, but roads infrastructure.

Some time ago, Tewkesbury Borough Council made an application for a garden town project and that will involve the building of a further 10,000 houses in the area, which will of course increase road usage. When I spoke to the council at the time, some five years ago, I made my position clear: I would support the project, but with two provisos. First, because my area is subject to flooding, as the House will remember, no garden town proposals should make flood risk any worse; and secondly, improvements should be made to the already congested A46.

Since then, I have waited for the improvements to the A46 to be proposed. Covid slowed everything down, but work proceeded at the county council level. Tewkesbury Borough Council obtained about £3 million from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and passed that money on to the county to develop a scheme for improving the A46. However, although the county then proceeded to spend not only that £3 million but a further £6 million on developing the proposals, a very poor business case has been presented to the Government. My main reason for securing this debate is to ask the Government to reject that business case and to explain why.

The business case contained four options—the blue option, the orange option, the pink option and, rather troublingly, the grey option or grey route. The first three options—blue, orange and pink—are basically bypass options. The business case contains no proposal to increase the capacity of the A46 itself. Furthermore, the grey option unbelievably proposes reducing junction 9 to a two-way junction. Even with the current level of traffic, that is ridiculous and completely unnecessary; with the future extra traffic that I have discussed, it is beyond belief. Yet, for some reason, that seems to be the favoured option. I wish to explore why.

As I said, a garden centre has been built right next to the junction, and an outlet centre is to be built on the site next to it. If we add the extra businesses that are expanding on that route and the proposed 10,000-plus extra houses, the proposal to half-close the junction really is extraordinary. In addition to half-closing the junction, the proposal suggests a link road to a further half-junction just south of junction 9. The link road would be built on land that floods badly; it would run alongside two schools, including a special school, that have almost 2,000 pupils; and pylons would have to be moved. All that, and for what purpose?

The theory behind all the options is that some traffic comes from the Stratford area along the A46 to join the M5 at junction 9 and then goes south, and building a bypass would relieve the A46 of some of that traffic. The evidence for that theory has not yet been provided to me, despite all my requests over a couple of years. To accommodate the bypass, farmland would have to be built over, villages would be blighted and a railway line would need to be crossed. It is necessary to produce the evidence that such a bypass is needed, before I could support such a scheme.

I am not against the bypass in principle, if the evidence is there to support it, but even in those circumstances there is no need to half-close junction 9. There is a £220 million scheme turning junction 10 from two-way to four-way just a few miles south of junction 9. What is the logic in doing the opposite at junction 9?

Furthermore, a bypass would not solve the problems being created by local traffic—the point that those who are proposing the scheme appear to be missing. Even if drivers wanted to access such a bypass, they would have to use the already inadequate roads to do so. As I said, local traffic already queues to get in and out of Tewkesbury; that situation will worsen significantly, for the reasons I have given. That is why a proposal to increase the capacity of the A46 itself is needed, but despite having spent £9 million on the proposals, that option is not being considered.

Who exactly are proposing this scheme? I am told that the county council is responsible for making the proposals to Government, but is that the entire story? I have seen evidence that National Highways is very much in favour of promoting the grey option. Extraordinarily, the leader of the county council, Councillor Mark Hawthorne, has told me that he does not support the inclusion of the grey route in the considerations—he gave me permission to say that publicly. Will the Minister confirm that, at this stage, National Highways is not involved at all in designing the proposals and has no interest in promoting one route above another?

Last year, the county council proposed putting the four options out to a non-statutory consultation. It withdrew the proposal to consult on that basis, presumably after protests from me. Let me restate that there was no option of increasing the capacity of the A46 in the proposed consultation. It is important to make that point, because a number of people and parish councils were understandably disappointed that the consultation did not go ahead; they thought it would be a better consultation than it was. I was surprised to find out a few weeks ago that the county council intended to put the same options forward in another non-statutory consultation in June. That prompted me to secure today's debate. Perhaps because the debate is taking place, that plan has—now—been halted.

Let me clearly state my position: there must be a scheme to increase the capacity of the A46 as it goes through Ashchurch to Tewkesbury, to deal with the local traffic. In addition—not instead of, but in addition—a bypass could be considered, provided that there is evidence that the traffic indeed comes from the north-east of Tewkesbury and that it could not be redirected along the M42.

The grey route—the proposal to half-close junction 9—should be taken off the table completely. To ensure a business case is produced, the existing business case, which is with the Government, should be rejected. [Back to top](#) [Previous debate](#)

The county council is reluctant to withdraw the business case because it has spent so much money to get to this point, but that business case is deeply flawed and there is no point throwing even away more taxpayers' money in pursuit of it. If the county will not withdraw the business case, I ask the Government to reject it and to instruct the county council to go back to the drawing board to develop proposals to increase the capacity of the A46. I would be the first to accept that increasing the capacity of the A46 would not be without its challenges, but far too little consideration has been given to the possibilities and the potential to upgrade that road.

I shall end where I started: in areas of development, particularly those with high growth, infrastructure must be in place alongside the development—not years later, but as areas are developed. We need improvements to the A46 at Tewkesbury and Ashchurch, but those improvements need to be made to that road. We need more evidence before we commit ourselves to a bypass, and we must reject any thoughts of half-closing junction 9.

News of this proposal will come as a great surprise to many people living in the area, and they will be greatly worried by it, so let us act now to remove those fears. I can only support that growth, including the garden town, if the right infrastructure is in place. That has been my consistent line all along. I ask the Minister to reject the business plan and ask the county council to take a fresh look at a scheme for the area. Such a scheme will need to be in place to accommodate growth of the kind that the Government themselves wish to see.

🕒 1.08pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport >

(Mr Richard Holden)

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for introducing the debate on the proposed changes to the A46 in his constituency, and for his very clear speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

My hon. Friend seems to have been incredibly successful in getting extra Government funding for major schemes in his constituency. Not long ago, he and I were talking with our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) about junction 10 and the A4019, and my hon. Friend has already mentioned the missing link and the funding, which will be of huge benefit not just for his constituents, but across the country.

I welcome the opportunity to talk about this important road project involving the A46 and the proposals being developed for it. My hon. Friend has a keen interest in the proposals for the A46 in his constituency, but I should say at the outset that the proposals, as his comments reflected, are very much led by Gloucestershire County Council. There is an important principle that we have to follow, which is that it is for the council to make decisions on its objectives, options and consultation plans.

My hon. Friend asked what role National Highways has played to date. I want to make it clear to him that, at DFT's direction—because of the size of the scheme—National Highways has been advising extensively and supporting the council, as the scheme impacts broadly on the strategic road network and the M5. National Highways has been feeding into the council, but I need to emphasise that the route options being put forward are the responsibility of Gloucestershire County Council, not National Highways. I also need to emphasise that the Department's processes to assess the business case for the scheme put to us by the council, and to decide whether to approve it, are not yet complete. We are not at that stage, but my hon. Friend can certainly consider me and my officials lobbied about his clear steer on that. I can therefore talk more about the process through which the scheme is progressing than about the merits of the scheme itself, but I want to be clear about some aspects of that.

One of the things I want to be clear about is that I have looked into this issue, particularly the grey route. If the council wants to remove or change the grey route, that is absolutely fine by the Department for Transport. We will happily consider that, and it does not need to be included in the options that we look at as part of the business case. That can still happen, and I am sure the council will have heard my hon. Friend's comments today. Given that a large new garden town with 10,000 houses is being built to the east of Tewkesbury, this is clearly an important scheme and he is absolutely right to want to get questions around infrastructure answered before other developments go ahead.

I recognise the important role that the A46 plays both strategically and locally, and the challenges it faces. The A46 runs for over 150 miles, from its junction with the M5 in my hon. Friend's constituency all the way through to Grimsby in Lincolnshire. It performs many important functions, including providing access to both the Port of Bristol and the Humber ports, and to important connections between the M1 and A1 in the west of the country. It is therefore unsurprising that the A46 is part of England's strategic road network,

which comprises most of our motorways and larger strategic A roads, as my hon. Friend will know. As per [Back to top](#) [Previous debate](#) Highways fulfils in maintaining the network, it is soon to complete electrical works at the A46 Teddington Hands junction that will provide new and renewed light-emitting diode lighting, and has previously undertaken some resurfacing work on the A46 between the junction and the M5 in my hon. Friend's constituency. National Highways knows how important the road is.

Approaching Tewkesbury, the A46 not only plays a vital role in facilitating long-distance journeys but, as my hon. Friend said, acts as a major local road for the communities in Ashchurch and Tewkesbury. The business case for the council's current proposals for the road, which are under assessment by my Department, reports that there are concerns about how the road performs: delays can be experienced on the A46 between the Teddington Hands roundabout and junction 9 of the M5, and there can be poor journey time reliability on the approach to and from junction 9. As my hon. Friend knows, this is also an area with significant growth plans, which he reflected extensively in his speech. Some of the developments have already gained consent but, as he said, the further large-scale plans are still going through that process at the moment.

It is in that context that the council has been developing its business case around junction 9 of the M5 and the A46 Ashchurch scheme for consideration as part of the Department's major road network and large local majors programme. Through the programme, I am pleased to say that the Department provides substantial funding to local authority-led highway schemes right across England. Such schemes can help alleviate issues such as congestion, improve road networks and provide important infrastructure improvements, particularly for public transport, which we hope will include better integrating active travel options such as walking and cycling into our broader road network wherever possible.

In September 2022, the council submitted the strategic outline business case for the scheme—the first stage of business case development—to the Department for approval. As my hon. Friend is aware, it puts forwards a shortlist of route options that would be considered further if the scheme were to progress. That is now going through the Department's rigorous consideration process, including to assess its compliance with the Green Book, value for money and strategic fit. But as I said to my hon. Friend, it can still be adjusted.

Mr Robertson >

I am grateful to the Minister for his response and how he is addressing the issue. He mentions that bits could be taken out of the business case—one of my big points was that the grey route should be taken out—but can things be added at this stage? What is missing is any proposal to upgrade the capacity of the A46 itself.

Mr Holden >

I would be very happy for my departmental officials to meet further with my hon. Friend, and I am sure we can look at other options. This is at SOBC stage, so it is very much about the strategic case for the road and outline proposals for schemes. At this stage, I am sure we can look at such questions, particularly if, as my hon. Friend says, the leader of the GCC is happy to consider different options and the proposal comes from the council, which is, in the end, the lead authority. I cannot force the council to do it, but I will ensure that my officials do everything possible to work with my hon. Friend to provide as many of the right options as possible so that they can be considered by the Department. All the options also need to provide value for money for taxpayers. We will then decide on whether to agree to the scheme going further, and the necessary Treasury approval will be sought down the line. I expect that the process will be completed this year.

As I have already noted, this is the council's scheme. It is for the council to decide on the options it wishes to propose for consideration in its business case, while having regard for the Department's guidance, and I suggest that my hon. Friend should keep pushing the council in that direction. Similarly, decisions on the timing of public consultation on the scheme are for the council. The Department's role is to assist the council with the large local schemes that have an impact on our strategic road network and to consider the business case down the line as the council has asked us to do.

Given that any scheme would mostly affect the strategic road network, the expectation is that in the long term the scheme's detailed design and construction would later be led by National Highways, after being led in the early stages by the council, which would of course be subject to satisfactory business case development. As I said, National Highways has been extensively advising and supporting the council on these developments, focusing on providing advice and assurance for the project, but I must be clear that the options shortlisted to date are the council's options. I also understand that at this early stage options have been shortlisted for

further, more detailed appraisal. I wish to reassure my hon. Friend that no decisions have yet been made. [Back to top](#) [Previous debate](#)
sure that the council will want to take note of the other points he raised, particularly on flooding and broader impacts on the A46, as it progresses further with this scheme.

If the scheme progresses, it will be considered for inclusion as part of the next road investment strategy, alongside other schemes in the area. On 9 March, the Secretary of State for Transport laid before Parliament a written ministerial statement announcing that overall affordability issues mean that although schemes originally being considered as part of the RIS3 programme pipeline will continue to be developed, we will be looking at RIS4 timescales for their construction. That announcement applies to the scheme, as the council has already been made aware.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for providing an opportunity to discuss these important proposals for what is clearly a key road in his constituency. I hope that I have provided some assistance in how he can best engage and work with the council on behalf of his constituents, as he always does, to ensure that the plans reflect local needs and desires. I hope I have also provided some reassurance as to what we have in place for possible delivery in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

🕒 1.19pm

Sitting suspended.