
Second strategic highway route to the south-west

On 30 April 2004, members of the South West Regional Assembly decided by the narrow margin of one vote to recommend the dualling of the A303 between Ilminster and Honiton, instead of the A358 between Ilminster and Taunton, in order to complete a second strategic route to the south-west. The A303 provides a more direct route to Exeter and reduces reliance on the M5 but involves new road construction in the Blackdown Hills, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This briefing sheet describes the background to this decision and the contribution that CTS made to the decision making process.



Background

The M5 is the main highway route connecting the south-west of England to the rest of the country. In 2002 the South West and South Wales Multi Modal Study (SWARMMS) recommended improvements to the other strategic corridor. This is the A303/A30 route which comprises a mixture of single carriageway and dual carriageway sections and experiences major congestion and journey time unreliability (particularly during holiday seasons) and high accident rates along the single carriageway sections. West of Ilminster there is the option of improving (dualling) the A303 itself, which requires off-line construction in the Blackdown Hills, or the option of

improving the A358, which links the A303 to the M5 below Taunton.

The SWARMMS preferred strategy included the A358 improvement option, subject to further analysis of its technical feasibility. In response to the study the recently formed South West Regional Assembly recommended to the Secretary of State for Transport that the A303 be dualled *in addition to* the A358 (Assembly members voted by a ratio of 4:1 in favour of this amendment). The Secretary of State endorsed the improvement of one of the two routes (but not both) and asked the Highways Agency to carry out a more detailed assessment of the two options. Before coming to a decision, the Secretary of State said he would again provide the opportunity to the Assembly to respond and make a recommendation on its preferred option.

Research Justification

The HA report confirmed the technical feasibility of the A358 as a route alternative to the A303. It found that the A358 option has significantly less adverse environmental impacts and is cheaper to construct (£246 compared to £338 million). The A303 option results in greater transport economic benefits (travel time, fuel and accident savings). The cost to benefit assessment undertaken by the HA is more favourable for the A358 option.

The Assembly wished to carefully consider the results of the HA report before making a recommendation to the Secretary of State on a preferred route option. The HA assessment had been conducted in accordance with established practice that facilitates national comparison of road schemes and the Assembly wished to make sure regional interests were taken into account.

Methodology

The Assembly set up a Panel of members to look into the issues raised by the report and commissioned CTS to provide expert advice and research to assist the Panel. The main stages in the process were as follows:

- HA report findings reviewed by CTS in the light of (i) national, regional and sub-regional plans and policies; (ii) past studies and recommendations.
- Stakeholders invited to submit views and evidence and Public Hearing held to explore these.
- Report produced by CTS and the Panel summarising key decision issues and significant evidence and arguments.
- Special Assembly Meeting held to debate the merits of the options and to vote on a preferred option.

Outcomes and Benefits

The second strategic route is a contentious subject in the south-west. This is reflected by the 180 written submissions received in response to the consultation process. The key issues that emerged were the following:

Economic development - claims for economic benefits to the region dependent on the option chosen were impossible to substantiate but the A303 option is likely to strengthen the east-west dimension of the regional economy and the A358 the north-south dimension.

Spatial strategy - stakeholders in Exeter and Taunton made cases respectively for the A303 and A358 options in terms of their importance in supporting the development of designated employment sites.

Environment and communities – opinions varied on the importance that should be attached to degradation of the physical environment and the extent to which it can be mitigated. Deliverability of the A303 option was acknowledged to be an issue, given the increasing difficulty in delivering infrastructure projects in environmentally sensitive areas. Higher CO₂ emissions have been forecasted for the A358 option but these are not substantial enough to be a major consideration. The communities living along or near the existing A303 route have shown strong support for the route to be upgraded

but actual impacts on communities will not be known until an alignment is chosen.



A303 through Blackdown Hills

Regional road network – claims were made in favour of both options in terms of their relief of other routes and improvements to journey time reliability. The HA's traffic forecasts indicate that relief of other routes will be minimal in each case and whichever option is chosen there will still be instances (holiday periods) where capacity is exceeded on the improved route. Particular concern was raised about the impact of closures of the M5 if the A303 was not improved.

The Assembly members voted by 42 votes to 41 in favour of dualling the A303 instead of the A358. A decision on the route is expected from the Secretary of State later in 2004.

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