

# **A350 WESTBURY BYPASS**

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## **SUMMARY PROOF OF EVIDENCE ON LANDSCAPE AND TOWNSCAPE**

PREPARED BY

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 My name is Alan James. I have a Bsc (Hons) geography, MA Landscape Architecture, and am a Member of the Landscape Institute (MLI). I have worked in environmental assessment and landscape design for highways and traffic management, have undertaken several landscape and ecological appraisals of highway schemes, and been involved in many public inquiries as a landscape and a transport witness.
- 1.2 The proof of evidence on landscape and townscape impacts is on behalf of the White Horse Alliance. It relates to the Secretary of State's matter c) concerning protection and enhancement of the countryside under PPS 7. Landscape is also important in conformity with the development plan, and in the question of whether scheme benefits justify its adverse effects. Especially important is the question of whether there are alternatives which broadly meet the scheme objectives but with lesser adverse impacts.
- 1.3 The section of the eastern bypass (EBP) of greatest concern in landscape terms is the southern section from the railway crossing near the cement works to the Madbrook roundabout, especially from Bratton Road southwards and through the Wellhead Valley. This lies within the Salisbury Plain Special Landscape Area (SLA) and the EBP would impact on views from the chalk escarpment of Salisbury Plain around the Westbury White Horse, Bratton Camp, and along the Wellhead Valley.
- 1.4 WCC assessments rate the landscape impact of both the EBP and the Far Western Route (FWR) as 'moderate adverse' on the areas through which they pass. The qualitative impacts are stated in very similar terms for both routes - reasonable landscape fit but with loss of rural tranquillity - and the impact assessment is the 'moderate adverse' for both schemes. On townscape impact, the EBP is assessed as 'moderate/large beneficial', but no equivalent has been seen for the FWR.
- 1.5 My proof of evidence on landscape and townscape argues that:
- WCC's appraisal understates the real impact of the EBP on the outstanding landscape of the SLA: the assessment should be 'large adverse',
  - It is untenable to argue that the relative landscape impacts of the EBP and the FWR are equal
  - The townscape benefits are overstated, partly because the benefits of traffic reduction have been exaggerated and partly because the impacts do not extend much beyond the streets where traffic relief is forecast to occur

## 2.0 LANDSCAPE IMPACT OF EASTERN BYPASS

- 2.1 More than half the route of the EBP runs through the Salisbury Plain SLA, a chalk landscape of national standing, and of equivalent landscape calibre to other chalk upland AONBs. The SLA is an important recreational area, featuring the White Horse and Bratton Camp, and the Wessex Ridgeway long distance footpath. The area directly affected by the EBP is all the more important for its proximity to the town of Westbury.
- 2.2 The section of the EBP running through the SLA is assessed in the ES as having 'large adverse' landscape impact, which is merited in relation to WebTAG criteria. The scheme as a whole should be assessed as having a 'large adverse' landscape impact, because:
- Over half the bypass is in any case assessed as having a large adverse impact
  - Almost all the criteria for 'large adverse' impact are met
  - WebTAG's 'most adverse category' rule

- 2.4 The ES suggests that the road achieves a reasonable landscape fit but with some loss of rural tranquillity. This is untenable, especially within the SLA, as the route is frequently discordant with the landform, and the landscape treatment creates an equally discordant tree belt through the largely open landscape at the foot of the escarpment. The loss of tranquillity, especially in the Wellhead Valley and along its escarpment edge, would be intense.
- 2.5 The WCC landscape officer also has reservations about impact on the SLA, stating that:  
*“Although the ES demonstrates a substantial effort to minimise landscape effects through careful siting and additional planting, the road will remain highly intrusive within this quiet rural landscape character area. I believe that it will be of significant intrusion sufficient to spoil the enjoyment of those people using local footpaths, bridle ways and open access land”*

### **3.0 ROUTE COMPARISON**

- 3.1 The landscape impact of a FWR should not be understated in making a case that there is a lesser order of impact than for the EBP. The current assessment of ‘moderate adverse’ landscape impact (which as defined in WebTAG is actually more serious than ‘moderate’ suggests) would be reasonable relative to a ‘large adverse’ impact for the EBP. I disagree with the ES assessment of equal landscape impact between the two (both ‘moderate adverse’).
- 3.2 There are three main grounds for suggesting that the area of the FWR is of lesser landscape status than the area of the SLA on the EBP route, beyond the fact that almost all the FWR area is not designated as a SLA :
- The clay vale is a pleasant rural area, but it has none of the distinctiveness of the chalk escarpment at the edge of Salisbury Plain, lacks significant landmarks, and its basic character occurs across a fairly large swathe of lowland England.
  - The area is considerably affected by disruptive elements which disturb tranquillity - the railway line, high voltage power lines, traffic noise, and the West Wiltshire Trading Estate within the broad landscape tract. The level of tranquillity is much less than in the Wellhead Valley area.
  - The FWR route corridor is relatively flat and has a more random pattern of tree cover than in the SLA. A better degree of landscape fit may therefore be achievable
- 3.3 The route and design details of a FWR have never been optimised, and the route used for comparison purposes is far from optimal in landscape terms, especially in terms of impact on scattered residential properties. In principle, a route following the railway as closely as possible on its north side would appear to be the least intrusive in landscape impact, as the disruptive linear feature is already there.

### **4.0 IMPACT ON TOWNSCAPE**

- 4.1 The ES assesses overall townscape impact as ‘moderate/ large beneficial’ because of the reduction in traffic through the town, with the greatest benefit to the historic core. Whilst accepting that traffic along the A350 through Westbury has a negative townscape impact, this is not exceptional compared with many similar towns. Traffic volumes are quite low for a main road in an urban area, and the proportion of HGVs very low.
- 4.2 There are in any case problems with WCC’s line of argument and overall assessment, since the benefits of traffic reduction have been overstated, both in the extent of traffic

relief and in its geographical spread across the town. The main townscape impact of traffic is on the through routes, but:

- The direct impact of traffic does not extend much beyond the through routes, and does not permeate the town centre core where most shops, public buildings, and areas of historic character occur
- There are roads where there is a projected increase in traffic with the EBP but these are not evaluated
- Current traffic volumes are not at a level that significantly hinders pedestrian movement around the town
- There are problems with the forecast HGV reductions

4.3 The extent of traffic relief is not enough to turn the streets forming the A350 from busy roads to quiet streets. Long-established research indicated that urban street traffic has to be below 2,000 vehicles/ day for pedestrians not perceive them as traffic-dominated, and above 5,000 vehicles/ day neighbourhood cohesion breaks down. In Westbury, the forecast 2009 12 hour traffic totals for the A350 are 4,500-7,000 vehicles/day, and Station Road would still have 7,000-10,000 vehicles/ 12 hours. Noise levels on the A350 remain largely above 60 dB(A). Traffic impact shifts incrementally with the EBP rather than crossing any meaningful threshold.

4.4 The ES picture of increased pressure on the narrow streets of the historic core is misleading, as traffic levels are static and most of the historic core is very lightly trafficked. The claimed impact on important historic buildings is also suspect, as few if any Grade 1 and 2\* listed buildings are on streets where there would be much change in traffic impact.

4.5 The overall assessment of moderate/ large beneficial does not exist in WebTAG, and has to be one or other. It is questionable whether the townscape impact can be classed as any more than 'slight beneficial', especially if the EBP were compared with a do-minimum which could achieve traffic reduction by demand management.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The Westbury eastern bypass is a severe intrusion into an exceptionally fine landscape, of national standing in spite of the absence of a national landscape designation. The landscape impact of the road should be assessed as 'large adverse' both because it fits the criteria anyway for the majority of the route and because of WebTAG assessment rules.

5.2 The landscape of the potential Far Western route options is of a lesser standing, and although the landscape impact should not be understated it is of a lower order of magnitude than for the eastern route. On landscape grounds there is a clear preference for an optimised far western route, and this is a significant planning consideration given the SLA status of much of the area of the eastern route.

5.3 Townscape benefits have been overstated in the ES, both in magnitude and geographical extent. The main routes through Westbury do not become traffic-free havens, and the degree of traffic impact away from the main routes is not significant.

5.4 In my view the landscape 'cost' of proceeding with the eastern bypass is nowhere near outweighed by the townscape benefit of traffic reduction in Westbury. There is also an alternative route with similar benefits and lower landscape costs. It must therefore be concluded that in landscape/ townscape terms the harm to the landscape of the Salisbury Plain SLA is not acceptable and the application should be refused.