

Email reply from Paul Arnold, Highways Agency, 20 May 2005

Having read your paper it would not be right for me to comment on a lot of what you say. It would simply be going over ground covered at the Public Inquiry, or not an appropriate matter for me to comment upon pending the Secretaries of State decision on the Inspector's conclusions and recommendations, not expected until late Summer this year.

However there are a few matters I upon which I would like to respond.

1. Gradients on the existing A3

I don't want to reopen Inquiry debates here but your statement about gradients seems to be rather sweeping. As a matter of fact the existing A3 between Boundless Road and the NT Cafe does not have a constant 5% gradient. In particular, the section of existing A3 from Boundless Road to the youth hostel access includes 600m with gradients of 5% and over, with the maximum being 7.2%. This is a length of 0.6km out of the 3km between Boundless Road and NT Cafe. Between the point where the proposed cycle track leaves the existing A3 to Gibbet Hill there would be about 800m with a gradient more than 5%, with a maximum of 9.7%. However the HA made a commitment at the Public Inquiry that it will smooth out any locations where the gradient is more than 7% with the aim of making 7% the maximum gradient. Between Gibbet Hill and the NT cafe there is then a down gradient of 3.2%. Therefore the maximum gradient on the BOAT 500 route will be no greater than that on the existing road - although I accept that there will be a total of 1400m in excess of 5% rather than 600m. Overall the HA's proposed cycle route climbs an additional 10 metres out of a total climbed on the existing A3 (from Thursley to Hindhead) of 170m.

2. General provisions within the scheme

I think that it would be fair to point out to the conference that the area currently has no provision whatsoever for cyclists and that this scheme will provide a cycle route, completely separated from the trunk road, for a distance of about 8.5km along the trunk road corridor, extending about 1km beyond either end of the trunk road improvements themselves. It also includes four new cycleway/bridleway bridges crossing the trunk road, two road bridges with cycle paths alongside and one country lane bridge that can be safely used by cyclists. It will mean that the current gaping hole in the local cycle network will be filled by either 3m wide paved cycle paths or by direct routes along country lanes.

You refer to Sustrans wanting to take NCR22 through Hindhead. This is not so, NCR22 is to be routed via Farnham. They simply stated that they would be looking to designate a subsidiary route through Hindhead. I would add that there are likely to be plenty of sections on NCR22 that will have gradients well in excess of the 7% you are objecting to.

You refer to a cycle path crossing the slip roads at Hazel Grove Junction. This is true, but the usage by cyclists of this route is negligible - indeed zero at present as far we can tell. It serves two private preparatory schools (for children up to 12), but at the moment no pupils cycle to school. Indeed, as both schools demand that parents deliver their children to the school gate, it is unlikely that this will change significantly. Beyond the schools the road becomes a narrow country lane with a gradient in excess of 17% - not good for cyclists, I am sure you will agree. There is, in any case, an alternative route that goes along Miss James Footpath (which NT have agreed to upgrade to a bridleway) and over a green bridge, completely bypassing the junction. So even if the schools start to encourage their pupils to cycle to school, they won't have to use the route across the slip roads.

You refer to "parallel cycle routes to the main carriageway are planned, with no concessions for barriers, screening or prevention of accidents caused by misinterpretation of high power cycle headlights." The routes referred to only occur along a 1km section at the south end of the scheme, where the adjacent land is both Common Land and a Special Protection Area, which restricts what can be achieved. For the remaining 7.5km, the cycle route is completely separated from the trunk road.

You also refer to the double mini roundabout in Hindhead village, "with cycles routed tortuously around it on shared footpaths." The cycle path here runs completely to one side of the existing trunk road, requiring cyclists to cross just one side road (the A287) via a Toucan crossing.

Towards the end of your draft you accuse us of "fitting in equestrians, pedestrians, cyclists, push chairs, wheelchairs and others down a restricted bridleway". The "restricted bridleway" is at least 5.5m wide, with a 3m paved cycle path and 2.5m minimum equestrian path. It also has other footpaths running more-or-less parallel to it. The use of the term "restricted" is therefore unreasonable.

3. General issues relating to cycling

You state that cycling should be a core activity for the Highways Agency. The Highways Agency's remit relates only to the trunk road network and its users. Those users obviously include cyclists but in the area of Hindhead those on the A3 are few and far between. Ideal provisions for all users are not always possible within the compromises that have to be made to progress a scheme from design to construction. The topography around Hindhead is quite challenging for cycling compared perhaps to your quoted examples of Holland and north Germany. Whether we got the balance right in this case is a matter now for the Inspector of the Public Inquiry and the Secretaries of State to judge.

Your comments about planners having no concept of the extent of suppressed demand is an unjust one. None of the cycling organisations seem to be able to either quantify the figures or offer a way of assessing the extent. So any lack of knowledge would seem to be widespread. At the Inquiry we did make an attempt to assess the possible suppressed demand in terms of so called "utility" cycling and the answer was still not many cyclists. That is perhaps not surprising in the context of Hindhead, its topography, lack of nearby origins and destinations and the economic profile of those living in the area.

I should have thought that to progress this matter sensibly there needs to be some form of joint research between cycling organisations and the DfT to try to develop some simple models to inform the debate nationally. Clearly the geography and demographics of areas would be a key input. As I am sure you are aware, a new methodology for putting a monetary valuation on the costs and benefits of walking and cycling schemes, prepared by a committee including DfT, TfL and Sustrans, is expected to be published later this month, so the process does appear to have, at least got going.

I am sorry that we were unable to reach an accommodation with you - the competing demands that we had to try to meet just didn't allow this. I hope that once the Inspector has made his decision we will be in a position to recommence discussions to ensure that within the context of the decision we do make the cycling network as safe and user friendly as constraints allow.

Paul Arnold
Team leader
Highways Agency Major Projects South