

B4221 Action Group: Summary, April 2006

People along the B4221/B4215 have been concerned about traffic problems for more than 15 years. The B4221 Action Group has been campaigning since April 2001 and was formed by the Gorsley and Kilcot Parish Council in response to a parish appraisal published in that year. We have produced a number of written reports and submissions detailing the problems on the route which have include our analysis of county statistics.

The problems are:

- a. too many drivers choose to use the route as a shortcut between the A40 at Gloucester and the M50, in preference to the A40 and the A417,
- b. through traffic includes a large number of lorries, including HGVs, which should be using the M50/M5 as a through route,
- c. there is more traffic on this route than the A40,
- d. speeding is endemic and speed limits are not enforced with any consistency
- e. a recent increase in the number of serious accidents.

We want the County Council to bring forward plans to implement our strategy which is as follows:

- a. effective traffic calming,
- b. reduction in volume, weight and speed of traffic,
- c. avoidance of any improvements that might generate or encourage more traffic,
- d. in the longer term, an alternative route to the M50.

On one hand we appreciate that it may not be possible to implement our strategy in full. On the other, officials have told us they accept our strategy because it is so similar to their own. There is no doubt that over the last 4 or 5 years a lot of work has been done on the B4221/B4215. Some of this is consistent with our strategy, ie. the pelican crossing and the voluntary 20 mph zone at Picklenash in Newent and the VAR sign at Kilcot. What we find difficult to understand is how much of the council's work is not related to our strategy. For example, major funding was used to install traffic lights at Newent Cross instead of traffic calming throughout the route.

In response to our initial report in 2001, the county carried out a Safety Study of the route. However, we were told that the "strategic issues" we raised would not be addressed by the study but we could not get clarification of what the "strategic" issues were. We had to wait 2 years for the study to be published to discover that none of our concerns were addressed by the study which was confined to the physical aspects of the route. It was subsequently explained that the "strategic" issues would be addressed in Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2 and we engaged in the LTP consultation process. However, at the end of the day few of our concerns and those of the people living and working along the road have been reflected in LTP2.

County officials have engaged in consultation with us many times over the years. For our part we have attempted to demonstrate that there are gains to be made by working with parishes and with groups such as ourselves. Our members joined the Freight Quality Partnership (FQP) and took part in working groups one of which produced the county lorry map. But however willing individual officials may be, in the end the council carries on with its own agenda and does little, in practical terms, to address the problems we and others on the route have raised. Consultation seems to be tokenistic and feedback is very difficult to obtain.

We have discovered that the county has a number of day to day operational policies toward the West of Severn Corridor that do not appear in LTPs 1 or 2. These include:

a. maintaining a balance of traffic across the routes in the West of Severn Corridor. In practice this means allowing drivers to make their own choice of route across the area.

b. avoiding any measures that might divert traffic from one route and increase it on another. Officials have the support of Parishes in the area because no-one wants to risk a reduction of traffic on one route leading to an increase on another. Playing off parishes against one another is hardly a constructive approach to traffic problems in the area.

c. not increasing traffic on routes with a worse safety record. Understandable, but the primary goal appears to be to avoid jeopardising a financial reward of about £2M that would accrue to the county if government accident reduction targets are met. It is matter of regret that this laudable approach is being used as a reason for not addressing the problems.

Given these policies the problems on the B4221/B4215 are unlikely to be addressed in isolation from other routes. However, there has been no will to move on from the current position and take the broader view. In fact, the then Head of Environment told us that the council's preferred option is to make the B4221/B4215 the strategic route across the West of Severn Corridor and that it would take only £500K to upgrade the route for that purpose. This is not only the exact opposite of our strategy but it would only make the problems much worse. Financial provision for this sum was made in year 5 in the first draft of LTP2 although there was no acknowledgement of the purpose of the funding in the text. No wonder our confidence in the County Council has suffered.

This solution would be inconsistent with the policy of the Highways Agency (HA). According to the HA, motorway traffic on the M50 should be using the A40, A417 or the M5 not the B4221/B4215. Junction 3 on the M50/B4221 is a "gated" junction and inadequate for through traffic. Traffic turning onto and off the motorway uses the same carriageway and long vehicles, HGVs and coaches, swing into the opposite lane. So the county council's policy is not consistent with policy or the pattern of public expenditure by the HA on roads in the area. It is a matter of public concern that these bodies can't coordinate their policies and spending especially in an underfunded area like transport.

There seems to be a fundamental lack of strategic thinking in the county. To us a strategy is a clear path that leads from where we are now to where we want to be. Despite claims to the contrary there is no strategy for transport in Gloucestershire. The problem starts with the vision - car use. So the vision is all about one current problem, a major problem perhaps, but it is too narrow to address all the current transport problems and it is not aspirational. What is needed is a vision for transport as a whole in the future - maybe 30 years ahead, a single path, a strategy, to achieve it and an action plan to implement as much of the strategy as feasible over the life of the LTP. LTP2 refers to "the strategy" but does not say what it is and provides separate so-called strategies for public transport and road safety in the appendices. The lack of a single coherent transport strategy in the LTP is self evident, it can be no surprise that integrated transport solutions are not being delivered in the county. Its ironic that at the same time as we are criticising the county over its lack of strategic thinking, we suspect that it is ahead of most similar bodies in the country.

The Great Gloucestershire debate was started because of the perception that we are heading for "gridlock" in 10 years time. Contributors described the problems in their locality and the county offered major schemes in the most troublesome spots. It's the same old thinking, what we need is something different. Assuming the county can't spend its way out of trouble the only thing it can do is change the way it thinks. But unfortunately we see little sign of that. The county has lost the means of capitalising on the good will of the populace who would be interested in contributing. It can't see the wood for the trees and carries on with its own agenda in a declining spiral towards what - gridlock?

Brian Collier, for the B4221 Action Group