

The Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 4DR

26 September 2014

Dear Secretary of State,

Environmental concerns and the A417 “missing link”

As we discussed at our recent meeting, I understand that you are currently considering proposals for the upcoming Autumn Statement and the first Road Investment Strategy, and that you have recently been lobbied by a number of politicians and businesses from Gloucestershire County Council and GFirst LEP seeking a large amount of funding for a major road scheme on the A417 in the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

This scheme, described variously as the ‘A417 Loop’, ‘Brown Route’ and ‘Missing Link’, would create an offline 5 km dual carriageway, the same width as the M5, on the route of the A417 from the end of the Brockworth Bypass to the Cowley Roundabout, bypassing the current roundabout junction at the Air Balloon. The existing road in this section is single carriageway and suffers normal peak-time congestion, and is subject to an Air Quality Action Plan.

Along with local campaigners, we are very concerned about these plans, and about information you may have received in connection with bids for funding this scheme as part of the Road Investment Strategy – in particular that these bids apparently state that there are no environmental objections. It is hard to see how any environmental assessment of these plans could conclude there would be no damage caused. The proposed scheme covers two SSSIs, two Scheduled Monuments, Ancient Woodland and National Trust land close by on Crickley Hill. Details of these are within the statutory instrument founding the Cotswolds Conservation Board in 2004.

Comments on lack of ‘environmental objections’ therefore will be likely to refer to the results of public and stakeholder consultation, and any claims of this kind must be viewed with great scepticism, since local people have not yet been asked in a fair and appropriate way to comment on these plans.

Campaign for Better Transport has previously expressed our concerns about the process of the Route Strategies, with environmental groups not routinely placed on invitation lists for consultation events, and environment and public transport maps and data not presented to stakeholder

workshops. In addition, the exercise in public engagement started by Gloucestershire County Council earlier this year (which may have been presented to you as a 'consultation') gives no opportunity to oppose the scheme or state objections. Their website* presents no environmental impact information, deals only with arguments in favour of the Brown Route, and asks people simply to 'pledge their support'. In essence this is a petition in support of the scheme and not a consultation.

I am therefore writing today to make it very clear that opportunities for public and local environmental stakeholder objections to these plans have not yet been properly provided by the County Council, LEP or Highways Agency. Campaign for Better Transport considers this proposal to be extremely damaging to the environment around it and the wider AONB, and I would be happy to arrange for you to meet with local environmental groups in order to hear an alternative viewpoint on the scheme and the potential damage it would cause, as well as its lack of efficacy.

I understand that, in addition to funding new schemes, the RIS will be concerned with commissioning new studies into different options at various pinch points. I would urge that, instead of pursuing the Brown Route, the Highways Agency should be funded to look at a wider range of options for the A417/A419 corridor to find less damaging solutions to congestion at this junction. These options could range from using smart motorway technology, variable message signage and variable speed limits, to short underpasses to resolve conflicts between different flows at the Air Balloon junction itself.

I also urge you to ensure that the options that come out of any new studies are shared with all stakeholders and environmental groups, and that all impacts are properly assessed before any final schemes are put forward for inclusion in the RIS.

Yours sincerely,



Stephen Joseph
Chief Executive
Campaign for Better Transport

cc.

Lord de Mauley TD, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Graham Dalton, Chief Executive, Highways Agency

Andrew Sells, Chairman and James Cross, Chief Executive, Natural England

Dame Helen Ghosh, Director-General, National Trust

Revd Jeffrey West, Chairman and Martin Lane, Chief Executive, Cotswolds Conservation Board

* Gloucestershire County Council's campaign website: www.a417missinglink.co.uk

