

Campaign for Better Transport

Comments on bid: South Bristol Link Road

14 October 2011

Consideration of funding for this project should await more developed plans and a better strategic case. Our experience of discussing the scheme with the promoters and the separate submission from consultants MTRU show that this is far from the case at present. Current aims for bus services are at a very early stage, and the case for the road is not yet able to be made on this basis.

No planning applications for this road have yet been made, and it is likely to face large number of delays while going through the planning process. There is significant local opposition, and a number of statutory barriers, including issues with the road passing through Common Land and green belt.

The projects aims are poorly defined. It is justified largely by the associated bus transit, but service details are vague at best. Campaign for Better Transport recently met with the promoters and put a number of questions relating to the routes, frequencies, likely ridership and quality of the proposed buses. However, we were told that no details could be provided.

This road is not associated with development, and a third party contribution from Bristol International Airport will only occur if airport expansion work approved by recent planning permission takes place. Uncertainty now exists. A judicial review is underway and your department forecast that BIA will not now expand beyond its current 6million passengers by 2020.

As consultants have pointed out, the value for money claims for this scheme depend almost entirely (94%) on very small time savings. With the details of plans and junctions likely to change, there is a very high degree of uncertainty whether these benefits would be realised, even taking at face value the idea that such small savings could form the basis of such a large amount of public spending.

Selection of options, consideration of alternatives and strategic fit (Best and Final Bid sections 1.3)

Local campaigners Transport for Greater Bristol have campaigned for many years for an Integrated Transport Authority for the Greater Bristol area, and have proposed a range of alternative strategic plans for improving transport in Bristol. These have focused on rail improvements and tram, and they regard the current plans for both Bus Rapid Transit and the South Bristol link to be inferior options.

It is clear from this group's separate submission that the selection of the South Bristol Link, justified by Bus Rapid Transit, is not regarded locally as the best option, and that alternatives have not been adequately explored.

Consultants MTRU, in their separate submission, have also detailed problems in the strategic fit of this scheme in respect of the consideration of alternatives, the assessment of Carbon and the testing of alternatives against a realistic Do Minimum scenario. Against the 5 Case Model strategic case, MTRU finds the following results, which should alone prompt this scheme to be refused funding at this point:

Greenhouse gas: RED
Environmental capital: AMBER
Economy: RED/AMBER
Health: AMBER/RED

Value for money (BAFB sections 2.5, 3.2)

Consultants MTRU, in their separate submission, have identified a key weakness in the value for money claims of this scheme. This is fundamental to the strategic economic case for spending large amounts of central and local government money on this project.

Analysis of the BAFB models by MTRU has shown that more than 94% of the benefits are from user time savings of less than 2 minutes, with 5.6% of benefits from time savings between 2 and 5 minutes, and just 0.2% of benefits from time savings over 5 minutes.

As the MTRU submission points out: *“High dependence on small time savings makes them very vulnerable to minor errors or adjustments.”*

So, again, with this scheme still at an early stage, and small adjustments to the specification of the road, alignment and junction designs expected during the long planning process, any BCR given in the BAFB needs to be regarded as speculative and subject to large changes as the scheme develops.

This conclusion adds further weight to the argument that this scheme is not at a stage where funding should be assigned, and that decisions should wait until much later in the process, particularly if good-value spending during the Spending Review period is the aim of the current decision-making process.

Consultation process (BAFB section 5.1)

The residents of South Bristol have never been asked specifically about the South Bristol Link Road. In 2004 and 2006 the GBSTS consultation showed a new road as a vague dotted line which eventually emerged as the South Bristol Ring Road (3 stages). In 2007 stage 3 was dropped after public objections and the road was renamed ‘the Link’ and a BRT added. Now the promoters prefer to focus on the BRT element of the scheme, leaving many people to believe wrongly that the road itself has been dropped.

This year, the West of England Partnership left it to a voluntary group (the Neighbourhood Planning Partnership) to organise two public meetings that included bus proposals as well as the road, and these were held outside the areas affected by the road, with no publicity for residents in the affected area.

Campaign for Better Transport’s full report on consultation:

http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/system/files/SBLRconsultationCfBT_Oct11.pdf

Delivery issues:

These issues may jeopardise the scheme going ahead at all, or delay any spending on the scheme until after the Spending Review period.

Planning process and statutory orders (BAFB section 3.3)

No planning application has yet been made, as the road is at a very early stage of development. The planning process for this project would take a large amount of time, and is likely to result in failure if any of the risks detailed below materialise.

Other statutory barriers that are likely to cause delays to this process include issues with the road passing through Common land at Highridge Common and through the green belt.

Third party funding and how LA contribution will be funded (BAFB sections 4.3, 4.7, 4.10)

This scheme has a total LA contribution of £15.5 million, and only £3.2m in third party funding has been secured.

North Somerset Council has a Section 106 agreement for this contribution from the expansion of Bristol Airport. However, even these payments depend on the expansion proceeding as planned. A judicial review of the planning permission is proceeding and Department for Transport recent forecasts indicate no increase in the current 6m passengers until 2020-30. The airport's current Travel Plan could be supported instead by improvements such as a reduction in the high fares for passengers on the airport bus, more publicity for the bus and more stops and further staff car sharing.

There are no other confirmed third-party contributions.

Consideration of the risks of campaigning and peaceful protest action (BAFB sections 3.8, and 5.3)

The BAFB section 3.8 covers a range of risks associated with the planning process, which the SBLR has yet to begin. These include legal challenges and, combined for each set of delays, could add 24 months to the project timetable. Protest action is not included in the three biggest risks in this section of the BAFB.

The risk register for the scheme¹ acknowledges the risk of protester action. The scheme is very controversial locally and green belt groups of local residents are very active. Judicial Review challenges have been commenced by local residents against two local planning proposals which would take Greenbelt land, the proposed new Bristol City Football Stadium and expansion of Bristol International Airport. Protester action is likely to take the form of protest camps, large demonstrations, site occupations and disruption to work.

We estimate protests could cause delays of between 8-15 weeks, and cost between £1-2million (using similar protests against the A4146 Stoke Hammond and Linslade Western Bypass in 2005 as a comparison).

¹ South Bristol Link Programme Risk Register, 1 September 2011
<http://www.travelplus.org.uk/media/223010/woe%20sbl%20appx%20e%20risk%20register.pdf>

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Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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