

Chideock Bypass Campaign

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Mr. John Prescott MP
Deputy Prime Minister
Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions
House of Commons
London

26th September 1998

Sir,

A31/A35 TRUNK ROAD AND THE CHIDEOCK BYPASS

I am writing to you on behalf of the Chideock Bypass Campaign and the majority of Chideock residents to request that the Government:-

- i) withdraws the proposal to de-trunk the A31/35(T) in Dorset and
- ii) progresses the construction of a Chideock bypass at the earliest opportunity.

1.1 THE INADEQUACY OF THE EXISTING TRUNK ROAD THROUGH VILLAGES

"The A35 is part of the national trunk road network and runs through the villages of Chideock and Morcombelake. The road is substandard and inadequate in terms of its horizontal and vertical geometry, width, visibility and side road junctions and is inadequate to cater for the conflicting requirements of through traffic and local traffic movements. . . The unacceptable conditions on the A35 through Morcombelake and Chideock have long been recognised ... Conditions within Chideock, Morcombelake and along the length of A35 between Newlands and Miles Cross are such that there is urgent need of an improvement to the road over this length, incorporating bypasses for both villages. If nothing is done the existing poor conditions for trunk and local road users and inhabitants of the villages will deteriorate as traffic volumes continue to grow. The need for the improvement scheme is therefore clear." From the Statement of Reasons presented by Mr E J Phillips on behalf of the Highways Agency, Public Inquiry 1994.

The long Inquiry found in favour of a bypass and recommended construction to the Secretary of State.

1.2 THE PROBLEMS OF CHIDEOCK

"This is an important Conservation Area with a large collection of listed buildings, many of which front directly on to the trunk road. All are adversely affected by vibration and pollution and as a direct result of lorry impacts buildings in the village have been destroyed or severely damaged. . . The setting of this otherwise picturesque village is further degraded by the urbanisation that is inevitable where such a road passes through a community."

This damage to the built environment has been made worse by the very extensive traffic calming installed throughout the village in an attempt to curb traffic speed.

Residents in the village also suffer from the pollution, noise, dust, severance and lack of physical safety. And again, all of these factors have become markedly worse as a direct result of the recently introduced traffic calming.

2.0 THE CHIDEOCK BYPASS CAMPAIGN

The Chideock Bypass Campaign is a group formed to progress the construction of a bypass, the first and most important step toward the restoration of this once beautiful village. The overwhelming majority (96% when last polled) of Chideock residents together with locally important environmental organisations support this objective. These include the National Trust (largest local land owner), English Nature (who have responsibility for several local SSSIs and other special sites) and the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE). The Highways Agency, as clearly expressed above, would also like to see this approved scheme completed.

The motives of local objectors to this part of the scheme stand little examination, comprising mainly of a 'not in my back yard' lobby and associated coercion. The position of Friends of the Earth has proved difficult to determine and would seem to depend on who is approached.

- 2.1 We have read this Government's 'New Deal' white papers together with the many consultative and supporting documents. The great body of evidence put forward at the recently held Public Inquiry has been carefully reviewed in the light of new information, particularly the 'National Road Traffic Forecasts (Great Britain) 1997'. In combination with TEMPRO this data has been used to project the local (and even more depressing) figures. In all, the group believes it has a good understanding of the transport problems currently facing this Government together with the associated social and political issues and the local implications for Dorset in general and Chideock in particular.
- 2.2 We agree with objectives laid out by the Government in the 'New Deal' transport white papers. In particular it is imperative that controls are applied to the growth of traffic and thereby contribute to a reduction of the environmentally damaging pollution that is presently associated with most motorised transport. But this clear need must be balanced against the recognition that road transport will continue to be the main element of our transport system, especially in the Western Region, for the foreseeable future. It will continue to be the backbone of our prosperity.
- 2.3 It is therefore surprising that the content of the Government's transport white papers cannot be reconciled with
- i) the proposal to 'de-trunk' the A31/A35 through Dorset and
 - ii) the proposal to revoke the Chideock bypass, an essential road improvement upon which the health and safety of the village is totally dependent. This is a bypass that already has a history of cancellation stretching back more than one hundred and seventy years.

It is understood that the Government would have difficulty in progressing the Morcombelake section of this dual bypass scheme as this section would appear to fail many of the criteria laid down in the appraisal documents. However the proposal to de-trunk the A31/A35 through Dorset and effectively abandon the Chideock section of the scheme ignores all of the Government's own guidelines and the clearly stated objectives set out in the 'New Deal' white papers and appraisal guidance.

3.0 PROPOSAL TO DE-TRUNK THE A31/A35

The white paper proposes to de-trunk the A31/A35(T) through south Dorset and east Devon.

"If a road which is now a trunk road does not have a significance outside a local highway authority's area, decisions about improvements to that road ought to be taken by the local highway authority." A New Deal for Transport: Trunk Roads Review

3.1 ECONOMIC DIS-BENEFIT OF DE-TRUNKING

3.1.1 There is no doubt that the majority of traffic using this trunk road is local, having an origination and/or destination within the feeder area of the road. The same can be said of any major road, including a motorway, serving an isolated region. The A31/35(T) loops down from the M3 in the East and across to the M5 in the West and is the only major road linking southern Dorset with the rest of the country, east, west and north.

3.1.2 The trunk road undoubtedly serves an important local function as most of the County's primary roads are connected to it.

3.1.3 The road and its trunk status is vital to the south Dorset economy. It is also the main communications link between the major conurbation of Poole/Bournemouth and the west. Downgrading the road's status will badly damage the south Dorset economy and will harm that of Bournemouth and Poole. But the effect that it will have on future investment in Weymouth, Portland and Bridport can only be described as devastating.

3.1.4 Under cross-examination during the sixth day of the Public Inquiry, Mr Derrien of West Dorset District Council stated

"it amazes me how much weight investors give to road communications. Whether it is psychological, financial or whatever, it is a 'big deal' for the investors"

A sentiment echoed later that day by Mr Bland of Dorset County Council. Clearly, both Councils also see improved transport links as being important tools for unlocking investment in the area. Refer also to the findings of SACTRA and the similar statements to be found in the 'New Deal' transport white papers..

3.2 CONFLICT OF INTERESTS BETWEEN CONNECT & DORSET COUNTY COUNCIL

3.2.1 This section of trunk road is presently maintained under a thirty year fixed term contract by a subsidiary of the Connect consortium. The road is maintained in return for payments that are directly linked to traffic flow through a system of 'virtual tolls', it is, in effect, a Government PFI. Connect's financial interests lie in minimising maintenance costs whilst ensuring that as much traffic as possible passes through the census points.

3.2.2 This situation is further complicated by the Puddletown/Tolpuddle Bypass which is nearing completion. This has been financed under a DBFO with the same consortium.

3.2.3 The government is asking Dorset County Council to take financial responsibility for a major road scheme over which it will subsequently have little control. Most of the benefits that could normally be expected to accrue from managing such a scheme will be lost. The Council will be unable to effectively control the maintenance schedule or manipulate the traffic flow on the road unless unreasonable and onerous additional conditions are appended to the existing road contract. Even if such conditions were accepted by Connect, (or could be lawfully imposed), there would still remain a fundamental conflict of interest between the two parties.

3.2.4 Unless the Government is to provide extra funding to fully cover Connect's 'virtual toll' revenue for the remainder of the two contracts, it is difficult to see how Dorset will be able to meet the day to day costs of this road. The County would seem to have little capacity for funding the major improvements that are required. (The proposed congestion and car parking taxes intended to finance transport improvements will do little for a County such as Dorset. Congestion is only rarely a problem and the number of businesses that would qualify for parking tax is very small. In both cases, fees would have to be draconian to net any substantial revenue.)

3.3 PROPOSALS FOR MASSIVE 'TRAFFIC CALMING' ALONG EXISTING ROUTE

3.3.1 It is suggested that if the road is de-trunked it will be possible for the County to introduce measures that would direct traffic away from the road, in particular the western section. These would be coupled with further measures to physically deter and slow down traffic remaining on the road, such as road narrowing and non-functional traffic lights and roundabouts. The objective of this 'calming' would also be to force traffic onto other routes. These proposals fail to consider the usage pattern of the road. Even the most strategic of our trunk roads (such as the M1/M6, M25 and M4) carry a high level of local traffic, on any given section this may account for a great percentage of the traffic, even a majority.

The proponents of these measures would appear to believe that such calming would solve the problems of traffic in the three Dorset villages yet to be bypassed. In an oddly counter-productive addendum, these calls for de-trunking are usually accompanied by a proposal to turn the road into a 'scenic route' to encourage drivers to use it.

3.3.2 If such measures were to be introduced they would, in no order of priority:-

- i) Conflict with the primary interest of Connect, which is to protect and foster its revenue stream. This may prompt them to cut maintenance to the absolute minimum.
- ii) Deter future investment in the area and encourage existing investment to look elsewhere
- iii) Conflict with the Government's stated objective of maximising the usage of existing road resources, this road is presently an effective trunk route with an ADTF > 13,000
- iv) Conflict with the Government's stated objective of reducing pollution by increasing the journey distance of the vehicles that would use alternative routes
- v) Conflict with the Government's stated objective of reducing pollution by reducing the operating efficiency of vehicles that continue to use the road
- vi) Conflict with the Government's stated objective of reducing congestion by introducing artificial obstructions on a road that presently exceeds its design capacity
- vii) Conflict with the Government's stated objective of reducing traffic accidents by reducing the overall safety levels on the road, with the additional financial burden that that brings
- viii) Increase the road haulage operating costs, (driver/vehicle time, fuel consumption, wear and tear etc.) translating into higher local costs and fewer local jobs
- ix) Directly damage the important tourist industry by discouraging free and efficient access
- x) Interfere with the operation of emergency vehicles, critical in a rural area such as this where services are often stationed many miles from the scene of emergencies
- xi) Introduce further unnecessary urban elements into an already degraded environment
- xii) Financially burden the County for no obvious financial, social or environmental gain and with very obvious financial, social, environmental and political dis-benefits.
- xiii) Increase driver frustration, further reducing road safety
- xiv) Reduce the operating efficiency and reliability of public transport and at the same time increase the journey time, making it less attractive to users
- xv) Have little effect on the number of vehicles using the road, sufficient measures cannot be introduced to negate the time/distance advantage of the road for existing users

3.3.3 The benefits of such measures on a road of this nature are minimal, the financial, social and environmental costs are high. The cost benefit and environmental advantage of building all three outstanding bypasses would be far greater and would also meet most of the Government's transport objectives.

4.0 THE NEED FOR A CHIDEOCK BYPASS

This is a bypass that clearly meets the criteria for construction laid down in the New Deal transport white papers and appraisal guidance.

4.1 By 'Chideock Bypass' this campaign group is not referring to the whole of the Chideock and Morcombelake Bypass scheme but only to the Chideock section. We consider that the traffic problems and the environmental constraints of the two villages are fundamentally different and that there is no necessity to solve both problems either simultaneously or in the same way. A partial scheme bypassing Chideock only was supported by a great many of the objectors to the complete scheme, most notably the National Trust and English Nature.

4.2 It is a bypass with a long history. It was first proposed to build a 'bypass' (or 'new alignment' as it was described at the time) around the already infamous and deadly Chideock Hill in 1824. This possibly makes Chideock the longest outstanding bypass proposal in the country. Further assurances were given in the early 1920's, when the Parish Council demanded the imposition of a 10 MPH speed limit through the village following a spate of accidents. A bypass route was laid out in 1937 and some preliminary work started, only to be abandoned when priorities were changed by the war. Promises were made in 1976 and again in 1984. Finally, the Secretary of State gave approval to proceed with the construction of the bypass recommended by the 1994 Public Inquiry. That was in May 1996. The scheme was dropped from the road building programme just six months later. Perhaps that is also a record.

The Secretary of State, having withdrawn the scheme from the road building programme, has issued a draft Revocation Order for the scheme. Following the six week consultation period that order has remained unconfirmed since April 1997.

4.3 The Highways Agency COBA calculation indicated that, for low traffic growth prediction, this scheme showed a better economic return than the full scheme. English Nature addressed this point as follows:-

"8.10 A breakdown of the COBA analysis provided by the Department shows that a Chideock only Bypass would bring a net economic benefit that is little different from that of the published scheme. This analysis is included in our proof as Appendix V since it was not produced by the Department as evidence. For a low growth scenario the benefits from the Chideock only scheme are greater (2.47 v 2.10) whereas the positions are reversed at high growth."

"8.12 For a number of reasons, we believe that the low growth scenario is more realistic than high growth. In this case, the contribution of the Morcombelake section to the overall economic benefit of the scheme is a negative one since a Chideock only bypass provides a greater benefit than the published scheme." Written evidence to Public Inquiry, 1994.

Given the Government's intended measures to reduce traffic growth it should be assumed that actual growth will be closer to the lower figure than to the higher.

4.4 It would seem that if the new appraisal technique is applied to the overall scheme encompassing both villages then it would fail to demonstrate a case in favour of the scheme.

4.5 If the appraisal is confined to the Chideock only section, then only in the case of landscape intrusion would there be a negative note and that only a moderate one. Effective mitigating measures have been proposed to ensure that this intrusion is minimised. All other aspects of the scheme would be positive or neutral. Even the local biodiversity would improve where the extensive road landscaping replaces the existing subsidy maintained monoculture 'farmland'.

4.6 The safety benefits of constructing this scheme are significant, although they could be substantially improved by implementing a dual carriageway design.

Of course, the cost benefit calculations consider only the actual accident rate (which is, in any case, well above normal). They can have no regard for the near miraculous history of major accidents in the village, which in many cases have passed off with relatively few casualties. Unfortunately, the potential for a serious disaster that results in major loss of life is high, indeed a statistical certainty. A bypass should be justifiable on this ground alone.

No warning signs or any amount of traffic calming can be effective against a runaway lorry suffering from brake failure. And no amount of traffic re-direction will remove these potentially deadly vehicles from our Main Street. Some recent such 'incidents' include:-

- A shellfish lorry completely demolished two houses after crushing more than half a dozen cars and a caravan. Only one person was killed. The houses had themselves been built on the site of a previous disaster, almost a carbon copy incident involving a refrigerated meat lorry.
- Three years ago a fully laden petrol tanker was driven into one of the escape lanes with brake failure, narrowly avoiding the high stone retaining wall. Last spring another tanker jack-knifed into the earth bank above the western end of the village.
- Last summer a brick lorry seriously damaged another house, narrowly avoiding a young mother and her two children.
- This year we have seen the spectacle of a burnt out Spanish lorry, the trailer having broken up after passing through the village with wheels ablaze.

When Chideock's run of good fortune finally expires, to the accompaniment of a blaze of international media coverage, no doubt all of the politicians who have procrastinated over the construction of this bypass will declare that such an 'accident' could not possibly have been predicted. The only thing that those who live in this village cannot predict is the colour of the lorry and the number of people it will maim and kill. All pray that 35 tonnes of petrol or LPG are not involved.

- 4.7 Headline accidents are just a small part of the village safety problem. Rarely a week passes without some incident. There have been days when half a dozen or more separate collisions have occurred. The sound of police and ambulance sirens is an accepted part of our country life. Most frightening of all is the hush that follows a major crash.

Pavements in the village are narrow and non-continuous. The front doors of many properties open directly onto the road. The road itself is too narrow for large trucks to pass in safety. There are junctions with restricted visibility, in some cases just a few metres. The road gradient exceeds 12% in places and nowhere is it level. The stopping distance visibility is limited for much of the road length, severely so in some places. We are told that it is not possible to construct pelican crossings in the village because there is no point that they could safely be placed. For a village of this size, pedestrian movement is abnormally low, with many people finding the road so intimidating that they cannot venture along or across it. Hardly surprising when, during the summer months it can take ten minutes or more just to cross the street. It can be quicker, safer and a good deal less stressful to get into a car and drive the four miles into Bridport or Charmouth to buy a morning paper than walk a few hundred metres to the village shop, which for many will involve crossing the road four times. Severance is extreme and has broken the village community into isolated pockets that barely communicate with each other. This is particularly noticeable amongst the older residents.

- 4.8 All Main Street properties suffer unacceptable levels of noise, chemical and particulate pollution. In addition ground vibration poses a serious threat to many of the listed buildings, normally constructed without benefit of foundations. A particular concern is the road gradient that exists throughout the village. Recent research indicates that the two most serious carcinogenic substances so far identified are generated by diesel engines under heavy load, for example when climbing hills. (University of Kyoto and others, reported by New Scientist)

- 4.9 Finally, and almost trivial, most of the land that is required to construct this bypass is already in the ownership of the Secretary of State, sold voluntarily by the land and property owners.

5.0 IN SUMMARY

Although what is, and what is not, classified as a trunk road is entirely at the discretion of the Secretary of State, we believe that the proposal to de-trunk the A31/A35 through Dorset will cause serious economic damage to a region of the country that desperately needs further investment.

It is a proposal that will result in few, if any, positive benefits to the region.

The case for the construction of a Chideock bypass has been proven repeatedly. In the past, cancellation and postponements have always been on the grounds of financial constraint. Yet it is easy to demonstrate a positive financial return on investment over the life of the scheme. Future legislation regarding noise and other pollutants may force the construction of such a bypass, for in Chideock all of these regularly exceed the EU, WHO and EPA maximums.

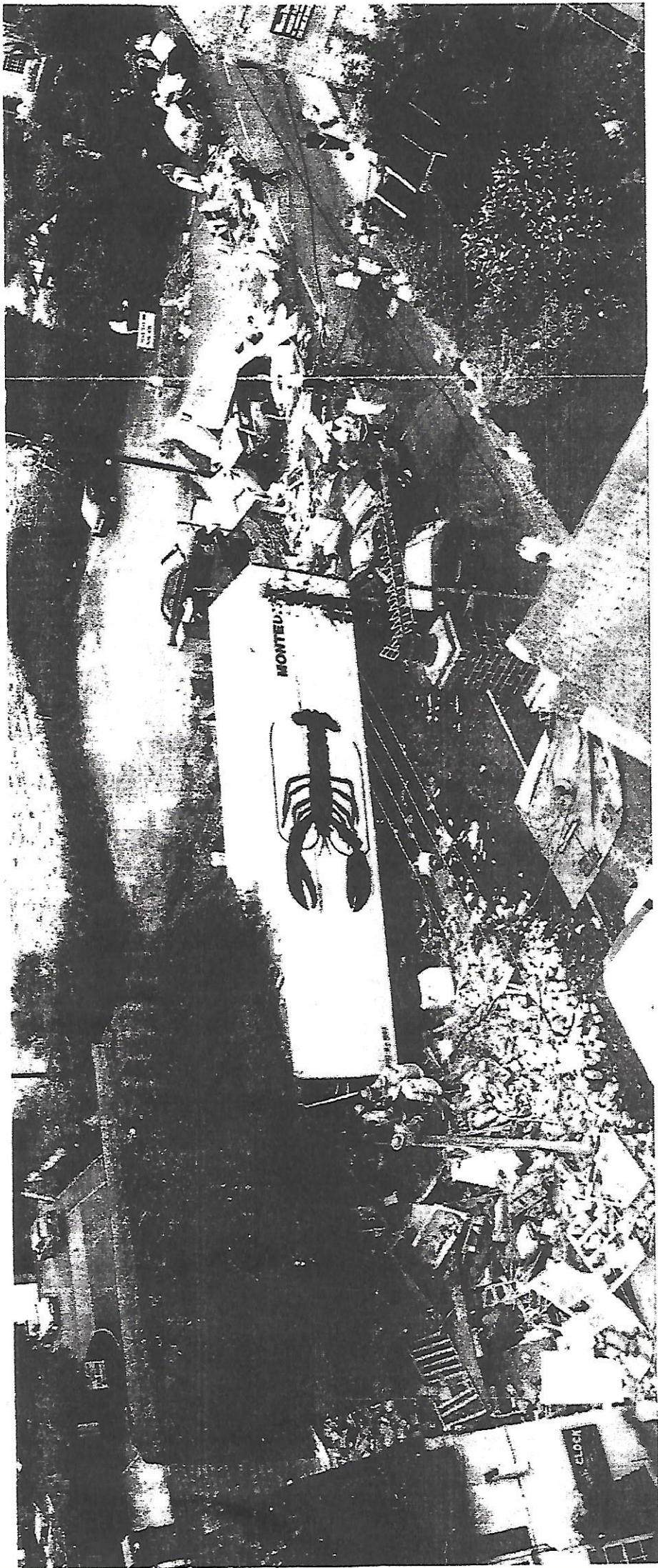
The Chideock section of this bypass scheme is not contentious and has the support of all major interested parties.

Mrs. Jan Jaques,
Chairman, Chideock Bypass Campaign.

cc.

Dr John Reid MP, Minister for Transport
Lord Whitty, Parliamentary Under Secretary, Minister for Roads
Mr Lawrie Haynes, Chief Executive, Highways Agency
Dr Oliver Letwin MP
Cllr Gill Streets, Dorset County Council
Mr Guy Spencer, Director of Environmental Services, Dorset County Council
Mr Des Derrien, West Dorset District Council
Mr Derek Taylor, Chairman, Chideock Parish Council
National & Local Press
Residents of Chideock and interested road users

Encs.



Chideock, Dorset