

Proof of evidence (a longer version) – Gillian Bargery

Introduction

The destructive impact of this road is indisputable and undisputed; even its promoters concede that it will cause significant environmental damage and will add to carbon emissions. It is my contention that, pitted against these undisputed damages, the claimed benefits of the road are putative and speculative at best and simply untrue at worst. It is an exemplary case of assertion led thinking whereby claiming loudly and often that the road will be beneficial is mistaken for having proved this.

Environmental damage

I do not propose to dwell on the damage to landscape or on the carbon emissions as expert witnesses will do so. Suffice to say the damage to Combe Haven, a remarkable and ancient parcel of unspoilt land lying within walking distance of several towns and villages, will be permanent, irreparable, audible and visible. That the road may skirt the SSSI is irrelevant; it will emit noise, light, fumes and carbon emissions, none of which will respect a notional boundary. The addition of a green way aligning the road is an insult added to injury. Who wants to walk beside a road?

By the measure of the road's promoter, it will add some 5.7% to carbon emissions over a decade or (they calculate) .6 per annum, which it considers negligible because carbon emissions will rise anyway. This argument is comparable to stating that, since crime levels are due to rise anyway, adding to the increase does not matter that much. The facts are bad enough but even worse is the message this sends, which can be paraphrased as “We know we have to reduce emissions but first let's just add some more” (a bit like the person who wants to diet but wants to eat some more chocolate first to make it worthwhile).

Traffic increases and decreases

The promoter's claim that the road will bring “large reductions” on the A259 is a sign of outdated and discredited thinking. For almost twenty years it has been known that, in any absolute or long term sense, roads cannot relieve congestion but provoke it. In 1994 the first report of the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) concluded unambiguously that roads generate rather than solve congestion through the phenomenon of induced journeys. The report proved (to the satisfaction of the then Tory government) that we cannot build our way out of congestion, marked the death knell of the previous “predict and provide” orthodoxy and paved the way for the Multi-Modal studies set up by the Labour government after its victory in 1997. Even on roads which could be construed as having national significance the folly of trying to cure congestion by road building is all too clear – every traveller on the M25 can attest to this. On a local level, when the A259 is congested - and at many times this road is perfectly free flowing – it is so because of overwhelmingly local traffic. A very large part of this is going to and coming from the Ravenside Retail Park (has the scheme's promoter found out the % of traffic going there?). Given its starting and ending points the Link Road cannot be the most direct route for most of the drivers currently using the A259 and is several miles out of the way for the shops at Ravenside. One of two things could happen. Drivers could continue to use the A259 because it is the most direct route, in which the Link Road would have failed in this stated purpose, or else they could use the Link Road and so would be driving more than the minimum necessary. Any assumed relief of the A259 will inevitably be short-lived and probably not discernible since, with traffic increasing all the time, any slack created will be filled within a few years (I do not have recent figures for projected traffic growth but a few years ago the DoT estimated it would grow between 60 – 90 % by 2025). and new housing developments (there are at least two behind Marina) will add to this, filling up any short term alleviation.

Additionally, the Link Road would bring considerably increased traffic to other roads in northern Hastings and St Leonards, among them my own area and also The Ridge, on which stands the Hospital and three school sites and which was described as being at full capacity by the consultants for the SoCCMS. The numbers are horrifying; over 5,000 additional vehicles per day on The Ridge, approximately 10,000 on Queensway, 2,000+ more heading up Gillsman's Hill for the residential area in which I live. The promoter believes that the projected link to the link, the projected connection to the A21, will relieve this glut of extra cars. If this does come – what next? Another proposed road to funnel away eastwards the extra traffic which does not want to go on the A21? And so on.

Regeneration

This is the main plank of the promoter's arguments for the road. Repeatedly it asserts that the road "will bring" prosperity and that without it prosperity cannot come to the area. We are told the road will both allow existing businesses to expand and attract new ones to the area. This is presented as if assured; in reality it can be only wishful. It seems obvious to me (as a layperson) that inward investment is an unstable and risky basis for prosperity, subject to many imponderables and unpredictable. Are we, in an era of global financial uncertainty, expecting foreign investment? If it came how long would it stay? Would it be any more reliable in its commitment to this area than the Japanese companies which, during what has come to be known as the "lost decade" of the 1990s, rapidly shut overseas outposts, and that was from areas with "good" roads. Is it seriously suggested that national companies would come here rather than elsewhere because of a Link Road running from Bexhill to St Leonards? If companies relocate to this area two things are certain; one is that many and complex features will have obtained in a choice to do so and the other is that they will move as quickly as they come if conditions change.

Set against this lack of any objective, verifiable evidence are decades of academic research and empirical evidence. Since the early 1990s there has been ample evidence, founded on careful research, that the effect of roads on economically weak areas is often negligible or even damaging. The examples of this work are too numerous to cite here but just one example is the 1994 study of Professor John Whitelegg who published a report called "Roads, Jobs and the Economy" which detailed his findings from 34 areas in the UK. His conclusions were clear; there was no consistent correlation between proximity to what might be considered a good road and employment prospects. For example, Doncaster - less than twenty minutes from the M1 had only a fraction of the rise in jobs experienced by Grimsby, over seventy minutes away from the M1. Horncastle - more than 90 minutes away from the A1 - did better in terms of job opportunity than Newark-on-Trent, located on the A1. His conclusion was simple; job creation and in particular sustained levels of employment are related to factors more complex and more subtle than roads. Other research found that economically insecure areas (such as this) can actually be further undermined and eroded by roads, which, after all, provide egress as well as access. For instance, in 1999 (in draft, finalised in 2001) the SACTRA committee published a second influential report, this time looking at links between transport improvements and prosperity. The report's conclusions are complex and I am not pretending to have absorbed them. They deal as much with the (then) deficiencies in measuring economic impact as with the impact itself but the conclusions contain the following statement:

12. "Thus we are provided with a strong theoretical expectation that all or part of a successfully achieved transport cost reduction may subsequently be converted into a range of different wider economic impacts. This, in principle, provides for the possibility of improved economic performance. Empirical evidence of the scale and significance of such linkages is, however, weak and disputed. We conclude that the theoretical effects listed can exist in reality, but that none of them is guaranteed. Our studies underline the conclusion that generalisation about the effects of transport on the economy are subject to strong dependence on specific local circumstances and conditions."

The (1999/2001) SACTRA report was not ground-breaking in its scepticism about any proven link between roads and prosperity. The 1994 report found that after repeated studies in several countries, the “mainstream view” was that there was no sustained connection, stating

“the mood among researchers in this field suggests that transport investment has little detectable effect on the overall level of economic activity” (4.58).

Closer to home, there is a perfect example of the fallibility of relying on roads to secure economic benefits. During the 1990s the redoubtable Norman Baker, now MP for Lewes, served on as Chair of ESCC’s Economic Development Committee. During this period he took a keen interest in the link between roads and prosperity. In a written statement, prepared in April 1998, for an Examination in Public of ESCC’s/Brighton and Hove’s Structure Plan (1999 – 2001), Mr Baker related how he had noted the coincidence of an upgrading of the A23 with several relocations from Brighton, with a consequent rise in unemployment in the town. One of the relocations was by the Royal Mail. Mr Baker met senior managers at the Royal Mail, who informed him that one of the factors which had caused their relocation was the easier access to Brighton from Crawley afforded by the improved road. (Incidentally, it is mildly interesting and of some relevance to note that the Examination in Public to which Mr Baker’s evidence had been submitted concluded that the two Councils’ linking of housing development to new/improved roads was unsubstantiated and should be deleted.)

In the light of this wealth of research (with which I assume the road’s supporters must be familiar) I want to ask why they consider that this area, relatively isolated and insecure economically, will buck this trend. For instance, what is there to stop the greater accessibility (which **they** claim the Link Road would bring) allowing a company to close a outlet in this area, moving distribution to a larger centre made more accessible by the road?

Housing development

We are told that the land outside Bexhill needs the road to be unlocked. I cannot dispute the pressure that all local councils are subject to by central government to provide new housing but can query two aspects of this as a solution. First, I want to ask if the local authorities know exactly how many houses could be developed using brownfield sites and if they acknowledge that greenfield development inevitably undermines the impetus for renovating existing stock. I also want to question the certainty with which they present their claims. At a time of considerable doubt about the practicality, indeed the morality, of reverting to rising house prices as a means of and a measure of prosperity, what makes them so sure that developers will come to this patch of land once it has been “unlocked”? Why are they unable to rely on developer contributions, as they admit is the case? Who will move to the projected homes? How can they guarantee that a new development on the edge of two towns will not lead to a movement **from** the towns (leaving more homes empty in towns, a feature now widely recognised as undesirable)? How do they know the houses will sell at all and, if they do sell, have they factored into their projections about increased traffic the resulting increase in car dependent residents living outside the towns?

Public Transport

That this road has ever reached this stage is a shameful sign of the failure of local authorities and central government to provide what this area really needs, which is much improved public transport. The Bypasses decision in 2001, which was an end to one long and protracted process and should have been a beginning of a much more productive one, handed down instructions to the authorities to co-operate to produce a plan which would incorporate diverse strands, central to them potentially transformative transport improvements. Under consideration was a four-an-hour “Metro” service between Ore and Bexhill, a station at Glyne Gap

and electrification of the Ashford – Hastings line, to which the Minister’s statement described Go-Via as having agreed.

Not one of these has to date come about. The sad, shameful, irony is this. No mention was made in the 2001 Minister’s decision of any road and yet it is the only major transport scheme to be under active consideration today. It is almost impossible to detect now the moment at which another road scheme was inserted into what had previously been a road-free vision, so that by the time we came to the SoCoMMS consultation a road was back centre stage. A clue may be found in the press statement issued by ESCC on 1st October 2001 (about ten weeks after the Bypass decision) in which it set out its responses to the government’s mandate. It contains no mention of the public transport improvements but seems to be the genesis of the Link Road, described as a “relief road” which would link to the A21. Public bodies - the local councils - and partly public bodies, such as the SRA, failed in the task with which they had been implicitly charged by the Bypasses decision – to think again and think differently. It is not only that public transport improvements of the nature and magnitude necessary have not been implemented; it is also that the constant return to a road based answer - I cannot call it a solution - to this area’s needs (funded by public money) undermines any realistic possibility of a public transport based solution, which requires private investment. Insistence on a road fatally erodes the kind of confidence needed to bring private revenue to public transport, pushing it ever further back.

Conclusion – “those most in need”

“in opening up the land at north Bexhill, the Bypasses could have adverse effects for those wards in central Hastings which currently experience the worse deprivation” and would not have helped “those most in need”. (Minister’s Decision 2001)

I live close to one of the areas of the Minister’s concern; my son went to our local Primary School and I was a governor there for many years. The school is in and serves Central St Leonards, one of the most deprived wards in the borough. It is in a pollution trap, by which I mean that it is built in a deep dip at the intersection of four roads, with all the attendant emissions as cars drive slowly and idle at the junction. Even with the projected figure of about 2,000 extra cars per day coming up Gillsman’s Hill (which I find hard to accept at it seems an unfeasibly steep decrease from the Queensway number) the effect of the Link Road on my road and on the junction where the Primary School lies would be to increase considerably the traffic and pollution with which we have to live. Bad enough for me and my neighbours, who live in nice houses with large gardens - but for children of low income families, such as overwhelmingly characterise my son’s former school and who enjoy no such alleviation , - intolerable.

My mother is a pensioner whose pension is supplemented by Pension Credit – in other words she lives on the minimum income. She lives right on the A259 but has no desire at all to see a new road. Like most pensioners in this area (59.3% at the last figure as I have) she has no car. She is eighty and reliant on public transport to get into town and on her very poor quality local shops. What she wants and needs is improved public transport (so that, for instance, buses do not have cut off times as to when she can use her free bus pass) and much better local shops. She belongs, like many families who shared my son’s primary education, to the proportion of residents whose income does not and never will support car ownership. Even IF the road fulfils the promoter’s stated aims and produces a shiny new out of town development with new jobs and new houses, the prospect opens up only further impoverishment for them. Out of town developments suck life from the nearest towns; this trend is well documented and widely accepted. Will there be shops in the out-of-town-car-dependent development? At some point, probably. It is hard to see Tesco letting it go unexploited. Will they endanger the already fragile retail sector in the two towns? Probably. Might even more shops close in town as a result? Possibly - leaving those who cannot travel to it with even more depressed and empty town centres, with all their well established social problems ? Why would this road, this development, this

opening up of green land, do anything other or different from what has been consistently seen as the result of out of town developments for at least a decade now.

This road scheme offers no certainty other than that of more car journeys, more pollution, more worry about our children's and grandchildren's future. It is a discreditable response to the challenge thrown down by the government in 2001 and it should be to ESCC's shame that we are still discussing it today.