

**BEXHILL TO HASTINGS LINK ROAD
PUBLIC INQUIRY**

Proof of Evidence by

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Hastings Alliance Proof of Evidence - October 2009

My name is Nicholas Bingham and I am chairman of the Hastings Alliance for Sustainable Transport Solutions.

We support sustainable transport for Hastings and Bexhill and regeneration of the two towns. We were formed at the time of the bypass controversy 10 or so years ago and campaigned successfully against those roads. Our membership is an alliance of both local and national groups. Among our national members are: CPRE, Friends of the Earth, Roadblock, Railfuture, RSPB, Campaign for Better Transport, The Wildlife Trusts, The Woodland Trust and the World Wildlife Fund. Locally we are supported by the A27 Action Group, the Friends of the Brede Valley, Hastings Urban Wildlife Group, the Rother Environmental Group, RailFirst, Sussex SERA, the Wishing Tree Residents Association, local branches of Friends of the Earth and the CPRE, the Sussex Wildlife Trust and others.

All of our members have objected to this road in the past and many have either submitted written statements to this inquiry or will be speaking themselves. They cover a wide range of important issues including Landscape, Archaeology, Air quality, particularly around schools and the Conquest Hospital, the so called Greenway, Public Transport and the rail alternative.

I will present the headline Hastings Alliance view that **this expensive road will not provide the economic benefits claimed for it, and its overall environmental cost is unacceptable.**

Before reading my statement Mr Tipping, I'd like to make a point, of which I am sure you are aware, but it really does bear repeating.

We are not engaged in a democratic process here. The game is hugely weighted in favour of the proposers of schemes such as this. All my members - and this applies to all objectors to the BHLR - are volunteers and give their time, energy, talents and in many cases money in what is now a last ditch attempt to persuade you that this road simply does not make sense. From the formal start of this process over 5 years ago we have been up against a powerful bureaucracy staffed by probably hundreds of no doubt worthy people, whose daily lives are it seems dedicated to achieving the opposite objective. It's particularly irritating of course that we the taxpayers ultimately foot the bill!

I'm not just talking about the difficulty we have with the ranks of highly professional well paid experts who will no doubt be deployed during this inquiry in the name of the cause, but the denseness of the information we the objectors vainly work to master, the complexity of the laws we try to understand, the endless acres of tightly packed electronic information released, the simple cost and time expended by us amateurs just to print out a few relevant parts of this mountain of material.

I know you understand this and please forgive what may indeed sound like a whinge, but it is important that you take these facts into consideration throughout the length of the inquiry. It truly is a case of David against Goliath.

Let me tell you the key beliefs of the Hastings Alliance and then ask our experts, Professor Alan Wenban-Smith and Mr Keith Buchan to go into more detail.

I want to start by reminding you of what was said by the then Minister of State for Transport about a previous attempt to concrete over this, some of the most exceptional countryside in the South East. In 2001 Mr Spellar said:

“The Access to Hastings multi-modal study did not build a convincing regeneration case for the bypasses – it concluded that although the bypasses could possibly help to regenerate employment in the area this would not necessarily help those most in need. There would be reduced congestion in some areas of the town but the position would get worse in others. Against these rather weak arguments we had to place the evidently severe implications for the environment”

In July 2001 he rejected the bypasses. Nearly a decade later what has changed?

At the ESCC Planning meeting last December the supporters of the BHLR almost unanimously lamented that this similar road will severely damage the environment, landscape and habitats of the Combe Haven. These same supporters then went on to excuse themselves on the grounds that it will create 2000 to 3000 new jobs, and I’m sure they sincerely believed this to be the case.

One thing has changed since 2001. The art of spin has become very much more widely practised. The BHLR is now being peddled as the vital part of a 5 point plan to improve life in Hastings and Bexhill. The proposed road is now protected as part of a kind of moral crusade to help improve life in the two towns.

It’s interesting to re-read the far sighted October 2001 DTZ Pida report for SEEDA, entitled ‘An Action Plan to secure the future prosperity of Hastings and Bexhill’. This report was the genesis of the March 2002 ‘Five Point Plan’. In its 100 pages DTZ Pida made scant reference to the Link Road. Among many interesting different suggestions for achieving future prosperity, transport recommendations focused on rail and the A21 to London. In the local context it favoured the Ore-Bexhill Metro which it was suggested could improve connectivity between the two towns along with a link road. Several of these ideas are now in the process of being developed, but how on earth did the link road leap from one idea among many to become the key driver of Hastings and Bexhill prosperity?

We will show that the regeneration case for the road today is no stronger than it was when Mr Spellar rejected the bypasses in Summer 2001, or DTZ Pida came up with its blueprint for prosperity a few months later.

This local road will not turn Hastings into an employment hotspot to compete with the Thames Valley or the Gatwick area. Without the link to the A21 such a result is even less likely. Indeed it is questionable whether this inquiry should even be considering the BHLR in isolation. The confusion and lack of information on route, timing and finance of the Baldslow Link confirm the BHLR as simply a local road moving traffic from one route to another and joining the periphery of two neighbouring towns.

It is said that the road is needed to allow access to new houses to be built in North Bexhill. Surely there are other cheaper and less destructive ways of achieving this.

ESCC claims to have studied alternative solutions before selecting a road, and then this particular road, to solve the problems of Hastings and Bexhill. From the start of the process a road seems to have been the only option in the minds of the proposers. We don't believe they have gone nearly far enough to satisfy Government policy in this area.

Overwhelming local support is claimed for the project - 84% of Hastings and Bexhill. This is simply not true. 2558 people responded to a questionnaire in 2004. That's just 2% of the population of the two towns. 84% of those 2558 said they wanted the road. That's not 84% of residents, that's just 1.68%

Since then 62% of respondents to a poll in the Hastings Observer voted against the road.

Please remember too that well over 2000 people wrote in opposition to the planning application for this road. A significant number wrote again to oppose the Compulsory Purchase and Side Road Orders, the official business of this Inquiry. These objectors alone therefore outweigh the 2148 who responded positively to the questionnaire.

Our Government has committed this country to achieving significant reductions in climate changing emissions. We are on the brink of a crucial Copenhagen conference on Climate Change at which the world must commit itself to begin an almost unimaginably dramatic revolution in its way of life. This is surely a good time not to give the go-ahead to a dirty and environmentally last century solution to a local problem which will increase traffic and reduce the incentive to begin making those vital changes.

In summary then we believe this to be a flawed project. Too much time has been spent promoting the road and far too little considering if it is the right solution. This is an inappropriate way of spending significant sums of public money on a project with such certain environmental and climate change impact and such uncertain economic benefit.

My colleagues Alan Wenban-Smith and Keith Buchan will now explain the reasons for our conviction.