

Notes of a meeting held at Alciston and Selmeston Village Hall on Friday 29th July 2022

Participants:

Maria Caulfield MP (“MC”)

Ann Howard (Alciston); Simon Taylor (Alciston); Michael Garner (Arlington); Nicky Kinghorn (Arlington); Tim Burrough (Berwick); Victoria Burrough (Berwick); Jonathan Ruddock-West (Chalvington and Ripe); Natasha Bolger (Firle); Liz Hill (Firle); Chris Harris (Selmeston); Bryan Stevens (Selmeston); David Quysner (Selmeston)(“DQ”).

DQ welcomed everyone to the meeting with particular thanks to MC for having found time from a very busy schedule. He commented that there is no doubt that the A27 is a problematic road. The problems are not, however, with the road alone. The perennial threat of major work on the existing or a new road has blighted lives, impacted property values and divided communities for many decades. Worries about what might be proposed have often been fuelled by a poor standard of communication from the Government departments that have dealt with us. For instance, there had recently been consultative meetings to which some of our communities but not others had been invited. NH were also reluctant to publish data that might be helpful to us.

Lack of transparency leads to rumour and speculation, which can be toxic. MC said she will be meeting National Highways (NH) shortly and will emphasise the need for a broad and transparent pre-consultation process to include Parish Councils and Parish Meetings.

MC noted that the “A27 Reference Group” that she had chaired had been disbanded when its proposal for a Lewes to Polegate scheme was not chosen for funding under RIS2. She said that the possible routes for a new road that had been put forward at that time and which included a route well north of the railway line, were therefore “off the table”. However, the A27 Lewes to Polegate was being looked at again under RIS3 because it is a poorly performing strategic road with one of the highest fatality rates in the country for an A road. It is one of 32 RIS3 schemes on which NH is working.

The fact that NH had recently asked for access to land over a wide area, from the A27 to north of Arlington reservoir, was necessary “due diligence” that did not indicate any particular intention as regards the route for a road.

It is proposed that there will be a public consultation on options for the A27 in the spring/summer of 2023, leading to the selection of a preferred option for further consultation at the end of that year or early in 2024. Any scheme would then have to

compete for funding with others, across the whole country. MC noted that a number of RIS2 projects had slipped forward into RIS3 and that, with national finances having deteriorated in recent years, competition was intense.

She commented that building a whole new road is a cheaper option than upgrading the existing one in part because existing junctions would not need to be accommodated. She could not comment on particular design features of past or potential future schemes. She said, however, that she wanted to see improvements to the existing A27, with particular regard to safety rather than journey times. In response to a question, she said that she had no particular preference for either widening the existing road along its whole length or in sections.

She had always made it clear that she would not support a proposal to build a new road cutting across the countryside. If funding were available, she would be in favour of smaller schemes, such as a widening of the section between the Beddingham and Southerham roundabouts and intervention at other “pinch points”. In response to a question, she said that she was not opposed to some incursions into the National Park. The SDNPA were open to discussion on this and might take the view that a new “super-highway” could have a greater adverse impact on the Park than some smaller works that cut into it.

A question was raised regarding the accident rate on the road and MC offered to let us have the relevant data. She said that there had been numerous fatalities that had been caused by the layout of the road and visibility rather than excess speed. The new Firle to Glynde crossing would help to improve safety but there were ongoing problems at other locations, including the junction at the Selmeston garage.

It was certainly the case that a lower speed limit would reduce accidents. However, the A27 is a national, strategic road and a permanent reduction in the speed limit, which would require legislation, was not likely to happen.

We speculated on the attitude of other communities and organisations to a new road. It was suggested that Polegate would be unlikely to support a major scheme because of fears that it would encourage more housing, with a knock-on effect on other roads and services in the area. Wealden’s position was less clear. Their Plan had envisaged a new road because this was considered essential in the context of their housing targets. However, they did not really want to build the number of houses required by central government and might actually prefer to have no new road and fewer new houses. ESCC had in the past supported the idea of a new super-highway but this was not considered to be a strongly held view. Eastbourne, both in the form of its MP, Caroline

Ansell (Con) and its Chamber of Commerce, was generally in favour of a new road. Lewes was not very vocal on the subject.

MC suggested that one of the groups we should be aware of is Transport for South East, which is a partnership of Local Authorities, LEPs and others, whose role is “to add strategic value by making sure that funding and strategy decisions about transport in the South East are informed by local knowledge and priorities.” They are concerned with all aspects of transport, including rail.

There were a number of questions relating to rail and the need for an integrated transport policy. MC said that she had campaigned for the reopening of the Lewes to Uckfield Line and for electrification of the Uckfield Line. However, the pandemic-driven fall in passenger numbers meant that the economic case for many passenger schemes was less valid. This might also apply to road schemes. It was suggested that more effort might go into encouraging use of the train, for instance by reducing the high level of parking charges at stations.

MC commented that there had been some success in increasing the volume of freight traffic to Newhaven by rail.

We discussed the impact of changes to planning policy that may affect the number of houses to be built in Wealden, including the way the 5-year land supply is calculated, acknowledgement that the critical algorithm is based on outdated population projections and removal of the “affordability uplift” criteria. As noted above, a requirement for fewer houses would significantly change the cost/benefit analysis associated with a new road.

In response to a question, MC said that the ability of Parishes to influence NH and others would be greatly enhanced if there were to be a collective, multi-Parish view. It would also be helpful if lobbying was not entirely negative. If there were initiatives that the community would support, these were more likely to be implemented and this might reduce the impetus for other, less welcome schemes.

DWQ

30.7.22