

WEST DORSET WESTERN AREA TRANSPORT ACTION GROUP (WATAG)

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Western Gateway Draft Strategic Transport Plan 2020–2025

WATAG (West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group) is a voluntary group with an interest in public transport principally in West Dorset and supported by Dorset Council. It holds public meetings every 2 months (currently suspended due to Covid-19), and acts as a forum for Town & Parish Councils and interest groups to express their views and air problems about all [public] transport matters.

Shown below are our initial comments on the above 'strategic transport plan'. It was prepared at short notice, since we were only recently made aware of its existence and have not had the opportunity of discussing it with Dorset Council, which is one of the 9 Local Authorities that forms The Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body.

WATAG's RESPONSE

WATAG has a number of concerns and observations, which we would like addressed, or at least acknowledged, prior to adoption of the Western Gateway Draft Strategic Transport Plan 2020–2025. The Plan's recognition of the imperative to decarbonize transport is contradicted by its commitments to regional economic growth as defined by Gross Value Added and to a raft of infrastructure projects, notably road-building and support for airport expansion, all of which will almost certainly exacerbate the climate emergency (to which Dorset Council has signed up). Projects which are partly framed as supporting Dorset's local economies are just, if not more, likely to undermine rural communities and market-towns by pulling in goods and services from elsewhere.

Although presented as short-term, the Plan is intended to shape the parameters for long-term (30-year) regional planning. It pays no more than lip service to the possibility – let alone the necessity – that radical and permanent changes are needed as to how people and goods are moved in, around and through the region. The kind of thinking underpinning this Plan led to the proposal to expand the M4 between Newport and Cardiff: what is needed is the holistic approach based on inter-generational social, environmental and economic justice which recently led the Welsh government to abandon that project.

The Board of the Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body intends to finalize and approve the Plan in September. This timescale is far too tight, and, in light of the Covid-19 situation, should be 'put on hold' for full consultation and sober reflection by all concerned.

The Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body: *A reminder of what it is*

- A non-statutory, shadow alliance of nine English local authorities (including Dorset and BCP Councils) forming a regional belt – the 'Western Gateway' – defined roughly by Cheltenham, Christchurch, Lyme Regis and Weston-Super-Mare.
- Other Board membership heavily weighted to business interests and infrastructure providers, including: Department for Transport; Western Gateway Transport and Business Forum; Highways England, and Peninsula Transport STB (Cornwall, Devon, part Somerset).

(page 1 of 3)

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- It aims to enhance the region's influence in discussions with UK government about infrastructure investments for 'strategic transport',
- And improving relations with the Department for Transport, Highways England and Network Rail
- 'Strategic transport' is defined as the movement of goods or people between *two local authority areas* – therefore *not* necessarily long-distance or 'essential' transport.

Planning horizons/visions/methods

- Its current plan is short-term, to 2025 BUT "Despite the short timeframe the plan identifies long-term strategy aims..." for a plan to 2050. The Board aims to adopt a long-term plan in March 2023, to inform government investment from 2025.
- There are cursory references to the possibility that Covid-19 will effect radical changes to the way we live and move AND to the imperative to decarbonize transport. BUT no evidence that either the short-term plan nor the – largely implicit – long-term 'strategy aims' are based on any scenarios other than '*Business As Usual*' with some minor environmental mitigations, often based on technological fixes.
- It relies heavily on discredited predict-and-provide methods based on extrapolations from population forecasting and assumed levels of economic activity.
- There is no evidence of whole life-cycle carbon accounting.

Projects directly affecting Dorset:

Southern Transport Hub

- This is defined by BCP and its travel-to-work zone, including in Dorset the A354 corridor from Portland/ Weymouth/ Dorchester/ Blandford and onwards to Salisbury.
- We welcome recent initiatives and short-term proposals to develop active travel and public-transport, and reduce high car-dependency *within* BCP and along *some* short, cross-border corridors into the Dorset Council area.
- However, many other projects are inconsistent with mitigation of the climate emergency. E.g. the advocacy in the medium-to-long-term of "strategic road connectivity and access to Bournemouth Airport and the Port of Poole", reflecting a simplistic paradigm linking connectivity and GDP/ GVA economic activity.
- As does advocacy of "an effective north-south [road] link to the M4" through rebuilding the A350 – a decades-old, potentially hugely environmentally damaging scheme currently under investigation by Highways England as part of its 'Road Improvement Strategy'.
- Similarly the A31 to Poole [docks] Link Road could only (further) degrade the (inter)nationally important lowland-heath SSSI between Wimborne and Poole.

Southern Growth Corridor: Strategic Corridor H2 – South East to South West

- This is the A31/ A35 corridor linking Southampton (M3) with Exeter (M5) and the SW Peninsula, with Dorset and BCP Councils as lead authorities.
- We feel that the assertion that Dorset's rural SMEs "require high quality road links" with urban centres to sell goods and services, access labour, and "connect with other local businesses" is questionable - improved connectivity can just as easily suck out economic activity to other, better-off and more accessible locations, or more readily pull in goods and services from elsewhere, displacing truly local businesses.

(page 2 of 3)

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- This plan presents the A31/ A35 as an alternative to the M4/ M5 for accessing tourist destinations from the SE. The risk with this plan is two-fold, that vastly increased road traffic: (i) continues to pass through Dorset to the west without significant local benefits, or; (ii) facilitates concentrations and kinds of tourism, such as sea cruising, which are of questionable local benefit and/ or environmentally unsustainable. In the case of (i), it should be noted that both A31 (parts of) and A35 (most of) are ill equipped to carry the *existing* flows of traffic; the fact that Chideock – on the A35 – has the highest NO2 levels in the Country must be of deep concern and shame to Dorset Council.
- It systematically assumes that highway investment is the only solution to allegedly poor connectivity. E.g. poor rail links to/from Portland/Weymouth means “it is important that access by road is easy and consistent”. There is little mention of the ‘rail alternative’ between Bournemouth and Exeter, via Dorchester and Yeovil that has been mooted for more than a decade.
- It makes highly speculative, ad hoc arguments about increased post-Brexit short-sea shipping flows to Port of Poole; “In order to be ready of this opportunity the quality of the surrounding highway network must be improved.”
- It supports airport expansion: “Having identified the potential growth of the UK holiday industry, both Southampton and Bournemouth Airport have stated plans to increase their passenger numbers, so appropriate action will need to be taken to allow this growth to occur”. It points out that Southampton already has good public transport links but “Bournemouth lacks both public transport and effective highway links”. We would expect improvements in public transport to take priority over yet more highways.
- Similarly for the cruise industry “also identified as a major growth area, which will further increase the draw of the coast and the need to focus on the A-road network between the urban centres”, including ‘Portland Port’.

The Missing Link Strategic Corridor V2 – Midlands to South Coast

- Warminster to: Poole/Bournemouth; and Dorchester/Weymouth
- It repeats many of the assertions noted above regarding: tourist access to Dorset’s “natural assets and... the growing cruise industry at Portland, Poole and Southampton”; and links to Southampton and Bournemouth airports, “a key driver for the economy to the south of Western Gateway”.

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31 July 2020

For further information, please contact **WATAG** on:-

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(page 3 of 3)

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