

WINCHELSEA TOWN PLAN

FIRST DRAFT *(with minor edits MJDS 11/11/04)*

BACKGROUND PAPER ON LONG TERM STRATEGIC ISSUES RELATING TO TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT

This paper aims to provide a wide-ranging review of the long-term strategic issues relating to traffic and transport in Winchelsea drawing on a broad selection of published information. It identifies the major strategic issues to be taken into account in the preparation of the Traffic and Transport Section of the Town Plan and the options available to deal with these. The paper seeks to inform and therefore seeks to be as objective as possible, but it is not comprehensive. The subject matter is complex and there are many vested interests at local, regional and national levels, which all have varying perspectives. The debate about future investment decisions in transport arouses strong opinions both within the community of Winchelsea and far beyond. Transport and infrastructure are central to our lives and welfare, impacting most economic and social activities. Environmental factors and interests are also very important.

The approach adopted in this briefing paper is that major issues should be seen in their wider context for them to be fully understood and for the full range of options to be revealed. The paper is divided into three main sections, each dealing with a major group of transport issues: regional policies and developments; road; and rail. The content and any views expressed are the responsibility of the author alone. Comments and suggestions for changes are welcome.

Regional policies and developments

The area between Hastings and Folkestone lies between the High Weald and the coast and embraces an exceptional coastal plain renowned for its marshes and historic maritime Cinque Ports (the Antient Towns). It is an area of unspoilt natural beauty and with a rich heritage, clearly visible in the landscape and its modest settlements. However it is an area bedevilled by poor physical communications.

Transport issues in Kent and the area around Hastings are recognised as some of the most severe in the country. The government's approach has been to use multi-modal studies to identify tailored, integrated and sustainable solutions to such transport problems. Through these studies, strategies and their component projects are weighed according to their economic, environmental, safety, accessibility and integration impacts before decisions are taken so that costs and benefits are fully explored and understood.

The South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) provides planning guidance, including a regional transport strategy. Ashford has been identified as a potential growth area, forming a transport hub at the northern end of the A259/A2070. Hastings is not a hub but is considered to be at the end of spokes radiating from Brighton, Tonbridge and Ashford. Hastings is part of the priority area for economic regeneration for the Sussex coastal towns. SEERA has proposed a substantial transport investment programme as part of a wider regeneration programme of the Hastings area. Current transport deficiencies include unreliable journey times on strategic road links, poor rail services, infrequent and unreliable public transport

services and a series of problems for walkers and cyclists. The proposed Western and Eastern Hastings Bypasses were attempts to contribute to the regeneration of Hastings, but these proposals had severe implications for the environment, which is a key consideration. There is a broad commitment to upgrading the A21 north-south access to Hastings but road improvements south of Pembury would involve serious damage to the High Weald AONB.

Currently there is no overall strategy for the south coastal route, merely the remnants of the Honiton to Folkestone coastal highway first proposed in the 1930's and subsequently built piecemeal. The A2070 from Brenzett to Ashford is an important recent component. The Bexhill and Hastings bypasses are two further contentious, potential components. An assumption remains that when these bypasses are built they will in turn precipitate an increased flow of traffic eastwards of Hastings towards Ashford or across Romney Marsh, which the current A259 is ill-equipped to cope with. Recent studies including the Access to Hastings Multi-Modal Study 2001 and the South Coast Multi-Modal Study 2002 (SoCoMMS) have produced no clear view of the way forward, save for the possibility of restrictions on HGVs and some additional investment in public transport.

The most recent attempt to deal with these problems was in 1995/96 when the Department of Transport proposed the redevelopment of the Guestling Thorne to Brenzett section of the A259, including a by-pass for Icklesham, a tunnel under Winchelsea Hill, and a new crossing of the Rother between Rye and Rye Harbour. Considerable public opposition and a number of proposals for alternative routes caused this initiative to collapse.

The Brede Valley is within the High Weald AONB and runs across the proposed line of the 1995 east-west coastal route. The construction of an Eastern Hastings Bypass would have a negative impact on the Brede Valley and would pose the question as to what would happen to traffic at the eastern end of the bypass (thought to be in the area of Guestling Thorne). There is no current proposal to deal with this traffic.

However given that the existing A259 east of Hastings cannot be improved to strategic trunk road standard without unacceptable environmental economic and social damage, an alternative east-west route has been proposed by various NGOs to the north of the existing flood plain, linking the M20 with the A21, which is scheduled for improvement. The aim of this new road corridor would be to link the coastal centres of Brighton, Lewes and Eastbourne with Ashford in a more direct corridor, well inland of the current A259.

Road transport

Road transport is crucial to today's way of life, where most rural households are car dependent. Public transport plays a minor role in local transport. Today Winchelsea is a small but unusual community with a special character. Once a major medieval port and shipbuilding centre, the settlement is no longer a major terminus or destination in itself but it is located on an important east-west coastal route.

Winchelsea is one of two neighbouring citadels in a sub-region of outstanding character and natural interest with considerable specialist tourism potential. Winchelsea relies on the A259 as a primary access route to neighbouring communities and to regional centres. With other coastal communities, Winchelsea

suffers the many disadvantages and hazards, which increasing traffic on this coastal route brings.

The A259 trunk road follows an historic route and is an amalgam of old coaching roads, which is far below minimum acceptable standards with narrow carriageways, severe bends, gradients and congestion not least in the service centres and residential areas through which it passes. According to the Highways Agency the A259 currently has seven functions:

- A link between Sussex coastal towns and various terminals for Continental departures and arrivals
- A route for abnormal loads (for which the Hastings to Brenzett section is recognised as unsuitable)
- A link between the coastal towns and regional centres (Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone)
- A primary link between Hastings and the designated strategic growth area of Ashford
- Local access to Hastings, Rye and Ashford
- Access to the M20 and Lydd Airport
- Access for local industry, agriculture and tourism.

Winchelsea is an important centre for tourism and national heritage. Its unspoilt and distinctive planned layout and many ancient buildings are of outstanding appeal. Its historical and archaeological features are of international importance and merit concerted conservation measures. Its character and appeal are strengthened by proximity to its neighbouring citadel, Rye, and therefore this relationship is important to the outcome of any transport initiatives.

The A259 directly and adversely impacts the settlement of Winchelsea. Ferry Hill is a serious, recognised 'pinch point' and hazard on the coastal trunk route, particularly for goods vehicles. This poses a direct threat to one of three remaining Town Gates, the Pipewell Gate - a 14th century ancient monument. Rectory Lane forms one perimeter of the main residential area and has to be crossed for access to recreational facilities, farmland and a number of residential properties. High Street, German Street and Monks Walk currently serve as a short cut ("rat run") for local traffic at peak times effectively bisecting the main residential area of the Town. As well as a substantive threat to a unique heritage and the environment, the current position amounts to the abrogation of residential, cyclist and pedestrian rights and as such is contrary to official policy and unacceptable to members of the community.

The volume of traffic on the A259 was said by the SoCoMMS to be low (with an annual average daily total flow of about 10,000 vehicles per day) though there is additional holiday traffic in summer. Overall there is said to be no capacity problem at present. HGV movements account for about 5% of total movements between 7am and 7pm. Local traffic is the majority of movement and is growing; there is no separation of through traffic from local and traffic directly flows through residential areas. Further growth in local traffic is to be expected from planned housing and commercial development between Rye and Rye Harbour, from expansion south of Ashford and regeneration in Hastings. The A259 is said to be too narrow at Winchelsea and Rye; it does not have standards associated with trunk roads in these areas and there are issues with the hill at Winchelsea. Traffic control and management improvements have been identified at Winchelsea and Rye. Current

traffic activity within both Rye and Winchelsea creates safety, environmental and operational nuisance – there may be a need for further study.

Currently a Route Management Strategy for the A259 is underdevelopment with a view to planning and optimising road investment over the next 10 years. The initial draft includes a statement of 'route outcomes' defining areas where change is most needed. These include:

- safety improvements where problems have been identified
- removal of pinch points, where these generate problems, with particular reference to the A259 between Winchelsea and Brenzett
- environmental improvements with a focus on landscaping, ecology and lighting
- better access to traveller facilities through better signing
- better facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians where these are perceived as shortfalls at specific locations
- facilitation of development to the south of Ashford, in and around Rye and at Hastings as part of the regeneration initiative.

These findings are to be validated or modified through further consultation.

There have been numerous attempts to relieve Winchelsea of the effects of traffic over the last century. The earliest complaints about traffic were associated with the steep hills and large volume of dust generated by horses and carts in the mid 19th century. There have been several attempts to upgrade the A259 with major schemes having been developed in 1904, 1927, 1961 and 1980 but all were abandoned, often in the face of strong local opposition. In the late 1960's the A259 trunk road was diverted at Winchelsea from Strand Hill and the High Street along Tanyard Lane, Ferry Hill and Rectory Lane. However much local rush-hour traffic still negotiates Strand Hill, passing through the centre of the Town and creating a notorious 'rat-run' in the rush hour. The current pattern of traffic flows has a strong negative impact on Winchelsea Town through noise and vibration, pollution, traffic hazards and mixing of residential and traffic areas with consequential adverse safety and severe environmental consequences.

Rail

The coastal plain between Hastings and Ashford is currently served by a largely single track railway, which is diesel operated and currently provides an hourly stopping service between Hastings and Ashford. There are no direct services to London or the South Coast towns. The coastal route to Hastings and beyond is currently under-utilised. Contributory factors are peak rail travel pricing and the poor quality of service, although the recent introduction of new rolling stock has improved the quality of service.

The current franchisee was originally committed to electrifying the Marshlink by 2006, however this requirement was changed with the agreement of the Strategic Rail Authority in the light of expected improvements to services from the introduction of new diesel coaches. Development at Ashford and any additional travel requirements to and from Hastings are expected to be met by rail services.

Martin Hogg, 10 November 2004