

Question 11

Policy 9 - Northern Relief Road

1. As with the Western Relief Road, the City of Durham Trust remains completely opposed to the Council's proposal for a Northern Relief Road for the City. Its effects would be contrary to the Council's own transport policies and sustainability objectives, and the scheme would have very damaging effects on the environment and setting of the City, both by encouraging road traffic growth and through its direct impact on the Green Belt, including the sensitive and valued woodland landscape of the River Wear gorge through Kepier Wood. It would sever the established Weardale Way long distance footpath at the historic Frankland Lane, and also impact adversely on the paths on the eastern side of the river, the Low Newton Local Nature Reserve, and other sites of ecological interest. The western end of the route could also potentially conflict with future proposals for the re-use of the Leamside-Newton Hall railway alignment, and with possible requirements for the provision of additional capacity on the existing East Coast Main Line following the Government's recent commitment of £240m for the route's upgrading.¹
2. Just as with the case for its Western equivalent, the arguments that are set out for the Northern Relief Road in paras 4.113-125 and 4.134-6 of the *Preferred Options* report are highly selective and biased. As detailed in the Trust's response to Question 10, the Council has not robustly examined alternative policy approaches which would obviate the need for this costly and intrusive addition to the financial burden which the existing road network places on its council-tax payers.
3. The Council's case is further weakened by the admission in para 4.137 and elsewhere in the documentation that the road would not be required until the very end of the plan period. Despite the significantly different phasing which the Council proposes for the delivery of the two relief roads, its published documentation analyses the traffic case and consequences of the Northern Relief Road in combination with the Western Relief Road, rather than separately. This is contrary to accepted good practice, and means that the specific traffic evidence which the Council claims in support of the Northern Relief Road scheme has no transparency.
4. It is also clear that (again, in common with the Western Relief Road) the prior approvals which the Council cites for the Northern Relief Road are not relevant to this particular proposal, since the scheme that it now seeks to promote is on a different alignment. In its highly selective presentation of the concept's origins and previous standing, the Council has also failed to acknowledge that, despite its inclusion in the Structure Plan, the earlier proposal for a northern relief road was expressly excluded from the North East Prioritisation Framework issued in 2006. The former City Council's Local Plan, while safeguarding an

¹ Department for Transport, *Railways Act 2005 statement* (2012), para 52.

alignment for a northern relief road, acknowledged that the scheme achieved a low NATA (New Approach to Transport Appraisal) score, and would require further evaluation at the planning stage because of its environmental impact.² The Capita Symonds work that was undertaken in 2004 to refine options for a northern relief road calculated a low benefit-cost ratio for the proposal, and drew attention to the probability that such a road would of itself have the counter-productive effect of encouraging traffic growth. Capita Symonds concluded that its Option 5 (the Northern Relief Road) “does not allow for the removal of traffic from Durham City by the provision of an alternative route”.³ Presumably for these reasons, the previous County Council did not include a northern relief road in either its first or second Local Transport Plans.

5. For the Council to claim, as it does in para 4.154, that “in fact the amount of traffic since that time [2004] has increased significantly” is a distortion of the actual evidence. Traffic flow counts on all A roads and motorways in County Durham in 2004 summed to 2,029,844 vehicles: in 2011 the total was 2,115,336 – only 4% higher, hardly a “significant” increase over 7 years. Growth on the county-administered A roads was slightly less, at 3.5%.
6. Flows on individual roads naturally vary within the County totals, but of the A roads close to the projected Northern Relief Road, average daily flows on the A167 north of Sniperley increased by only about 700 vehicles between 2004 and 2011 (2.4%), while those on the A690 section between the A1(M) junction and the Gilesgate roundabout increased by just under 3000 vehicles (11.5%). Between Gilesgate roundabout and the A691 junction (including Milburngate bridge) traffic volumes on the A690 fell by almost 4000 vehicles (-9.4%) over the same period, while those on the A691 between Milburngate and Sniperley increased by 1000 vehicles (3.8%).⁴ The increase in traffic on the high-capacity Gilesgate-Belmont section of the A690 was more than offset by the fall on the cross-town section between Gilesgate and Milburngate, so the overall picture is hardly one of insupportable traffic growth on the routes that might be relieved by the Northern Relief Road.
7. As already noted, the fact that the Council itself does not consider that this new road would be needed until the end of the plan period (and only then if housing development takes place on contested sites) confirms that there is no proven traffic justification for its inclusion in the County Plan at the present stage.
8. In addition, however, scrutiny of the figures in the Jacobs papers which the Council has included in the evidence base in support of its road proposals suggests that, despite the stated intention of diverting through traffic away from the existing road network through and surrounding the City, the provision of the Northern Relief Road would largely serve to relieve the A1(M) north of its junction with the A690 by routing more traffic via Durham's

² City of Durham Council, *Local Plan*, paras 6.32-3 (accessed via http://www.cartoplus.co.uk/durham/text/06_t_transport.htm#t3)

³ Capita Symonds, *Durham Northern Relief Road: APR Submission (Report Number: DUR/04/009/Rev)* (2004), p 18.

⁴ <http://www.dft.gov.uk/traffic-counts/download.php>

northern outskirts. Figure 26 of the main Jacobs report shows that flows on the A1(M) in 2030 would decrease substantially in both the morning and evening peaks, while the A167 north of Sniperley would see a significant increase in traffic volumes.⁵ As the Jacobs report itself acknowledges, traffic to and from the Chester-le-Street direction would be attracted away from the A1(M) and back onto the A167.⁶ As a consequence, in 2030 the Northern Relief Road would already be approaching congestion westbound in the morning peak and eastbound in the evening peak. Jacobs' modelling also identifies that it would be operating in excess of capacity westbound in the evening peak.⁷ In addition to the noise and air pollution that the Relief Road would create for the adjoining residential areas in Newton Hall, some existing roads within Newton Hall would experience significant increases in traffic flows, and junction delays would increase in both the morning and evening peaks at the A167/A1(M) intersection and the Pity Me and Red House roundabouts.⁸

9. By freeing up capacity on the A1(M) north of Durham, the Northern Relief Road could have the effect of actually undermining the County Council's overarching objective for the County Plan, that of supporting additional employment in the City of Durham. This extra headroom for traffic growth on the direct motorway link northwards would make it easier for County Durham residents (particularly those from the eastern side of the City itself but also from areas further south and to the east of the motorway) to commute by car to the far wider range of employment opportunities in the Tyne & Wear conurbation. Consequently, more housing with the Council's area would become accessible to residents who were employed outside the county, reducing the stock available to those working locally and encouraging less sustainable travel patterns.
10. This possibility needs to be taken into consideration as a potentially significant offset against the contribution to its preferred policies that the Council attributes to the Northern Relief Road. This contribution principally results from the trivial reductions in car users' modelled cross-city peak travel times that the new road *might* facilitate. These time savings (which are inclusive of the benefits already attributed to the Western Relief Road) would amount at most to 3.2 minutes in one direction in the corridor between Bowburn and Sacriston. They would generally be less than 2 minutes on the other routes through the City, but in two instances would entail *increases* in car travel times.⁹ Crucially, relief to the A690 through the City would be minimal, despite the claims that are made for the Northern Relief Road as a means of reducing city-centre congestion and pollution. The provision of this relief road would of itself also attract more traffic to the A167 south of Sniperley.

⁵ Jacobs, *Durham Local Development Framework (LDF) option appraisal: final report* (2012), para 5.6.3, p 66.

⁶ Loc cit.

⁷ Ibid, para 5.6.4, p 68; Figure 27, p 69.

⁸ Ibid, Figure 28, p 71.

⁹ Jacobs, op cit, Table 37, p 72. The modelled 3.2 minute gain in one direction in the Bowburn-Sacriston corridor would be offset by a 1 minute loss in the other direction in the morning.

11. The assumed benefits for only one section of the community (peak hour car commuters) need to be considered against a background in which motorists in Durham already enjoy faster average journey times than the regional and GB average. Account also needs to be taken of the environmental damage, increases in road traffic, and reductions in public transport use and active travel which the Council's road construction proposals would directly cause. When the Council itself does not envisage a requirement for the Northern Relief Road's early delivery, it is difficult to see any credible case for including the building of this road as a core strategy within the preferred options for the County Plan. The Trust therefore urges Durham County Council to withdraw its Policy 9.