

**Transport and Works Act 1992 (TWA)**

**Transport and Works (Inquiries Procedure) Rules 2004**

**Application for the Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) Order**

**Public Local Inquiry - Department for Transport Reference: TWA/18/APP/02/OBJ/1002**

**Friday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2021 9.30am**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Since I filed my Statement of Case in September 2018 in this Application, as a Rother District Councillor, and at that time portfolio holder for tourism (public realm and culture), I have become the Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye. The concerns I highlighted in my Statement have not changed. In fact, my concerns about the wider economic impact of a level crossing over the main trunk road to one of the most deprived towns in the country, let alone the South East, have only become more pertinent.

Since becoming the MP for Hastings and Rye, I have had the opportunity to speak to many local businesses, the hospital and schools, amongst many other organisations. The common complaint is that Hastings has poor connectivity which impacts on the businesses' ability to grow – even to recruit staff and retain them. The latter is so for the hospital and schools. The poor road and rail connections is also attributed to the difficulty of attracting businesses to locate to Hastings. I am disappointed, therefore, that no consultation has been undertaken by RVR with the Hastings Chamber of Commerce, for example, or any of the businesses or other organisations as to their views about the level crossing and how or if it might impact in them.

The Applicant commissioned a Local Economic Impact Study from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2007, with an update in October 2013. It is likely that the steam railway will have a positive local economic impact and enable a more secure economic base for Kent and East Sussex Railway. I do not dispute that. However, there is no conclusion that the Scheme would have a positive economic impact for the wider area. In fact, the authors of the Study's final comment that they *'recognise that increased visitor numbers and the introduction of level crossings (especially on the A21 Robertsbridge by-pass) may have negative economic impacts arising from the RVR/K&ESR 'missing link'.*

There appears to be a clear lack of understanding – or even care – on the part of the Applicant about the wider socio-economic impact that a level crossing on the A21 will have. I doubt that the deprived communities of Hastings and St Leonards, or the businesses and other organisations there, and what would be a benefit - or detriment - to them, have been considered at all by the Applicant.

One of the 'economic corridors' that Transport for the South East seeks to identify for investment is the A21 road infrastructure. Transport for the South East's primary aim is to support and grow the economy through identification and prioritisation of a programme of integrated strategic transport projects and programmes. It is well established that transport connectivity supports economic growth and the flow of traffic is important. TfSE Economic Connectivity Review also evidences how delay in journey times can negatively impact on economic growth; a one minute journey time saving on key corridors adds £4.5 million to the economy. Frequent 51 second (or 76 seconds I understand is the updated time for each closure of the A21 for the train to cross) will have a negative impact on journey times and subsequently the wider economy.

The A21 is already a slow road south of Tunbridge Wells and has the reputation for being a 'complete nightmare', 'a joke' the 'snail trail'. It is not just the reality of the road being one of the most dangerous roads in the country – but also of public perception; the road is slow so an additional impediment of a level crossing to already slow moving traffic will only add to the negativity around the road and ultimately getting to Hastings, Rye and local villages.

Tourism is vital to Hastings and Rye, with over 30% of my constituency's economy dependent on it. I have no doubt that the RVR steam railway will have some beneficial impact for Hastings and Rye, but there is more to the tourism economy than a steam railway between Tenterden and Robertsbridge and our wider tourism economy is dependent on better road – and rail – links.

ESCC Local Transport Plan 3 2011 - 2026 4.48 states that *"our strategic infrastructure, to carry longer distance traffic, is seen as a major constraint by local business to achieving economic growth and improving our connectivity with the rest of the region. This can result in traffic using less appropriate rural roads, creating a greater maintenance burden on those roads leading to higher accident rates and poorer connectivity between areas"*.

When I researched my Maiden Speech last year, I looked back at the Maiden Speeches of my last four predecessors in Hastings and Rye, starting with Kenneth Warren in 1972. All of them highlight the necessity of improvements to the A21 as being an essential prerequisite to economic development in the constituency.

I stood there, nearly 50 years later, making the same point; that to have any chance of 'levelling up' opportunities in Hastings and Rye, of providing opportunities to all our residents and of unleashing the potential of Hastings and Rye residents and businesses, the Government needs to invest in the A21 – and in the local rail and bus transport infrastructure.

A good transport infrastructure platform combined with a skilled local population will encourage existing businesses to grow and new businesses to start up, boosting economic growth in Hastings and Rye and combating poverty.

Since becoming an MP, I have joined with other East Sussex and Kent MPs bordering the A21 to lobby the Government for improvements to the A21.

I would like to refer you to paragraph 5.2 of my Statement of Case – to a letter written to the MPs bordering the A21, to Jesse Norman, the then Roads Minister. My predecessor, Amber Rudd, was one of the signatories.

*'In November 2017, a report by the Road Safety Foundation cited the A21 from Hurst Green to Hastings as the highest risk road on England's Strategic Road Network, with the place most likely to be killed on an A-Road being the A21 junction at Coopers Comer. This is sobering and should be cause alone for an upgrade to be approved but there is a practical impact on others too - the March 2017 South Coast Central Route Strategy recognised this stating, "The lack of viable alternative routes also means this corridor has limited resilience to disruption." Accidents sadly can and do grind to a halt one of the country's most important roads'*

*Our ambition is to see a modern dual carriageway which befits the main link between the M25 and south coast. For decades schemes have been designed, approved and scrapped. Sometimes as a whole, more often for separate sections. But they have all demonstrated that the need is clear. We have every confidence the case for dualling the A21 from top to toe satisfies the five key aims of RIS2 as well as the four goals in the Transport Investment Strategy'.*

My predecessor, Amber Rudd was very concerned too about the negative impact on Hastings and Rye of a level crossing on the A21. She opposed the building of a level crossing on the A21 and believed that there are safer and more effective ways to re-establish a transport link between Robertsbridge and Bodiam which should be explored. I agree with her and would urge you to consider alternative transport links which do not involve interrupting the traffic flow on this trunk road to one of the most deprived towns in the country.

I have not spoken today about the safety of the level crossing nor the environmental impact – as well as the personal impact on the farmers; these issues, no doubt, have been discussed in more detail by other parties.

This amazing Constituency, my home, is located in the affluent South East, but it suffers from some of the lowest levels of deprivation in the country. Hastings is slipping further down the levels of deprivation and is now the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived out of 317 local authorities, based on the 2019 Indices of Multiple deprivation. In East Sussex, 9 out of the 10 most deprived

neighbourhoods are located in Hastings and St Leonards. Baird Ward, for example, is still among the most deprived 0.5% in the whole country. It makes me angry to see these levels of deprivation becoming increasingly worse after years of a Labour controlled Borough Council.

I do profoundly believe that the people, businesses and other organisations in Hastings and Rye need a voice in this inquiry and I hope that I have provided an adequate one for them today. I care deeply about my constituency and I believe a level crossing on the A21 will cause significant congestion, limit tourists' accessibility to Hastings and Rye and limit our opportunity to achieve economic growth.