

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL – FUTURE HOUSING PLANS : LOCAL CONSULTATION

I give below some personal but professionally informed comments on the Consultation proposals made by SDC to meet the Government targets for additional housing by 2040.

I grew up in Gloucester and have lived in Stonehouse for 12 years after a career in transport in the South East. This was with BR and a direct involvement in operating, research & planning, international services and the largest 20th Century railway construction project (HS1). A degree in Economics, subsequent professional studies and a continuing interest in transport geography/economics gives me a wide knowledge base.

I have a very clear support for a station with direct access to/from the Stroudwater corridor on to the NE/SW main line i.e. the re-opening of Stonehouse (BR). I am aware of the importance of the spatial distribution of settlements, economic activity and transport corridors in respect of personal and trade movements. In other words, housing and transport are inextricably linked on both their environmental and social impacts.

A. CONSULTATION FOR FUTURE HOUSING REQUIREMENTS

Local At the recent Consultation afternoon at Stonehouse Town Hall I was pleased to see comprehensive displays covering the generalities of your evaluations, including the specifics for the Stonehouse area. There was plenty to read (causing queues at some boards!) and your staff were kept busy answering particular queries. After several years as a HS1 Consultation Manager, it brought back many memories!

I spotted just one specific reference to re-opening Stonehouse (BR) as a ‘high priority,’ and one solitary paragraph about Transport in general. There were occasional aspirational references to encouraging walking, cycling, and sustainability, but otherwise the matters of the ‘how, why and where’ of movement were scarcely evident.

However, knowing that the display boards were just the tip an iceberg based at Ebley I went to the SDC website for the finer details involved in your ‘optioneering’.

Supporting Documents

In the **SDC Planning Review** I looked at the **Strategic Objectives** and in **S.3.2** I welcomed the statements that you would ‘*work towards a more integrated transport system to improve access to local goods and services*’ and that ‘*the pattern of development that facilitates the use of sustainable modes of transport*’. I noted the phrase ‘*strong strategic links along the M5 corridor*’ but wondered why the strategic NE/SW main rail line was not recognised, despite the ‘ghost trains’ that race past 50,000 people in the Stroudwater corridor! It was a nice aspirational touch to mention ‘promoting healthier alternatives to the private car’. Presumably this referred to walking and cycling, but did you know that the majority of rail passengers walk/cycle to their station?

In the Transport Assessment of the **Background Studies** I agree that **Option 1** *is the most sustainable for the planned growth and in view of present levels of non-car trips. It is most likely to benefit from the existing passenger transport network.* I assume this covers car, bus and train.

The SALA report by LUC was incredibly detailed, looking at all the environmental categories that now have to appear in such appraisals. The history of settlements reveals just how much they are defined by the movement of people and trade (Stroud is an early classic example). I felt that the report was rather introspective and static e.g. it did not appear to recognise the dynamics of pressures from outside the District, and how these impact upon socio-economic movement generally; in other words, **transport**.

I would note that **Bristol** seemed a foreign country! Surely it must be recognised in a broader 'settlement heirarchy', as it has a growing influence on our area. Certainly in our 'green and sustainable world' it must be considered as Stroud's 'Mother Ship' (sorry, Gloucester!).

In the **SA Objectives (p 96/7)** I found some slightly encouraging statements.

6.45 was mainly road orientated, but it did note '*the strategy may also be supported by improvements to public infrastructure including rail and bus services.*' (*Must* would have been better!) There was a welcome reference to an additional rail station on the main line, but then mentions the red herrings (Hunts Grove and Haresfield).

6.46 was actually good, stating that *improvements to public transport facilities would help to promote modal shift.....and limit...traffic generated air pollutants.*

6.47 spoiled it somewhat by warning that *the land for the new station at Stonehouse is in close proximity to a number of Listed Buildings on the other side of the A-road.* If this refers to canal-side buildings or the Hotel, this would surely be good. A station can only enhance their value by giving easy, sustainable access to the canal and its Visitor Centre.

BACKGROUND PAPERS – Strategic Options Transport Discussion Paper

The assessments looked only at car trips for work purposes, which is fair enough to find the peak load factors on the road network and indicate the pinch-points where mitigation measures will be needed. It was clear that the A419 corridor at Stonehouse is the dominant area, possibly in all Options when taking into account current traffic levels.

Likely mitigation for public transport was limited to tinkering with a few bus services and a station upgrade at Cam & Dursley station. In one table I saw that the Cam & D'y area was said to be 5km from Stroudwater Business Park ; 5 miles is nearer the mark!

Work trips to the West of England (mainly Bristol) account for 55% of external trips.

I saw that TRICS was used to generate future traffic levels. It is a useful tool for highways planning in assessing traffic generation under varying scenarios, giving early broad indications of traffic flows to generalised areas. It is not entirely clear whether the journeys to work are from the new housing areas to the workplaces, or whether there are journeys from outside the District to new employment within the Stroud area. TRICS is basically a tool for Highways planners.

However, you should be aware Rail traffic forecasting and trip generation is subject to quite different behavioural and journey influences. There must be a substantially different approach in assessing potential flows between stations and their relatively small catchment zones.

B. SOME SPECIFIC RAIL TRANSPORT FACTS AND COMMENTS

To illustrate my concerns over this area in relation to the District I set out below a series of relevant facts indicating why the County and District are already the 'poor relations' in the West of England for the generation of rail traffic. I regret to say that this will get worse if 'sustainable Stroud' does not have a more positive strategic view of public transport and railways in particular.

1 *The County generates fewer rail journeys per head than any other West of England County within the GWR area ie 40% less than 'typical'. Despite its size and importance the City urban area is also 40% below par. Stroud District is even worse. Its two urban corridors generate less than 50% of what might be expected from three stations – equivalent to nearly 1million journeys a year. The basic reason is the poor or non-existent service to Bristol etc.*

2 *Most rail passengers (65-70%) get to the station by walk or cycle, with a further 12% using a bus. Of the car-borne traffic about a half is 'drop-off' by lift or taxi. This leaves around 10-15% on average parking a car.*

3 *The greatest trip generation per person comes from within 0.67m (1km) of a station. Beyond 2m (3km) the 'trip rate per person' declines and levels off further (depending on local bus services/cycle/bus access etc); over 4m it falls to minimal levels at most local stations.*

4 *Journey purpose is the next factor, covering not just Work but also Business, Education, Social (visiting friends and family), Leisure (shopping, culture/concerts, sport), and Tourism. Rail 'commuting' trips account for just over 40% of the total, but concentrated in shorter periods. All these are 'two way factors', and can apply to both outward and inward trips. The recent doubling of rail demand is due to the great increase in mobility (social and work) and road congestion; there has been a relative decline in commuting.*

5 Finally there is the question of *the quality of the rail service* to the principal relevant destinations. This includes journey times, frequency, importance and distance of the main destinations and the need to change trains. These factors are quite apart from getting to the departure station and leaving the arrival station to the trip end. It is more complex than driving door to door!

6 In respect of **Stroud District**, you should be aware of the following, particularly in the case of access to Bristol/WofE :

STONEHOUSE The closed main line station is surrounded by a population + employment of about 12,000 within a mile, and 22,000 within 2 miles (*nearly as far as Ebley Mill, which is a similar distance from Stroud station*). This is well above the level needed to justify a station almost anywhere in the UK, and the planned growth will take this even higher. However, Stonehouse has designated footpaths and cycleways along the Stroudwater corridor going within yards of the station, and there is already a good bus service to Stroud. This can be amended in future years in response to the current growth west of Stonehouse. It would be a supreme irony if Stroud's very own 'national sustainable eco-treasure', Dale Vince, were given the go-ahead for a stadium with access only by congested roads! An eco-business park would add insult to injury if there were no main line station a short way down the road.

STROUD is equally bereft of direct rail access to Bristol etc. It has a population of some 22,000 within 4m of a re-opened station. Stroud could easily become a good example of a sustainable public transport hub and network. (*It is another relevant irony that SGS and its companion campus in Filton are not sustainably linked for its students, who are mainly without cars.*)

The significance of the Stroudwater corridor as a rail catchment area was recognised in the professional Halcrow Study nearly 20 years ago. It showed there was a good case for re-opening the station, and since then rail traffic has doubled!

CAM & DURSLEY station (C&D) has had a long struggle to reach 200k journeys p.a. despite free car parking. It's poor performance results from one basic defect – only a few people live within a mile of the isolated station. The 2mile catchment is about 12k, with a further 7k up to 4miles away. (ie less than half of Stonehouse). Dursley town centre is nearly 3m from C&D . There are irregular bus connections, and the area has little attraction for inward trips. The best single action for C&D is to build as many houses as possible within a mile of the station, and then to consider a bus network for the area. It does seem somewhat bizarre to suggest the need for a Masterplan for C&D as the only item of rail transport mitigation flagged up to reduce the impact of up to extra 6000 houses within the District.

It appears even more ridiculous when the re-opening of Stonehouse station *at the earliest possible opportunity* would generate more than 400k journeys p.a. and create a solid base on which to develop an effective integrated transport network that can respond to the future developments. Even worse is the view that C&D station is a rational way of trying to serve the Stroudwater area, as it creates a 'double jeopardy' ie car via M5/A38 would remain the default way to the south, leaving a few tempted to drive on narrow lanes/busy roads to C&D; or demand is suppressed entirely. It makes 'sustainable Stroud' a bit of a joke, whilst increasing social costs generally.

Conclusions

I have great sympathy for SDC in its huge task of having to formulate a housing strategy for the future, and I am aware that you have limited direct powers in transport planning. Nevertheless the exercise is important in letting local residents make their contributions. It is also an opportunity for SDC to develop strong and well-choreographed statements to the higher levels of government about such issues. Sustainability is an increasingly important political objective, but it can be met sooner than later at a small price worth paying (*eg re-opening a local station not only gives immediate benefits, but facilitates many more in the future!*)

Overall I am disappointed that the general strategic review (or vision of the future) seems to pay so little regard to the general movement of people and to reducing the effects on the transport network. Given that transport is the largest polluter and consumer of fuel resources, it is disappointing that so little attention is given to the more sustainable forms of public transport. And a major benefit of both bus and rail is that they encourage walking and cycling!

My views are informed by a detailed knowledge of nearly all transport modes, but with rail as a specialism. The figures I quote above are based on actual data (not preconceptions!), and I would very happy to explain them in greater depth if necessary.

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