

Comment

This is not the end of the road - it's the start of something better

By Gary Shipton
Editor-in-chief
Chichester Observer



There will be widespread disappointment that a curt and factually ambiguous note from transport secretary Chris Grayling has signalled the cancellation of the A27 Chichester improvement scheme.

But in the context of Brexit, Prime Minister Theresa May said a month ago that no deal for Britain is better than a bad deal - and the same is true of Highways England's naively constructed and arrogantly imposed solution for this great city of ours.

The public consultation was a farce from beginning to end - the results of which have shamefully still not been published - and the possible options for upgrading the existing route were rightly viewed with widespread contempt.

The A27 is both an arterial through-route for the South-East and a local road for district residents.

The options presented would have isolated the south of the district and effectively forced more local traffic on to residential roads and into the already jammed city centre.

They simply didn't make sense. There has been much debate about a

northern route.

Given a blank sheet of paper there is no doubt that this would have overcome many of the difficulties and ensured minimum disruption during the long construction period.

But a new road to the north has always been unacceptable.

For reasons of the unique environment and cost it is a non-starter.

The county council's desire for transparency with a consultation re-run was mistaken by some as an encouragement for a northern route.

This has never been the case and it must now be decisively ruled out.

The sensible and indeed only way forward is an upgrade to the existing route that properly takes account of the needs of the south as well as maintaining the A27 for local traffic.

There is no doubt it should be complemented by some sensitive upgrades to neighbouring routes as well.

With a united community approach, this is now possible.

Chris Grayling's five paragraph note of cancellation singles out for his excuse the local councils' withdrawal of support and ambiguous 'funding', and significant local campaigns.

The county and district council have not withdrawn their £20m contribution. Their support for a solution has never been more vibrant.

It is they and campaign groups that deserve our unstinting praise.

How easy it would have been for Conservative county council leader Louise Goldsmith to have paid lip service to local concerns and rubber stamped her own government's approach.

As JK Rowling wrote: 'It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.'

With courage, principle and determination Mrs Goldsmith has led from the front to signal her residents' concerns and achieve a solution that worked for residents, the environment, and the economy of Chichester.

With the huge backing of her Conservative county council colleagues, this has been one of the authority's finest hours. How proud we all should be of her and them.

District council leader Tony Dignum and his cabinet have shown resolute support; while MP Andrew Tyrie has not sought to steal the limelight but has worked tirelessly over many years with our councils to secure the investment we need. Well done. Well done. Well done.

Campaigning groups Chichester Deserves Better - whose stellar defence of the northern countryside is to be applauded - along with alternative ambitions of Best4Chichester and No Option Is Still An Option demonstrate people power at their best.

Their passion combined with the exemplary leadership and expertise of Mrs Goldsmith, Mr Dignum and Mr Tyrie should now be harnessed to create a

solution to upgrade the existing route that works for the entire district.

It will take a monumental community effort where all must seek to work cohesively and openly but we now have the potential to shape Chichester's future in a way that truly meets Chichester's aspirations.

Chris Grayling's letter concludes that 'the delivery of the A27 Arundel bypass should proceed as planned.'

That sentence is a tribute to the diligence and determination of Arundel MP Nick Herbert.

However, there is no agreed 'plan' at this stage and the upgrade to the A27 cannot be undertaken piecemeal - or you merely shift the queues to the next bottleneck.

That is why the transport secretary must yet return to a solution for Chichester - one that meets local need and holistically supports the entire South-East plan.

When Chichester finally has a solution, Mr Grayling is obligated to respond positively.

The investment in a new road was a condition of accepting so much more additional housing in the future.

Without an improved A27, so many other housing plans desperately sought by central decision-makers would be placed in jeopardy.

This week's decision was not the end of the road.

It is an opportunity for all of us to secure something so much better.