

OX 002N/1b

Summary

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We oppose the compulsory purchases orders (CPOs) for the land between Seacourt Nature Park and Old Abingdon Road that the Environment Agency (EA) propose to use for part of a flood channel. Our primary reason is that there is no compelling public interest for the CPOs, because this part of the flood channel (the 'channel component'), adds little benefit but excessive costs for the public.

Detailed evidence regarding these cost and benefits will be covered by other objectors, but we focus on costs generated by the removal of construction material via the A34.

Additionally, we argue that the EA's proposed replacement land for land subject to CPOs at Seacourt Nature Park is not 'equally advantageous' to the public, and therefore different exchange land should be provided.

Public Interest

The EA have modelled an alternative to their proposed flood scheme that omits the channel component, but is in all other respects the same. The modelling shows that this alternative brings only slightly less benefit in terms of flood protection, and this is partially offset by greater financial costs. For example the EA's benefit cost analysis (BCA) shows that the proposed scheme brings net benefits (value of flood damages avoided minus cost of construction) worth £1391.8 million, but only a net £11.1 million (0.8%) of this is attributable to the channel component.

Although the EA opposes the no-channel alternative, there seems to be no evidence-based or peer-reviewed reason why it could not be adopted.

A CPO should only be made where there is a compelling case in the public interest. In this instance the CPOs are only needed in order to provide the channel component, yet the scheme could go ahead without it. Therefore the test of compelling public interest should **not** be represented by the net benefits of the scheme as a whole, but rather by the **marginal benefits of the channel component less its extra costs.**

According to the EA, the channel component brings a net flood protection benefit worth £11.1 million, although there are grounds to believe that financial cost of providing the channel are understated, and its financial benefits overstated.

However even if the channel component had net financial benefits, other costs accrue solely because of the channel component. These are: time costs of £10-35 million borne by users of the A34, social costs incurred by loss of access to parts of the work area during and after construction, disruption to residents of South Hinksey village, and environmental costs around loss of rare grassland, reduced biodiversity, mature trees, etc. These latter points are not reflected in the EA's BCA, but are factors which in a broader and objective assessment should outweigh the claimed £11.1 million net benefits.

On this basis, and even before considering the need for CPOs, it is hard to see any justification for the channel component.

However, the channel component requires the **forced acquisition of private property** via CPO. Therefore it must not merely provide a net public benefit, but rather command a **compelling** public interest. Given the facts we cannot see that this exists, and ask that the CPOs are not confirmed.

Traffic at South Hinksey

The EA proposes to move 360,000m³ of material excavated to form the channel, mostly from South Hinksey onto the A34. This represents about 50,000 HGV movements at South Hinksey over 3-5 years. The EA proposes to reduce traffic speeds from 70mph to 40mph around South Hinksey to make this safer.

However the length of the slip roads at South Hinksey is totally, woefully short of anything safe, even when merging with slower traffic. Slip roads comprise a 'nose' which is full width and used for acceleration, followed by a 'taper' which narrows to zero. The nose lengths at South Hinksey are, respectively, 0% and 3% of the modern standard for slip roads, and the taper lengths 57% and 68%. The National Highways standards for slip roads do not account for a high proportion of fully-laden HGVs. A US study suggests that, to allow such HGVs to reach a 40mph merge speed, a slip road of 400m would be needed: the slip roads at South Hinksey are 73.5m and 92m long. Southbound HGVs would be joining 40mph traffic going less than 10mph, and northbound HGVs would be going 10-15mph. It is difficult to imagine 25,000 HGVs getting onto the busy A34 under these conditions without a large increase in traffic jams and at least some accidents. Accidents with HGVs are three times as likely to end in fatalities than other accidents.

Traffic safety would be further compromised by the short distance between the South Hinksey exits and the Hinksey Hill interchange. Before and after junctions, vehicles weave their way to or away from the junction. The National Highways standard for weaving distance is 1-2km: at South Hinksey there is only 600m weaving distance, with drivers additionally having to contend with slow-moving HGVs in the left lane. To achieve a safe merging of HGVs onto the A34 would require the slip roads to be lengthened by 300m, but this would further shorten the southbound weaving section. Given this, we do not believe that it is physically possible to make exiting HGVs at South Hinksey safe.

National Highways is content to deal with safety issues through a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP), but seem to be relying on the scheme's environmental statement to inform the development of this CEMP. The environmental statement does not include the information discussed above. Until its full transport impacts are considered and the scheme can be shown to be safe, and without HGVs backing up at South Hinksey, we believe that **the prospect of the scheme going ahead is unclear.**

Reducing the A34 speed limit from 70mph to 40mph for 2.4 miles - the main mitigation measure proposed by the EA - would put significant cumulative costs on motorists. The government uses reductions in travel time to justify the construction of new roads, so increases in travel time should also be considered in decision-making, especially given that the A34 is one of the most important UK corridors for freight. Depending on their timing, speed reductions at South Hinksey would affect 36-90 million journeys, costing drivers £10-35 million in wasted time. This does not include time spent in additional traffic jams or the cost of additional accidents. It represents 95-315% of all the benefits that the channel is expected to bring over 100 years. This has not been costed in any economic analysis for the scheme.

Jewson's Field

The Acquisition of Land Act 1981 requires exchange land to be provided for the compulsory purchase of any common land. The exchange land must be no smaller and "equally advantageous" to the public. Government guidance states that "land which is already... used by the public, even informally, for recreation, cannot usually be given as exchange land, since this would reduce the amount of such land, which would be disadvantageous to the persons concerned". The Oxleas Wood legal judgement supports this, adding that "land in private ownership but over which the public already enjoyed extensive public rights of way affording roughly equivalent recreational access" would not be equally advantageous.

In exchange for 11,635m² of land taken from Seacourt Nature Park, the EA proposes to provide 11,032m² of exchange land at Jewson's Field plus about 740m² at Hinksey Meadow. Our interest is in Jewson's Field.

Jewson's Field has been regularly used by the public, without hindrance, for 20+ years. This is confirmed by the EA's own surveys, our questionnaire surveys of local residents in 2016 and 2023, and a video. These show that the whole of Jewson's Field has been regularly used during this time informally by the public for walking, camping, bird feeding etc.

The EA suggests that the fence around Jewson's Field is 'broken' and that access to the field could easily be revoked by repairing the fence. A site visit would confirm that there is no fencing around 50+m on the western side of the field; there is an unlocked pedestrian gate on the eastern end; and the fence is breached in other areas. The field's regular use over 20+ years has made public access essentially permissive. Jewson's have made no attempt to improve the fencing, even in the knowledge that it has been proposed as exchange land. It would also be difficult to show that Jewson's Field could be significantly 'improved' for public recreation.

We do not oppose the use of Seacourt Nature Park for the OFAS, but believe that "providing" Jewson's Field as exchange land would be clearly disadvantageous to local residents, and thus in contravention of the Acquisition of Land Act 1981. It would be like taking a slice of my cake, and then saying that another slice of cake that I am already holding can replace the first slice. The EA should provide different exchange land.