

19 August 2008



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ms Hilary Severn
Branch Chairman, Campaign to Protect Rural England
The Countryside Room
Poole Court
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South Gloucestershire
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John Penrose MP

Dear Ms Severn

Thank you for contacting me about the Government's proposed changes to the draft revised regional spatial strategy for the South West. You may be aware that this is an issue which I've been working on very closely in the past few years because, as I'm sure you already know, large numbers of Westonians (about 20,000 every day) commute to Bristol on the M5 and face daily gridlock at Junction 21 of the M5. This is not just environmentally damaging and a serious waste of thousands of people's valuable time, but it also creates dangerous queues back onto the motorway itself in the evening rush hour, and long delays in the other direction every morning.

My overall approach has been to support and encourage any moves towards making Weston a more sustainable community, instead of a dormitory of Bristol. Fundamentally this will require more jobs in Weston to reduce the levels of commuting, both now and in the future, before we gobble up any more green belt to build even more houses. It will also require major improvements in public transport to provide people with alternatives to using their cars on the M5, whether through improved and expanded rail services, better and faster bus services and, possibly, high occupancy lanes on the M5 for buses and car-sharers to reduce the number of vehicles on the motorway. It should also include expansions and improvements to the capacity of J21 itself, to make it safer and reduce emissions from queuing vehicles.

The solution seemed to lie in the *Draft Regional Spatial Strategy* for the area which, whatever else it may have contained, would at least have achieved some of these things. As I'm sure you're aware it was later amended by Government-appointed planners to allow more houses to be built without the necessary local jobs. In para 4.1.55 the panel said that they "believe that it would be wrong to assume that the employment led approach to the new development will transform the level of self containment. In our view the planning of infrastructure should allow for a significant level of interaction with the Greater Bristol area. This conclusion would support some modification of the motorway junction on safety grounds and improvements to the public transport links to Bristol." In other words, they believed the junction should be expanded without waiting for more local jobs, which seemed to be contrary to the Highways Agency's view. As a result, in April, I requested in the House that Ruth Kelly liaise with the Rt Hon Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to resolve this infrastructure issue, which she promised to do.

Following the publication of the draft revised RSS, I remain concerned that the fundamental imbalance between employment and housing in Weston is still not being properly addressed and will mean that the town will never become sustainable in the way I have described. I am liaising with North Somerset Council about the best way to respond to this and will do so soon. In the meantime I met with the Highways Agency chiefs, David Wright, Regional Planning Manager and Ron Davies, the Network Planning Manager earlier this month. We discussed possible improvements to Junction 21 of the M5. They tell me the Highways Agency has promised to identify a detailed implementation plan to improve the operation of the M4 and M5 around Bristol by early next year.



This will include combating the problems of Junction 21 without simply encouraging more single occupant car commuting to Bristol.

However, I believe that the solution is not solely linked to Junction 21 or even the M5 itself. We need to provide better train services between Weston and Bristol so that commuters have a viable alternative to their cars. The new timetable introduced last winter was a big step in the right direction but, I'm afraid, while it reduced overcrowding and improved service frequency on most rush-hour trains between Weston and Bristol, First Great Western made a serious mess of introducing it. The levels of delayed trains and poor service skyrocketed and are only now improving towards a satisfactory level. I'm afraid that meant many commuters won't have switched from their cars to public transport, which represents a huge missed opportunity. I will continue pushing hard on this point in future.

I hope this gives you a straightforward response to your questions about what my views are on the proposals and what I have been doing this year. If there is anything else I can assist you with or you require further information, please don't hesitate to contact me again.

Yours sincerely

John Penrose
MP for Weston-super-Mare