

STOCKBURY PARISH COUNCIL

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A249 Stockbury Roundabout (M2 J5) improvement scheme

Stockbury Parish Council response to proposal that the Inquiry
should be held over the internet

Whilst we acknowledge and share the desire to ensure that the Inquiry is carried out as expeditiously as possible, we have serious reservations about the proposal to hold a “virtual” hearing.

1. Participation

On behalf of the Parish Council I recognize that the resort to holding the Enquiry via Microsoft Teams is, in principle, a reasonable and proportionate departure from the usual procedure for a hearing at which interested members of the public may attend in person. But we have real concerns that the proposal, unless supported by other measures, will significantly disadvantage some local residents, who would otherwise have chosen to attend in person, effectively disqualifying them from witnessing these proceedings that are, after all, of such fundamental importance to the way of life of many local residents. This is because it is one of the defining characteristics of living in a small rural community that many are deprived of broadband access of a sufficient quality to enable participation by live internet connection.

Therefore, we ask that you consider what can be offered to address this serious risk of disenfranchisement of many of those whom we represent in making arrangements for them to have access to these proceedings. We are confident that we can accommodate many of those who would otherwise not be able to participate by providing a live Teams link in the village hall, where social distancing measures can be maintained. The difficulty is that we do not have access to the IT equipment to make this possible. Are you able to arrange for the temporary provision of a large screen and internet connection to it for us to provide this access in the Stockbury village hall? If you are able to assist, then the major adverse consequence for local residents of being deprived of the opportunity to participate will be significantly reduced. I assume, as is the case with most Teams meetings with a significant number of participants, you will be appointing a moderator to review and collate

questions typed into the chat bar during the hearing so that those considered appropriate to be addressed are considered, as they would be at a public hearing if properly advanced.

2. Genesis of the proposal

We note that the proposal to hold a virtual Inquiry originates from the Department for Transport and not the Planning Inspectorate. As the sole shareholder of Highways England Ltd, the DfT is one of the parties to the Inquiry. It seems unusual for the party whose scheme is the subject of an impartial Inquiry to set the rules by which that Inquiry is held. We would be grateful if you could shed any light on how this has come about and share any correspondence between, HE, the DfT and the Planning Inspectorate on the matter.

As stated above, we acknowledge the need to press ahead. However, without the means to enable wide participation we are not wholly satisfied that holding the Inquiry over the internet would be adequately “public”, or that the recommendation / decision to do so can be seen as impartial.

Stockbury Parish Council