

manipulation and the A46 newark bypass



You may have missed the statutory consultation on the A46 Newark Bypass. The consultation closed late last year, in December 2022. The proposed scheme is one of many highway enhancement projects being implemented as part of National Highway's investment in the strategic road network over 2020–25, amounting to a huge £27.4 billion.¹

The A46 Newark Bypass has an estimated cost of £400–500 million and involves the widening of 6.5 kilometres of existing single carriageway to dual carriageway, providing two lanes in each direction between the Farnon and Winthorpe roundabouts, near Newark-on-Trent, in Nottinghamshire. The project involves new bridges over the A1 highway and East Coast Main Line railway, a viaduct over the River Trent, enlarged roundabouts, new slip roads, flood mitigation measures, and some traffic signalisation changes to 'improve traffic flow'. The planned start date for building is 2024–25, one of the last projects to be developed under Road Investment Strategy 2 (RIS2).

This is not a particularly special project, involving fairly marginal highway upgrades, but still entailing a large project cost. It is fairly representative of the slew of projects in RIS2; around 50 RIS2 highway investment projects are expected to start by 2025,¹ in addition to those already under construction under RIS1. There are further projects being planned for RIS3.

As with many of these highway improvement projects, the background literature is very promotional in style and the process of participation is very limited. The material and process illustrate the conflicted nature of public policy, with central government professing to be interested in climate change and environmental issues, indeed in social equity and 'levelling up', and possibly even participatory governance, while at the same time investing heavily in the highway network across the UK, facilitated by a very superficial participatory process.

When I run through some of the excerpts from the material from National Highways, I would like you to compare them to Sherry Arnstein's famous ladder of participation, published over 50 years ago but remaining very relevant today (see Fig. 1).² You can assess which rung of the ladder you think National Highways operates on.

The A46 was originally built in 1923, providing a cross-country route between Bath, Cheltenham, Stratford-upon-Avon, Coventry, Leicester, Newark and Lincoln, partly following the old Roman Fosse Way. It has been widened and realigned since the 1970s, including the original Newark Bypass, which was built in the 1990s. There is no mention in the consultation material that this is a subsequent widening of an old bypass project, presumably to avoid highlighting that the increased road capacity has already been filled as traffic levels have risen in the subsequent 30 years.

The purpose of the current consultation on the A46 is stated as 'to understand your views on our proposals for the scheme [...] including identified environmental effects'.³ Note the use of 'your views' and 'our proposals' and the rather oddly worded 'identified environmental effects', which is discussed later here.

The consultation material begins:

*'In this brochure we explain the improvements being proposed as part of the A46 Newark Bypass [...] We explain how our plans would improve journeys, how the local environment may be affected and how we propose to mitigate the effects of the proposed improvements.'*³

A preferred route was announced in February 2022, following an earlier consultation period. This examined two route options, with the same widened highway, but slightly different junction access arrangements.

The project is described throughout as a highway improvement—indeed, 'improve' (including inflections such as 'improves' or 'improved'; or synonyms, such as 'better' or 'advancement') is used 33 times in the material.³ There is no consultation on the *need* for highway widening and increased highway capacity; instead, views are requested on the narrowly-bounded option given—the interaction through the consultation is very tightly managed.

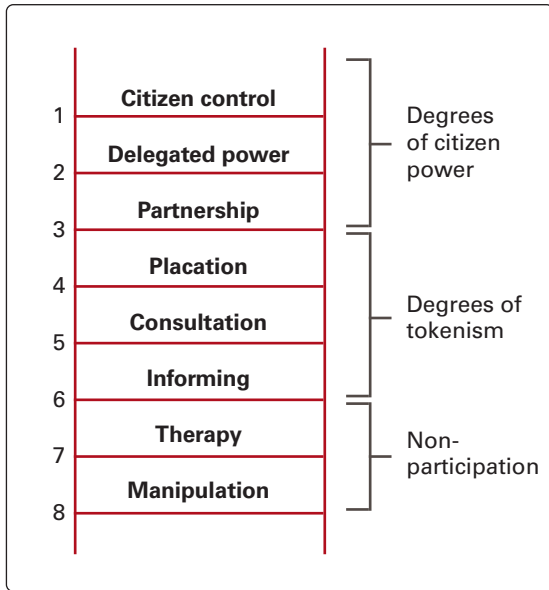


Fig. 1 Eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation
 Source: S Arnstein: 'A ladder of citizen participation'²

The project objectives are given as improving safety, congestion (journey times and reliability), connectivity (to accommodate economic growth in Newark-on-Trent and the wider area by improving its strategic and local connectivity), environmental improvement (delivering better environmental outcomes by achieving a net gain in biodiversity and improved noise levels at 'Noise Important Areas' along the A46), and even improving relations with the customer (to build an inclusive scheme which improves facilities for cyclists, walkers and other vulnerable road users where existing routes are affected).

Cyclist and pedestrian routes are only to be improved if there are existing routes; there are no suggestions of new routes or facilities for active travel. Do not ask whether more road capacity is needed, what the adverse impacts of increased motorisation might be, or indeed what £500 million might do for cycling in Newark-on-Trent—this is not within the framing of the consultation.

The project information is subtitled as 'Investing in your roads' and continues with:
*'At National Highways we believe in a connected country and our network makes these connections happen. We strive to improve our major roads and motorways. We want to make sure all our major roads are more dependable, durable and most importantly, safe. That's why we're delivering [...] the largest investment in a generation, which is great news for the local and regional economy.'*³

There is much use of modality to help express certainty and position views on validity; there is an active voice and prejudgement in associating positive adjectives with highway building.

The need for the scheme is developed as:
*'the government's second Road Investment Strategy included a commitment for National Highways to improve the A46 'Trans-Midlands Trade Corridor' between the M5 and the Humber Ports, to create a continuous dual carriageway from Lincoln to Warwick. The A46 around Newark-on-Trent is the only remaining single carriageway section of this key strategic trunk road. We propose to fill in this gap, eliminating the regular traffic jams and creating improved journey time reliability [...] Congestion on the single carriageway section of the A46 means that journeys are unreliable and take longer than they should. This will only get worse as more people are expected to use the road in the future.'*³

The narrative is to improve journey times, remove 'gaps' in the network and reduce unreliability, reflecting the Department for Transport's transport appraisal objectives, which are sadly inconsistent with wider environmental and social public policy goals. Views are presented as factual truths, with undue certainty given to uncertain positive impacts, and adverse impacts are overlooked.

For example, safety is put forward as the primary objective for the project:
*'safety is our top priority, we're committed to reducing the number of incidents on our road network. From January 2015 to December 2019, incidents on this section of the A46 resulted in 208 casualties. Our improvements would make the A46 safer for road users as well as reduce closures, congestion and delays.'*³

As is common practice, traffic crashes are framed as 'incidents', as if incidental, rather than a predictable result of increased traffic volumes. Safety is understood as safety for road users, rather than pedestrians or cyclists. There is no discussion of reduced traffic volumes being much better for safety; nor of the decline in active travel in Newark-on-Trent and the subsequent problematic health impacts, such as the increase in non-communicable diseases.

Car ownership in Newark and Sherwood is already much higher than the high national average, at 1.3 cars per household in 2011, and rising by 57% in 20 years. The proportion of residents travelling to work by bicycle has dropped from 6% in 2001 to 4% in 2011, and half of all the children in the area are

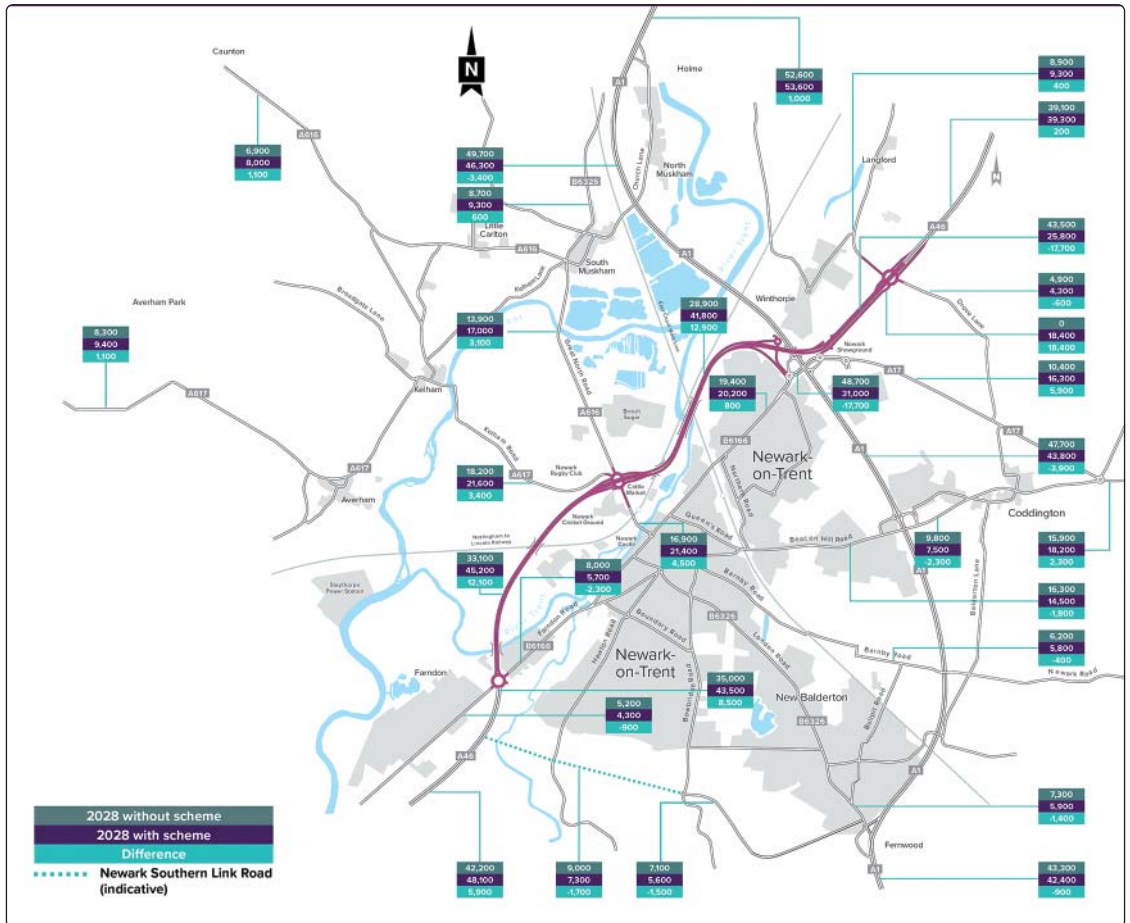


Fig. 2 Forecast traffic flow differences after the opening of the A46 scheme
 Source: A46 Newark Bypass Public Consultation³

driven to school—with the major reason given as perceived danger of traffic.⁴ These travel trends are ignored—and the transport strategy is simply producing more traffic, despite all the associated environmental, social and health problems.

The project design has been developed using: *‘the current traffic modelling data and projections available [...] This has helped inform the design of the proposed scheme, such as the number of lanes and changes to junctions required [and] our economic assessment of the proposed scheme’s value for money by weighing up the costs against the benefits.’*³

The key impacts of the scheme in relation to traffic flows and network performance, it is suggested, are to increase long-distance traffic on the A46, reduce journey times on the improved section of the A46, and reduce traffic on local roads in Newark-

on-Trent as traffic redistributes onto the bypass. The question of, or potential for, induced traffic is not raised, yet presumably the bypass will be full and congested in only a few years’ time.

There are no significant traffic management measures proposed in Newark-on-Trent, or new public transport services, or cycling or pedestrian provision. Indeed, new housing development is planned to disperse the town further, with direct access onto the highway network, including a proposed southern link road; hence car-based travel is only likely to increase. The game is really given away by the forecast traffic differences (see Fig. 2)—there is much forecast traffic growth on the improved road and also across the town.

The environmental effects are given in a PEI (Preliminary Environmental Information) report, extending to 568 pages. The ‘effects’ are on air quality (dust arising from construction), cultural heritage,

landscape character and visual amenity, biodiversity, geology and soils, material assets and waste, surface water, and noise and vibration. There is no assessment of increased carbon dioxide emissions, although surely this is the largest likely environmental impact. The initial consultation stage⁵ inadvertently raised the problem, stating that ‘once opened for traffic, the two options would result in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions generated by vehicles in use’. However, it went on to say that:

‘Government policy is helping change the fleet mix to improve those emissions, such as no petrol/diesel cars sold after 2030. So, we would expect the impact to reduce over time in line with the UK’s ambition to be Net Zero Carbon by 2030.’

The current consultation is not so blatant, stating, in Orwellian terms, that:

‘The climate of the study area has already changed from its natural state, as a result of climate change, and will change over the lifetime of the project. Measures to mitigate the operational impacts of climate change on the scheme include development of a scheme design which accommodates the predicted changes in regional climate.’³

The objective with the environmental evidence is to obfuscate, so that the public, even if they engage with the consultation process, give up reading and assume that there are no environmental problems associated with increased traffic capacity and traffic volumes, particularly if the vehicle fleet is assumed to be cleaner.

In the end, most of these highway improvements go largely unnoticed and are implemented. There is a blind commitment to increasing traffic mobility, achieving spurious travel time savings, and an assumption that they are directly linked to improved local and regional economies.

The postulations on traffic safety and the environment are further nonsense. There is no substantive evidence on all of these issues; it is simply the practice of transport planning and appraisal to ensure that more highways are built—this is the discursive formation we are presented with. National Highways is in existence to produce increased traffic mobility—and has ruined the street environments in places in the vast majority of urban areas across the country. The consultants producing the project consultation brochures and analysis, traffic modelling and economic environmental appraisals are all complicit, as they get paid handsomely for their extensive work.

The public are confused by the consultation or not interested—just 1,500 responses were made to

the A46 Newark Bypass consultation in 2020; it is not known yet how many there were in 2022, but probably fewer still. The public mostly support the road-widening projects as there is little debate over the substantive issues associated with road widening—they are all overlooked in the reports. This is non-participation and manipulation, in the guise of statutory consultation, and it will not lead to sustainable mobility behaviours; only increased traffic volumes and, consequently, all the associated significant adverse environmental and social impacts.

We need a much more authentic and collaborative process for transport planning, through which projects are built only where they are consistent with environmental and wider public policy goals. In effect, this would mean no more highway investment projects, as all are inconsistent with climate change and social equity goals.

Next in line are the A27 Arundel Bypass and the Lower Thames Crossing. Then there will be the M1 Leeds Eastern Gateway, A1 Doncaster to Darrington, the A27 Chichester Bypass, and so on.

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● **Robin Hickman** is Professor at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. He is Director of the MSc in Transport & City Planning. e: r.hickman@ucl.ac.uk
The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Road Investment Strategy 2: 2020–2025*. Department for Transport, Mar. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025
- 2 S Arnstein: ‘A ladder of citizen participation’. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 1969, Vol. 35(4), 216–24
- 3 *A46 Newark Bypass Public Consultation. Share Your Views. 26 October to 12 December 2022*. National Highways, Oct. 2022. See National Highways’ ‘A46 Newark Bypass’ statutory consultation (2022) webpage, at <https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/east-midlands/a46-newark-bypass>
- 4 *Newark & Sherwood Local Development Framework. Residential Cycle and Car Parking Standards & Design Guide. Supplementary Planning Document. Topic Paper*. Newark and Sherwood District Council, Jun. 2021. www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk/media/newark-and-sherwood/images-and-files/planning-policy/pdfs/supplementary-planning-documents/Parking-Standards-Topic-Paper.pdf
- 5 *A46 Newark Bypass Public Consultation. Share Your Views. 9 December 2020 to 2 February 2021*. National Highways, Dec. 2020. See National Highways’ ‘A46 Newark Bypass’ statutory consultation (2020) webpage, at <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/he/a46-newark-bypass/>