KEY ISSUE

The consultants for the multi-modal study of transport solutions around London (ORBIT) have produced their provisional strategy for consultation. The report sets out a proposed response.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report sets out the details of the consultants provisional strategy for the M25. Given the paucity of data on options tested, costs, benefits and impacts many concerns are expressed at the limited nature of the consultation both in terms of time and content.

MEMBER CONSULTATION

The Executive Member of Transport and the Economy has been informed of the consultants provisional strategy. The Executive Member for Communities and Countryside has also been involved.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

1 The consultants, and the Government for the South East are informed that the consultation material and time period are totally inadequate for a study of this importance.
2 The Government Office for the South East is informed that this authority is concerned that the consultation material for this nationally important study does not necessarily have the support of the Steering Group.

3 The consultants be informed that given the very limited information provided, the authority is not able to give a reasoned view on most of the conceptual elements of the ‘provisional strategy’.

4 The Government Office for the South East is informed that this authority is extremely concerned that it is being asked to comment on such limited material for what is the most important of the multi-modal studies.

5 The Government Office for the South East should reconsider its position in respect of the ORBIT study with the aim of carrying out a full and comprehensive consultation with all statutory transportation authorities allowing at least 4 months for consultation and that the consultation is based on the consultants final report.

6 The provisional strategy should give considerably more thought to the role and impact of enhanced travel information and land use planning strategies and policies.

7 That the authority is unable to take a view on the likely benefits, the effectiveness and feasibility of a high quality orbital coach service until considerably more technical evidence is produced.

8 That given the major problems associated with introducing a road use charging system, it is inappropriate to predicate the provisional strategy on this approach.

9 The proposed interim measures linked to the widening of the M25 do not demonstrate that the overall road network would operationally be in balance.

10 This report is forwarded to both the offices for South East of England Regional Assembly and the Government for the South East.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1 As an integral part of the 10 year Transport Plan the Government commissioned a number of multi-modal studies (MMS). The purpose of the studies was to examine the transport problems in defined areas and corridors where serious congestion problems are being encountered with the aim of producing transport investment strategies commensurate with the objectives of the 10 year plan. Surrey has a strong interest in the A3 Hindhead Study, the Thames Valley MMS and the study of orbital travel around London ORBIT. The A3 Hindhead study is complete and the tunnel proposal is being taken forward. The Thames Valley MMS findings are awaited. The consultants for ORBIT have now produced their provisional strategy for 2016 and comments are sought by 31 July 2002.

2 The County Council has had officer involvement in the stakeholders Steering Group via representation on behalf of the South East England Regional Assembly. Officers and the Executive Member for Communities and Countryside have also attended recent briefing meetings with the Consultants. (Halliburton, Brown and Root Ltd). However it is important to note that the consultation material does not appear to have received the endorsement of the Steering Group. The consultation is being undertaken by the consultants with agreement from their client, the Government Office for the South East (GOSE).

3 This work on the ORBIT study has been on-going for some 2 years. This report sets out the main findings from the consultants report and suggest a series of recommendations.

THE PROVISIONAL STRATEGY FOR 2016

4 The aims of the ORBIT study was to examine the existing and future problems of orbital traffic around London and to produce a ‘long-term sustainable management strategy’ for the M25 which:-

- meets the Government’s objectives for transport; and
- solves, or at least ameliorates, the problems on the M25, both now and in the future.

5 As is necessary with this type of study, it is essential that a full understanding of the existing travel characteristics on the M25 and adjacent roads is achieved. Consequently the consultants undertook a full range of surveys which demonstrated that on the M25:-

- about 50% of traffic in the morning peak is for journey to work;
- over 40% of trips are over 100kms in length, although average use of the M25 is quite short (over 40% travel 1 or 2 junctions only);
- car occupancy is low at 1.15 persons/car;
- both origins and destinations are extremely widely spread;
- the current public transport system is very inconvenient.
Serious congestion already exists on the M25 and by 2016 the computer model developed by the consultants shows that with increasing car ownership and increasing numbers of households and job opportunities, traffic flows in the study area could increase by 33% with traffic speeds on the M25 falling by between 10 and 20%.

The consultants have proposed the following 4 levels of intervention to meet the objective of a long-term sustainable transport strategy:

i) making best use of the M25 through 'best practice' traffic management;
ii) ways of reducing the demand for use of the existing M25;
iii) provision of alternatives to travel by car, particularly through the use of improved passenger transport;
iv) increased capacity on the M25 (in addition to the planned widening between Junctions 12-15 in Surrey), to a level consistent with area –wide road user charging and with methods of managing demand as follows:-

- physical demand management measures;
- physical demand management measures plus tolls for priority use;
- motorway tolls.

The consultants proposals relating to each of these elements are:

i) Best Practice Traffic Management

- less disruption from roadworks;
- quicker intervention for incidents;
- better information on delays;
- better signing of alternative routes;
- active traffic management, such as variable message signing.

ii) Reducing Demand for the M25

- land-use planning to concentrate development;
- business and school run travel plans;
- flexible working;
- telecommunications as a substitute for travel;
- parking controls.

iii) Alternatives to the Private Car

- high quality orbital coach systems;
- new rail infrastructure (Crossrail, Thameslink 2000, Airtrack);
- improved quality of passenger transport journeys;
- improved interchanges;
- development of a system of hubs (interchanges) and spokes (routes).
Of particular note is the proposal to create a high quality orbital coach system through the establishment of a Strategic Coach Authority, whose function would be to define and secure (via franchising) a network of coach services.

However the consultants comments on the impact of these three levels of intervention as follows:-

i) traffic management should improve reliability;
ii) the ‘soft’ measures to reduce demand on the M25 will reduce traffic levels by a modest amount;
iii) the passenger transport improvements will provide an alternative for some car travellers.

and they state that they are doubtful whether these three measures, when combined will put off the need for other actions for more than a few years. Consequently they state that other proposals are required to meet the objectives of reduced congestion and improved travel conditions on the M25.

The consultants believe that if there is a case for increased orbital road capacity then it should not be through an ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ M25; it should be on the line of the M25. They state that if and when widening is required then such widening must be ‘locked in’, through the use of measures to limit the level of induced traffic, otherwise this would negate any benefit anticipated for M25 users. These management measures include a combination of physical and fiscal mechanisms. Of particular note is their proposal for area wide road user charging.

Area wide road user charging is proposed in preference to other fiscal or any physical measures. The consultants believe the charges should be set so as to maximise the economic benefits. The net revenues would be hypothecated to passenger transport schemes. However given that the Government has stated that it does not intend to make a decision on area wider road user charging within the timescale of this 10 Year Plan, the consultants suggest that initially widening should be linked to the following interim measures:-

- integrated demand management (IDM) measures such as ramp metering, mainline flow metering, segregated lanes for priority vehicles;
- tolls plus bus priorities.

Nevertheless they propose that the scale of widening on the M25 should not be linked to these interim measures, but rather linked to the widening that would be justified should a decision be taken to implement area wide road user charging. This would ensure that level widening does not prejudge any later decision.

The consultants do not indicate the order of magnitude of widening that might be appropriate as an integral part of an area wide charging scheme.

OFFICERS VIEWS ON THE STRATEGY
Your officers have serious concerns over both the consultation process itself and the draft strategy for 2016. The concerns are as follows:

(a) The Process

The consultation material has been produced by the consultants for GOSE but does not appear to have been formally agreed by the Steering Group. (It is understood that this may be because a consensus of views has not been reached between the individual members of the Steering Group.)

The consultation documentation was produced for the 20 June presentation to your officers and consisted of a 21 page report. As a result of serious concerns being expressed by your officers on the lack of information on what is a very complex issue, three chapters (chapters 3, 6 and 12) of the “internal draft report” have been provided. The covering letter makes it clear that the chapters “do not necessarily reflect the latest information as work has been on-going. Further the report has not been approved by the Steering Group for publication”.

Although helpful in providing more information on the consultants proposals, nevertheless there is a paucity of data on costs, benefits, outcomes etc.

In total the County Council has been given of the order of 6 weeks to respond on what is the most complex and indeed important multi-modal study in the UK. Your officers take the view that even if all the relevant data was available, this is a totally inadequate consultation period. It is understood that this will be the only opportunity for the County Council to comment directly on ORBIT.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The consultants, and the Government for the South East are informed that the consultation material and time period are totally inadequate for a study of this importance.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Government Office for the South East is informed that this authority is concerned that the consultation material for this nationally important study does not necessarily have the support of the Steering Group.

(b) The Provisional Strategy

When consulting on a major transport scheme or study, the necessary elements to ensure a purposeful consultation are: -

i) the aims and objectives;
ii) the current problems;
iii) a full range of options with costs and benefits;
iv) evaluation of the preferred option.

23 The consultation material on ORBIT goes someway to satisfy (i) and (ii) but is seriously deficient in that:

- there is no cost data for any of the elements of the provisional strategy;
- there is no data on the financial, economic, operational and environmental implications of the strategy;
- there is no information on options.

24 Consequently your officers find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make sensible comments on what can only be termed a ‘concept’ and not a ‘strategy’.

RECOMMENDATION 3

25 The consultants be informed that given the very limited information provided, the authority is not able to give a reasoned view on most of the conceptual elements of the ‘provisional strategy’.

RECOMMENDATION 4

26 The Government Office for the South East is informed that the authority it is extremely concerned that it is being asked to comment on such limited material for what is the most important of the multi-modal studies.

RECOMMENDATION 5

27 The Government Office for the South East should reconsider its position in respect of the ORBIT study with the aim of carrying out a full and comprehensive consultation with all statutory transportation authorities allowing at least 4 months for consultation and that the consultation is based on the consultants final report.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

28 However there are elements of the ‘provisional strategy’ that officers believe should be commented on at this preliminary stage.

29 The first three elements of the provisional strategy are effectively referred to by the consultants as only putting off the need for other actions for more than a few years. Such a view seems to totally underplay the potential impact of the recent advances in technology which will enable travellers either at home, at work or in their vehicle to make more reasoned decisions on when to travel, how to travel or indeed whether to travel at all. The use of the internet will be particularly relevant. Further, there is real concern that the consultants have not really addressed the impact and value of land use planning strategies and policies on travel demand. The primacy of the link between land use patterns and the need to travel is clear and the provisional strategy of ORBIT should
make considerably more reference to the role of planning strategies and policies.

RECOMMENDATION 6

30  The provisional strategy should give considerably more thought to the role and impact of enhanced travel information and land use planning strategies and policies.

31  In bringing forward alternatives to the car for orbital journeys, the consultants consider the introduction of a high quality orbital coach system to be the key proposal. Only a limited number of additional new rail lines are suggested, e.g. Airtrack (based on Heathrow), extensions to Crossrail and the North Downs Line, albeit that the County Council considers these to be particularly valuable. Improvements to the quality of the public transport journey and improvements to interchange are also proposed, in a general sense, and, indeed, these would be essential to the success or otherwise of the proposed coach system. Shared taxis are proposed for alternatives where demands are too low for coach or rail services.

32  The provision of this coach network is based on the concept of trying to provide a feasible alternative to the diverse nature of orbital type journeys currently undertaken by using the M25. As such, it is a high risk strategy, as it is difficult to determine with any certainty the likelihood of those currently making car journeys of being persuaded to change to a coach based journey. This is particularly the case when it is considered that any such journey would probably require three links, that is a movement to access the coach network, the coach journey itself, and a third movement to access the destination. An extremely sophisticated provision of services in and out of the proposed hubs would be essential in order to provide a seamless journey, which would be neither excessively lengthy in time, or expensive.

33  In order for such services to be attractive to car users, they would have to benefit from priority measures both on and off the motorway network. However, to build dedicated bus lanes would require either expensive road widening to provide additional capacity, or a restriction on existing capacity, which would exacerbate congestion for other road users.

34  As with other elements of the provisional strategy, there are no costings provided for these services, nor any reassurance that it can be demonstrated that they would work and represent good value for money. Technical work may have been undertaken on this proposal, but this has not been made available. In addition to priority measures, the network of coach services would require substantial ongoing funding in the form of operating subsidy, and there would be very significant costs involved in providing new interchange facilities and improved connecting services.

35  The consultants rightly raise the need for primary legislation to enable this proposal to be progressed, and the establishment of a Strategic Coach Authority. This would need to be at a national, rather than local or regional
level. There is little indication of how such a contractual regime would interface with a deregulated bus environment, nor on the potential to abstract income from rail, bus and existing coach services for sections of route served by more than one of these modes.

36 In short, what appears to be a relatively low cost proposal, which could be implemented quickly, could in reality prove to be expensive, complex and require primary legislative changes. Furthermore, it would not be fully effective until after the provision of additional highway capacity and the introduction of a road user charging regime. It is thus unlikely to be of significant benefit as a means of reducing congestion until after 2010.

RECOMMENDATION 7

37 That the authority is unable to take a view on the likely benefits, the effectiveness and feasibility of a high quality orbital coach service until considerably more technical evidence is produced.

38 The provisional strategy is predicated on the consultant’s belief that area wide road user charging should be implemented for all travellers (except emergency and public service vehicles) in “the majority of roads in London and the south-east”, with the level of charge being determined by the charge that creates the optimum economic benefits. The proposed geographical area includes an outer cordon (about 50kms from central London) which would include towns such as Guildford, Woking etc.

39 The results of these tests indicate that with the maximum charge rate there would be an 8% in the number of car trips (over their do-minimum case) with a consequent increase in the level of service on the M25. Their analysis also demonstrates that the revenue resulting from the charging would be of the order of £7 billion/annum.

40 Although many practitioners would agree that area wide road user charging will theoretically delivery an optimum transportation solution, nevertheless your officers have serious concerns about the practicalities of such a system. In particular:-

• the potentially strong user re-action against such a system may make it impossible for any government to deliver it in the foreseeable future;
• the behavioural modelling of travellers reactions to road user charging could be highly suspect given that there is no existing data on the elasticity relationship between charging and usage.
RECOMMENDATION 8

41 That given the major problems associated with introducing a road use charging system, it is inappropriate to predicate the provisional strategy on this approach.

42 However the consultants do, in part, recognise that there would be a time lag in introducing an area wide road user charge system and therefore propose widening of the M25 (to an unspecified level) commensurate with a number of interim measures including, ramp metering, main flow motoring, segregated many lanes and motorway tolls. No facts are provided on the impact of such measures on the local road network. As with the County Council’s stance to oppose the “Link Roads”, your officers would suggest that the critical factor to take into account in deciding whether and by how much to widen the M25, is the capacity of the local road networks to feed the M25; every car journey on the M25 has an origin and destination which impacts on the local road network. Measures such as ramp motoring and motoring tolling will simply transfer much of the problem from the M25 to local roads.

RECOMMENDATION 9

43 The proposed interim measures linked to the widening of the M25 do not demonstrate that the overall road network would operationally be in balance.

FURTHER CONSULTATION

44 It is understood that the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA) will be the only consultee on the consultants final report for ORBIT. It is understood that the final report will take account of the current round of consultation and will be produced in early autumn 2002.

45 To assist the officers of the Regional Assembly in preparing their response to the final report, it is suggested that this report is forwarded to the officers of the assembly. It is also suggested that it is forwarded to the Government Office for the South East.

RECOMMENDATION 10

46 This report is forwarded to both the offices for South East of England Regional Assembly and the Government Office for the South East.

47 The Executive Member for Communities and Countryside will be attending a further briefly on Friday 12 July and an oral update will be given to the Executive on the outcome of the meeting.
CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

48 The ORBIT study is by far the most complex and important of all the multi-modal studies. The information provided to the County Council by the consultants is extremely limited with no data on costs, benefits, outcomes and options evaluated. Given that this will be the only opportunity for the authority to comment on the ‘provisional strategy’ for ORBIT, the series of recommendations set out the serious concerns in relation to the content and timescale of the consultation material. In particular GOSE are asked to give consideration to reviewing their consultation strategy.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: