

## Wokingham consults on more wasteful road schemes

The Lib Dem Council has a determination to spend huge sums on road consultants to come up with expensive schemes to make it more difficult to get to work by van or car, to impede deliveries made to our homes, to make life far more complicated taking children to school and doing the weekly shop. This month they are consulting on the first part of a very expensive four part plan for the A 329, a crucial east west highway, between Winnersh and Wokingham. They want to get government money to cover their big costs, as if that was not more money taken from Wokingham taxpayers in a different way to the Council Tax. Government funds local Councils for the Councils priorities. The Council needs to have sensible priorities and to make good use of taxpayers money when it claims it. The Council will be on risk of the project overrunning or going wrong.

The idea is to create two wide cycle lanes either side of a reduced road for vans, lorries and cars. The current cycle lanes do not attract much use. The Council has clearly not studied who does use the road and why they use it. If they did they would find many of the uses cannot be done on a bike. The plumber and the decorator, the maintenance man and the parcel deliverer need a van to do their work. People taking young children to school do not want to try to supervise them on bicycles in the morning rush. People needing to carry home a week's food shopping need a car. People wanting to complete a decent amount of work in a day that need to travel around often need the flexibility the car provides.

Spare us the anguish and the cost. People living along the road do not want major roadworks for months on end with all the noise and dust. People trying to do their jobs need to be able to use that main road.

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## Travel Advice for Gaza and Israel

The Government has provided updated travel advice to Gaza and Israel which I have reprinted below.

Our Travel Advice has updated to advise against all travel to Gaza and to nearby areas of Israel and to advise against all but essential travel to Israel. ([www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/israel](http://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/israel)). We will keep this under close review. We are telling any British nationals in any areas affected by the fighting that they should follow the instructions of the Israeli Home Front Command.

My officials are working around the clock to support affected British

nationals as our utmost priority. Our consular assistance must also include support for the families of British nationals reported dead or missing. We are also supporting those who require new passports, or Emergency Travel Documents, or other assistance with leaving Israel and, where possible, facilitation for the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. We are also asking affected British nationals to register their presence via (<https://www.register.service.csd.fcdo.gov.uk/israel20231009/tell-the-uk-government-youre-in-israel-or-the-occupied-palestinian-territories>) so that they can receive FCDO travel updates. We are aware that commercial airline capacity out of Israel is constrained and that some British nationals are having to delay their departure.

As mentioned above, any constituents who remain in Israel should follow the instructions of the Israeli Home Front Command. We are working with the Department for Transport and the Israeli government to keep commercial flights running. We are available 24/7 should any British nationals need to contact us, including to update their contact details or location. Our Crisis Response Centre is fully operational and we have embedded Police and other government liaison teams. British nationals in Israel or the Occupied Palestinian Territories requiring consular assistance should call the following numbers: +972 (0)3 725 1222 or +972 (2) 5414100. If they experience technical difficulties or if they are in the UK, call +44 20 7008 5000.

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## [How has devolution done?](#)

Scottish devolution when voted on at the end of the last century was claimed to be the way to allow Scotland to perform better than England in public services and economic growth when they could run their own services and boost their tax revenues.

I have no intention of arguing we should seek to reverse a democratic decision taken in a referendum, and many Scots may well have voted for more Scottish decision taking however it worked out. It nonetheless sheds an interesting light on policies towards higher spending and higher taxes to see what Scotland has bought by choosing both. It is a perfect experiment compared to England over the last 23 years.

Scotland has imposed a higher 21% intermediate Income tax rate, a higher higher rate at 42% and a higher Top rate at 47% compared to the rest of the UK at 20%, 40% and 45%. This has helped Scotland to afford much higher public spending per head, though the bulk is paid for by a bigger grant from UK taxes. Scotland last year spent £13,881 per head on public services compared

to £11, 549 in England.

If we take the two key services of health and education we see little advantage from these higher sums. Scottish pupils on average are well behind English ones in maths and science judged by international secondary school comparative assessment, and similar in English. The NHS in Scotland has more long waits to get NHS treatments than England and has a bigger percentage on waiting lists.

Meanwhile there has been no boost to growth from higher spending and taxes. Since 2000, the first full year of the Scottish Parliament, Scottish GDP has advanced 86.6% in cash terms compared to 106.2% for the UK as a whole.

Scottish voters need to ask some tough questions of their government. Why aren't public services better for all the extra money? Why is economic growth lagging so badly? It also warns England that a further hike in taxes and public spending would not deliver better results on this evidence.

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## [Visit to new centre at Maiden Erleigh School](#)

On Friday 29 th September I visited Maiden Erleigh School to see the new facilities for Special Educational needs. The School does a good ,job in meeting the individual needs of each child, and now has an excellent new area for some of this work. It was a pleasure to meet those who had created it and to thank the teachers for all they do to provide a rich educational experience.

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## [Labour's conference](#)

So Labour wish to run large scale investment projects better than HS 2. They wish to halve the government's use of consultancies, reduce the use of chartered planes for government Ministers and ensure more private investment is added to state investment to boost output.

This is not going to suddenly change the growth prospects, get inflation down faster or transform public sector management. Consultancies may be due a hair cut, but you cannot say how many you need until you identify what they do and whether they are essential because the civil service does not have the skills and knowledge. Otherwise they should only be used where they are cheaper and better than in house.

Cutting down on plane use may afford some small savings though rail tickets are also dear these days and chauffeured cars do not come cheap. Most of us would like to see more private investment alongside or replacing public investment. The question is does the state identify enough projects that will earn a decent return to attract the investment? Labour's wish to impose more windfall taxes will put off some private and foreign investors, reminding them that if their investment works the government will want to pocket more of the profits.

Labour promises us iron clad fiscal rules. They want to double up on Treasury forecasts and an independent Office of Budget Responsibility . They will make every decision on tax and spend dependent on a report and forecast by the OBR. They should have learned that that very system allowed a huge increase in spending and borrowing over covid when they backed government spending plans and urged more. It then led to big rises in tax revenues which they attack. Chancellors have to make judgements as they will be blamed for the results. The OBR needs to amend its models so it can forecast the levels of tax revenue and borrowing more accurately than it has been able to do in recent years. We need an accurate guide to help steer the ship. How would they restore lost productivity with public sector Unions keen to expand workforces?