

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Highways Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Thursday 4 July 2013 at 9.30 a.m.**

Present:

Councillor G Bleasdale in the Chair

Members of the Committee

Councillors J Allen, D Bell, H Bennett, O Gunn, D Hall, D Hicks, K Hopper, C Kay, O Milburn, S Morrison, J Rowlandson, P Stradling, J Turnbull and R Young.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor B Armstrong, I Geldard and R Ormerod.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members present.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 11 April and 19 June 2013 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest in relation to any items of business on the agenda.

5 Proposed Signalisation of Northlands Roundabout, Chester-le-Street, County Durham

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development regarding objections received to a scheme which proposed junction improvements and signalisation at the A693/A167 Northlands Roundabout, Chester-le-Street (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Strategic Traffic Manager made a presentation to the Committee which detailed the location of the roundabout and included aerial views, prominent features of the immediate surrounding area, street views of the roundabout exits and traffic flow statistics (for copy of presentation see file of Minutes).

Representations from people residing in the immediate area had been on-going since 2005, all of which sought improvements for pedestrians and other road users. The Council had revisited the site on numerous occasions but had encountered difficulties in the design of a suitable scheme given the five-legged nature of the roundabout.

The Committee were informed that the A693 and A167 were categorised as economic transport corridors where the Council would look to improve junction layouts, enhance capacity, facilitate growth and reduce congestion.

The proposed scheme would consist of traffic signals, with pedestrian and cycle crossing facilities. The Park Road North entrance to the roundabout would be reconfigured and an area of highway land to the south would be utilised to introduce a crossover priority junction. The carriageway on the A693 Blind Lane and A167 North Road would be widened to provide additional lanes to deal with the volume of traffic and the roundabout would be reduced from five legs to four.

It was considered that the scheme would serve to manage traffic flow at the roundabout and had been developed in response to a number of factors, namely:

- requests for formal pedestrian crossing facilities at the junction
- lack of facilities for cyclists
- delays to buses and traffic at peak times

Traffic data was shared with the Committee which showed an average of 15,000 vehicles per day. This had remained relatively constant over the past eight years. There had been 14 accidents in the past five years which had resulted in 16 casualties, two were pedestrians and one was a cyclist.

Extensive consultation had taken place, through informal meetings with the local Parish Council, local councillors, residents associations and the general public. Consultation with residents was undertaken in December 2012 and had been followed up with a series of 'drop-in' sessions. Press releases had been placed in the local media.

The Committee were informed that there had been 59 representations from the occupiers of 33 properties, together with an objection from North Lodge Parish Council and North Lodge Residents Association. In addition to this a 73 name petition had also been submitted which, essentially, maintained an objection to the parts of the scheme which directly affected the residents of Blind Lane who stated that residents in the area were already faced with high volumes of traffic, associated noise and pollution and environmental impact. Representations from the MP for North Durham and North Lodge Residents Association had been circulated to the Committee at the request of both parties.

The Strategic Traffic Manager then summarised the objections to the scheme which included:-

- traffic volumes and speed;
- impact on pedestrian safety as a result of carriageway widening and the impact on accessing properties;
- merging lanes;
- noise and vibration;
- vehicle emissions;
- quality of life and visual amenity;
- consideration of alternative proposals.

Referring to an email submitted by Councillor Wilkes prior to the meeting, the Strategic Traffic Manager informed the Committee that:

- the location of telegraph poles, streetlights and the tree barrier from a nearby playing field had not been considered at the current stage and would be part of the final design phase. This had not yet been undertaken because the Council did not have approval for the scheme;
- traffic signals on the roundabout would be full-time and needed to be operate in this way for any pedestrians who were visually impaired;
- there were no concerns in relation to any possible increase in through-put of traffic which would affect the Vigo Lane/Durham Road mini-roundabout at the boundary with Birtley, because improvements had already been undertaken in that particular area;
- no objections had been received from emergency services and a letter of support had been received from the local bus company;

The Strategic Highways Manager also referred to a representation from a local resident who sought the retention of a stone bus shelter. The Committee were informed that no discussions had yet taken place and the Council would discuss this issue with the Parish Council and others at the relevant time.

The Committee then heard representations from a small group of students from Park View School who were in support of the proposals and explained to the Committee that:-

- the road was extremely difficult to cross given the amount of traffic at peak times;
- many students took unnecessary risks in attempting to cross the road after long periods of time, simply through impatience. Whilst it was accepted that students would still have to wait for any possible traffic signals to change, it would be controlled with a guarantee of being able to cross safely, quicker than what it would be without;
- vehicle speeds entering and exiting the roundabout were fast and dangerous;
- Northlands park was a popular play area in Chester-le-Street which many students used and encountered difficulty in accessing because of difficulties crossing the road;
- many vehicles did not indicate which left students unsure of their intended direction of travel;
- visibility was poor when crossing the road at Blind Lane with many cars travelling at excess speed;

- some road users with good intentions would often stop their vehicle on the inside lane to allow students to cross the road, however, drivers in the outside lane were either unaware or wouldn't stop often - causing students have to retreat back to the footpath.

In summing up their representations, the students from Park View School felt that the introduction of traffic signals and pedestrian crossing facilities would make the road safer for all users.

The Committee then heard representations of objection from a spokesperson of the residents of Blind Lane, summarised as follows:

- residents were not against change, especially changes which would make the area safer and provide better traffic flow;
- proposals at present would mean the removal of grass verges at Blind Lane which offered little or no tangible benefit other than to affect the lives, wellbeing and physical wellbeing of local residents;
- it was considered that the junction was safe. This was supported by the Council's own statistics and the introduction of traffic signals would potentially create more accidents. The spokesperson highlighted a scenario of a heavy goods vehicle travelling at speed over the junction through an amber signal;
- it had been observed very recently by local residents that the majority of responsible road users took care at the roundabout. Traffic at peak times had seen good traffic flow and little congestion. Thirty or more schoolchildren had crossed the road with relative ease using the existing footpathways;
- there was a feeling that more could be done to educate students on how to cross the road properly;
- recent meetings between representatives of the local community, the local Member of Parliament and County Council representatives had resulted in a general view that all reasonable objections had been dismissed and there were doubts about the effectiveness of the consultation which could have been better;
- the Committee were being asked to agree a multi-million pound project without a final design;
- traffic congestion at peak times from junction 63 of the A1(M) came as a result of traffic lights, whereas the Northlands Roundabout appeared to flow quite well;
- Blind Lane was not constructed for the volume or capacity of traffic that travelled through it which would worsen with the expansion of Drum Industrial Estate;
- earlier reports lacked consistency and there were little to no details of any form of compromise or alternative;

- there was a feeling that the Blind Lane area was shouldering the burden for the scheme and did not fit with the council's consultation strategy to 'reduce inequality between residents';
- requested that the Committee leave the grass verges in Blind Lane untouched and look at alternative of staggered traffic.

Councillor T Smith, local County Councillor for the Chester-le-Street North Division referred to letters and correspondence she had received in 2008. The letter alluded to problems that students encountered when trying to cross the road. The school encouraged students to walk to school in an attempt to reduce car journeys to and from school, which many parents were in agreement with. Councillor Smith suggested that after five years of inactivity, no safety improvements had been made, and she considered that the Council must act quickly and approve a scheme for the benefit of all.

Councillor Smith also referred to an email from the Headteacher of the school who had stated that at present, the road proposed a significant danger for students of Park View School with no other reasonable way to approach the school site by foot and expressed the view that traffic signals would make the roundabout safer for all. The Headteacher had also referred to traffic congestion outside the school entrance, essentially caused by indiscriminate parking and did cause major issues for the residents of North Lodge. This issue would potentially be minimised if students had a safe walking route to school.

Councillor P May, local councillor for the North Lodge area informed the Committee that both himself and local residents were not against any scheme which made the area safer and felt that the introduction of any pedestrian crossing would not resolve the traffic issues experienced outside of the school.

Councillor May commented that the Council had proposed a scheme which made the area safer for certain groups of people but was in fact to the detriment of residents and users of a nursery on Blind Lane, which was not intended to cater for heavy traffic. The associated widening of the road would exacerbate problems that residents had already been experiencing, which included noise, vibration and difficulties with access and egress from their properties. Councillor May suggested that Highways officers should have produced an alternative proposal for consideration.

In response to the representations made to the Committee, the Strategic Traffic Manager informed the Committee that:

- despite the concerns that had been raised, there was no evidence to support that the introduction of traffic signals on roundabouts caused more accidents;
- the consultation had been well publicised, open and transparent and provided many opportunities to feed into the process;
- in terms of the final scheme, no detailed design had been made, for example how the utilities would design new telegraph poles etc., and assured the Committee that any changes of significance would be referred to them for consideration;

- in terms of the design for the scheme, the council had tasked a leading traffic design company to come up with a solution to this problematic area which has been fully assessed by professional officers from the Council. If there was an option not to widen Blind Lane the scheme could not go ahead as it could not be achieved without widening the road.

Councillor Stradling commented that the consultation appeared adequate and queried whether any alternatives had been considered at any point.

The Strategic Traffic Manager informed the Committee that no alternative schemes had been considered and referred to the constant requests received over a number of years, hence the renewed push and engagement traffic consultants to come up with a solution.

Councillor Turnbull explained to the Committee that he had travelled the route over the past weekend and felt that the roundabout currently presented a 'who dares wins' type of scenario and needed to be addressed. He also pointed out that a large volume of vehicles had been parked in cycle lanes at certain locations which should be looked at as a separate issue.

Resolved:

That the recommendation contained in the report be agreed.