

AGENDA ITEM 10

To: Swale Joint Transportation Board
By: Head of Transportation, Kent County Council
Date: 9 June 2014
Subject: A2 / A251 Junction, Faversham
Classification: Decision

Summary: Proposals have been developed for the A2 / A251 junction, to tackle congestion and improve safety. The report outlines the results of public consultation and recommends a preferred option with which to move forward.

Introduction

1. For a number of years, improvements to the A2 / A251 junction in Faversham have been put forward as a proposed scheme for Local Transport Plan (LTP) funding, to tackle two of Kent County Council's main priorities, namely congestion and safety. At present, the junction forms a T-junction, with the A251 from Ashford giving way to the A2. Nearby is another significant T-junction, where The Mall leads off the A2 into Faversham; the primary signed route into Faversham from the M2, A2 and A251.
2. A report was previously presented to this Board on 9 September 2013. The subsequent recommendation was that three options be presented for public consultation, namely traffic signals, a roundabout, or 'do nothing'.

<http://www2.swale.gov.uk/dso/viewagenda.asp?uid=1711> (Item 10)

3. A budget was initially set aside to progress improvements in 2014/15. This Board requested additional options be presented to the public, and requirement to investigate and draw up Option B (roundabout) has meant that the scheme implementation date has been put back. However, adequate resources have been retained in this current financial year to progress the detailed design and land acquisition for a preferred option, with a view to informing a fresh funding bid to implement improvements during 2015/16.

Public consultation

4. The public consultation took place between 25 April and 16 May 2014, inviting comment upon three options. Annex 1 contains the consultation documents, including scheme drawings and a comparison of the options.
5. The consultation has taken the form of the following:
 - Leaflets delivered to nearby residents and businesses.
 - Posters placed on site.
 - Yellow road signs placed on all approaches to the junction.
 - Direct notification to local representatives, bus companies, emergency services and other statutory consultees.
 - Notification to the local press (the consultation has subsequently received coverage). Drawings and background information available on KCC's consultation website.
 - A one day exhibition at Faversham Library on 8 May 2014, which received a steady attendance throughout the day.
 - Notification via KCC's social media outlet.
6. Respondents were asked to say where they had accessed the information, to select a preferred option, and to provide any further comments that maybe helpful for the progression of the scheme.
7. The consultation strategy has resulted in a strong response. A summary of comments and views received is contained within Annex 2.

Analysis of responses

8. A total of 100 responses were received. Of these, 25% viewed the plans at the library exhibition and 75% accessed information via the KCC website.
9. The responses indicate a strong consensus for 'doing something', with just 13% wishing to maintain the status quo (Option C). Of those wanting to see positive action, there was a very even split, with 44% preferring traffic lights (Option A), against 43% for a roundabout (Option B).
10. A large volume of additional comments were received and these are also summarised in Annex 2.
11. A number of responses related to the predicted performance of Options A and B to deal with traffic flow. This has been assessed using computer software and existing traffic flows, with factors built in for traffic growth and potential future development over the next five years. The models predict that both arrangements should cope with the traffic and have spare capacity. Option B may have more spare capacity than Option A in the longer term, although this cannot be accurately predicted beyond the medium term and also needs to be offset against the greater land take and costs.

12. Some respondents expressed the view that traffic lights have more flexibility dealing with traffic growth. Improved technology means that signals can be made smarter and more sensitive to fluctuating conditions. Remote monitoring can also be installed so that the junction is kept under constant review from the Highway Management Centre in Aylesford. Option A takes up less land than Option B to achieve comparable levels of congestion relief, and so there is more flexibility to further increase capacity in the future if required.
13. It was noted by some that the current junction arrangements only perform poorly during the morning and afternoon peak. This is certainly true. However these are the times at which the majority of users are travelling through the junction, and any positive benefits will be felt mostly by this large percentage. A negative impression will remain at quieter times as to the merit of any improvements and public expenditure incurred.
14. The additional costs associated with Option B were highlighted. The construction cost of Options A and B are estimated at £265,000 and £415,000 respectively. This excludes unknown additional costs associated with the diversion of public utility services and land acquisition, both of which will be more for Option B due to the greater land take. This should be offset against Option A having more maintenance costs following construction, estimated at £60,000 over a 15 year period.
15. In view of the above costs, some queried whether cheaper options were possible e.g. a mini-roundabout. Option B is the size that it is, because it has been designed to accommodate the predicted traffic flows in as safe a manner as possible. A mini-roundabout is not considered to be a safe option for this junction, as they are more suited to a single lane approach, which would constrain capacity and thus would not deal with traffic flow as efficiently as either Option A or B. It would also be costly to maintain, as the high traffic flows, particularly HGVs and buses, would over-run the central dome which would require regular refreshment.
16. The visual impact of the options was highlighted, with lights perceived as being less attractive, and a roundabout having more potential for providing an 'entry point' for the town.
17. The relative safety of each option was mentioned, with more comments perceiving the greater safety of traffic lights. Predicted crash reduction rates are similar, however Option A presents a better situation for more vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists, with this option being the preferred arrangement for organisations representing the visually impaired. In the last three years of available records there have been five personal injury crashes, one of which was categorised as serious, resulting in an overall total of nine casualties.
18. Observations were made that the outline designs did not show any specific cycling facilities, this can be dealt with at the detailed design stage and take cognisance of the emerging Swale Cycling Strategy.

19. Some respondents highlighted issues with the junction at The Mall, and whilst expressing support for Option A, liked some elements of Option B associated with this junction. The issues relate to turning right towards Sittingbourne, the possibility of extending yellow box junctions, and improving pedestrian crossing points. The possibility of improving traffic flow at the entrance to The Abbey School was also mentioned, as well as other junctions leading on to the A2. These issues could be looked at further, whatever option is pursued.
20. Residents raised difficulties with accessing the A2 from side roads and driveways, and expressed this as a reason for supporting Option A. This is a valid reason, and traffic lights are more likely to supply the breaks in traffic flow that would assist with this issue.
21. The possibility of part-time traffic lights was raised. This was addressed in the previous JTB report in September 2013, and the option ruled out for the reasons explained. Similarly, the possibility of signalling both junctions was also explored and not progressed. These are summarised in Annex 3.
22. Problems associated with the previous temporary use of traffic lights at this junction for roadworks were cited as a reason for not supporting Option A. This is not an equitable comparison, as the temporary lights do not have the level of technology and sophistication to react to traffic flow that permanent signals would have. Similarly, some questioned whether lights could be 'triallyed' to see if they would work. Again, the required level of technology to assist the junction to perform satisfactorily could not be achieved or replicated under temporary conditions.
23. Alternative suggestions were put forward to the effect that the options presented did not look to the longer term, and that a new access on to the M2 should be promoted that would connect with Western Link. It is most unlikely that a new link to the motorway from this roundabout would be feasible within the foreseeable future. This would require the funding and construction of a new all movement motorway junction and 1.5km of new road construction. The cost of this would be in the order of hundreds of millions of pounds and could not be justified by the quantum of new development that is proposed in Faversham. A new junction onto the M2 at this point would be 1.6km from Junction 6, which would be a sub-standard spacing and would be unlikely to be approved by the Highways Agency, particularly as the spacing between Junction 6 and Junction 7 (Brenley Corner) is also short.
24. Queries were raised concerning the potential impact upon the declared Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) in Ospringle, located approximately 850m from the scheme extents. The impact of either Option A or B is considered to lie somewhere in the range of 'neutral' to 'slightly positive', given the projected improvements in traffic flow. As discussed in section 19, there may also be scope to look at some relatively low cost measures at other junctions along the A2 to improve traffic flow.

25. Concern was expressed that more people may use unsuitable residential side roads to 'avoid' either Option A or B. As discussed elsewhere in this report, both of the 'do something' options are anticipated to improve traffic flow, which should make this less likely. Nevertheless, not every impact of the proposals can be accurately foreseen. Subject to any improvements taking place, unexpected impacts on other parts of the highway network would need to be kept under review, and addressed if deemed necessary.
26. The specific views of various statutory consultees are contained within the following paragraphs:-
27. Views of the local County Member for Faversham: "Having smart traffic lights and a pedestrian crossing will create gaps in the traffic flow to enable other road users to join the A2. The top of the Mall would need to be cross-hatched. I think a roundabout of the necessary size would be an eyesore, and there is no guarantee it would solve the problem".
28. Views of Faversham Town Council: "Faversham Town Council's informal view (which will be confirmed at its next Town Council meeting on 2 June) is that Option A – traffic lights – is the preferred option".
29. Views of Kent Fire & Rescue Service: "We welcome the highway improvements to the junction of the A2/A251. Both the options will provide improvements to traffic movement along the Canterbury and Ashford roads. However, Option B - Roundabout – would appear to be the more favourable choice with regard to access and egress from Faversham Fire Station".
30. Views of Kent Police: "We have no objections to either of the proposed options; however our preferred option would be for a roundabout".

Conclusion

31. There appears to be a consensus to 'do something' and thus a choice between Options A and B. For those who have taken the time to respond, this choice either comes down to a matter of personal preference with some people preferring traffic lights to roundabouts (and vice versa), or to how people use the junction e.g. as a motorist, cyclists or pedestrian.
32. Option A has the following advantages:
 - Lower installation costs.
 - Less third party land required, and associated loss of mature trees.
 - Quicker to deliver.
 - More land remaining available for future junction expansion.
 - Less disruption during the construction phase.
 - Better facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.
 - 'Hurry call' for Fire Station.

33. Perceived deficiencies with the design of Option A can also be addressed during the detailed design phase of the project:

- Pedestrian facilities at the junction with The Mall.
- Turning movements at The Mall.
- Further work on yellow box markings and keep clear markings for selected side road junctions on to the A2.
- Exit from Preston Grove.

34. Option B has the following advantages:

- Lower energy usage.
- Significantly less costs for longer term maintenance.
- Facilitates the u-turn to help drivers wishing to go towards Sittingbourne from The Mall.
- Decision making retained by drivers.
- Less delay caused by pedestrians crossing the road.
- The possibility of more capacity in the longer term.
- Visually a less 'engineered' appearance than traffic lights.

Recommendation

35. On the balance of the relative advantages, disadvantages and the views received, it is recommended that Option A as shown in Annex 1 be approved as the preferred option for further progression to the detailed design and funding bid stage, incorporating an investigation into additional features as outlined in Section 33.

Background documents: Previous Swale JTB Report, 9 September 2013.

Annexes

Annex 1 – Consultation documents

Annex 2 – Summary of responses

Annex 3 – Alternative traffic signal arrangements

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