

SWALE JOINT TRANSPORTATION BOARD 14 MARCH 2011

- Subject:** **Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road – Bapchild Link**
- Director/Head of Service:** Director of Regeneration and Economy
- Decision Issues:** These matters are within the authority of the Kent County Council
- Decision:** Non-key
- SBC Ward/KCC Division:** **West Downs / Swale East, Swale West**
- Summary:** *Report on public consultation on the Bapchild section of the SNRR (Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road).*
- To Recommend:** **Views are sought from Members on the Bapchild Scheme to report to the KCC Cabinet Member for Environment Highways and Waste for decision.**
- Classification:** THIS REPORT IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road (SNRR) is being built in stages with the current phase (Milton Creek Crossing) due for completion in autumn 2011. The overall route has been developed to ease transport pressures in Sittingbourne, both providing a new high quality link to the northern industrial estates at Kemsley and Eurolink and also providing major relief to Sittingbourne Town Centre, facilitating central area regeneration.
- 1.2 The final section of the SNRR is proposed to link the project to the A2 east of Sittingbourne and has been studied in principle and developed to outline design standard. The scheme was the subject of public consultation in February 2010 and this report is a summary of the issues raised for Members to debate. Consultation Plans will be available for Members to view at the meeting. A decision needs to be taken on the way forward for the scheme and the outcome of the debate will be reported to the KCC Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste.

2.0 History

- 2.1 The SNRR was originally conceived in the early 1990's as a development of the Sittingbourne Milton and Kemsley Distributor Road. There are two key constraints in the town, namely: Milton Creek (running north/south) and the London / Coast Railway line (running east/west). Together these constraints restrict the development of the Town and seriously affect traffic circulation around Sittingbourne. The SNRR is designed to overcome both these

constraints by bridging Milton Creek and connecting to the A2 East of Sittingbourne.

- 2.2 The principle of the project is long established and has been debated many times, both in Committee processes and at Public Inquiries. The spatial development of Sittingbourne has been influenced by (amongst other issues) opportunities associated with transportation projects (principally the A249, the SNRR and latterly, the Sittingbourne Southern Relief Road). One of the key issues for Sittingbourne is the large volume of HGV's accessing various industrial sites in and around the Town. The SNRR is deliberately designed to manage the flow of HGV's in Sittingbourne, and to do this effectively, the SNRR needs to connect strategically to the principal road network.
- 2.3 The Bapchild Link scheme was studied for the Borough Council in 2002/2003 by Babbie and focused on three possible options: the northern, central and western routes. The work carried out then was discussed with the Parish councils and subsequently the Borough Council included the principle of the northern route in their current (2008) Local Plan. The County Council was not involved in this process.
- 2.4 At the Local Plan Inquiry it was noted by the County Council that the scheme should be reviewed before being brought forward. The reconsideration of broad objectives and costs led to the development of a fourth alternative route (known as the Combined Route) which combined the strategic and local objectives in a more cost-effective project. It was clear that the route had substantial disadvantages but these had not been debated through either the previous work or at the Local Plan Inquiry. The County Council decided to mount public consultation to test the principles of the scheme locally

3.0 Scheme Details

- 3.1 The scheme was developed with two key objectives in mind. Firstly, to complete the SNRR providing the strategic route across the north of Sittingbourne, and secondly, to provide mitigation to local communities potentially affected by the scheme – principally Bapchild, where the majority of any disbenefits would be experienced. Consequently, any mitigation needs to focus on the community there as far as possible.
- 3.2 The scheme is shown on Figure 1 in the appendix. This plan shows some indicative mitigation measures that have been included to inform people how the scheme could look once completed. It is anticipated that any detailed design would develop the proposals in more depth in close liaison with locally affected people.
- 3.3 In order to consider the scheme, it is helpful to compare and contrast the proposal against the previous routes studied by the Borough Council in 2003. These options have not been developed to the same level of design as the consultation route, but there is sufficient information to understand the principles involved. They are shown diagrammatically in Figure 2 in the appendix. It is also helpful to render the issues into reasonably comparable concepts. In this respect the contrast between costs and traffic impacts is a useful barometer of the basic impacts.

- 3.4 It should be remembered that the environmental impacts are particularly important and need to feature strongly in Members consideration. At this stage of design the environmental issues are only briefly described – at subsequent stages of the scheme design a full environmental assessment would be undertaken. In all cases any new route must cross the railway line – going over creates visual intrusion and going under creates environmental problems with groundwater. In addition, as a general policy, Network Rail is reluctant to approve new structures for projects that go under the railway.
- 3.5 The following summary is used to compare and contrast the possible options.
- 3.5.1 The **Northern Route** is the most expensive at approximately £46.5 million. It has strong environmental impacts whether going over or under the railway line. In traffic terms the route would reduce traffic flows in Bapchild by about 25%. It is unlikely this scheme is deliverable due primarily to the high costs.
- 3.5.2 The **Central Route** is cheaper at approximately £16.5 million. It has severe environmental / landscape implications by crossing the Country Park and Conservation Area. In traffic terms the route would also reduce traffic flows in Bapchild by about 25%. This scheme is potentially deliverable if the environmental concerns can be mitigated.
- 3.5.3 The **Western Route** is the cheapest of the options at approximately £15 million. It has some landscape implications but has by far the least impact on the environment of the three schemes. In traffic terms it would increase traffic flows in Bapchild by some 20%. This scheme is more deliverable but makes traffic conditions in Bapchild worse.
- 3.5.4 The **Combined Route** (Central and Western) is estimated to cost £20.5 million. It carries the severe environmental / landscape implications of the Central Route. In traffic terms it provides a complete bypass to Bapchild thereby reducing traffic flows to just village traffic only. This scheme is potentially deliverable if the environmental concerns can be mitigated.
- 3.6 It is apparent when considering the differences between the routes that there is not a “best” option across all aspects (financial, environmental, traffic) and therefore any scheme which is finally chosen will require a substantial element of judgement which balances the various factors.

4.0 Consultation

- 4.1 The consultation process was not statutorily based and therefore was governed by the County Council’s general Duty to Involve. This comprised an absolute basic 3 months consultation period which was extended to ensure a widespread consultation was carried out. A public exhibition was mounted in Bapchild, with leaflets publicising the event delivered throughout the village. All material exhibited are still posted on the kent.gov.uk website and discussions with individuals, representative groups and parish councils were carried out throughout 2010.
- 4.2 Accompanying the formal exhibition was a questionnaire which sought answers on two specific questions – the need for completing the strategic route for Sittingbourne – and the need for bypassing Bapchild. In addition, views were sought on the scheme promoted and detailed issues on

environmental impacts, noise, visual intrusion, etc, were canvassed. Discussions at the Exhibition and subsequently have been wide-ranging as people have sought to understand the problems locally with the wider implications for regeneration and network strategy issues.

- 4.3 It should be noted that the developer of Stones Farm mounted a separate consultation process immediately prior to the County Council's events and showed the previous 2003 routes studied by the Borough Council. In discussion with local people and groups it was evident that this additional process did manage to confuse the issues and caused significant disquiet in Bapchild. Consequently, the discussions on the SNRR were extended beyond the basic timescale to allow clarity on responses and to separate the decision-making processes to ensure transparency of accountability. The Stones Farm consultation was followed up by a subsequent process managed by the Borough Council to consider the SPD issues with that development.
- 4.4 It has not been particularly helpful to run these consultation processes almost in parallel with each other but not fully integrating them. The results to each of the consultations may well have been "cross -contaminated" by the different issues and care therefore needs to be taken in drawing simple conclusions from any of the results. For the future, any scheme brought forward near Bapchild will require a careful consultation and information process to ensure transparency.

5.0 Results

- 5.1 The public exhibition was visited by 236 people over two days and a total of 131 questionnaires were returned. This is a suitable sample for considering the issues raised and has been used as the primary mechanism for assessing the suitability of the scheme. It should be noted that despite the simplicity of the questionnaire (yes/no answers) not everybody filled in every answer, so the results need to be considered in percentage terms to avoid confusion. This point needs to be borne in mind for any future consultation to ensure the results are as useful as possible.
- 5.2 **Question 1** considered the strategic need for the scheme. Of those responding, 113 people answered this question of whom 73 (65%) said it should be completed to the A2, with 40 (35%) against the principle of the scheme.
- 5.3 **Question 2** considered the desire to bypass Bapchild. Of those responding, 118 people answered this question, of whom 95 (80%) said it should be bypassed, with 23 (20%) against.
- 5.4 **Question 3** asked if people agreed with the scheme or not. Of those responding, 116 people answered this question, of whom 58 (50%) agreed with the scheme and 58 (50%) opposed it.
- 5.5 Although a question on the previous 2003 routes studied by the Borough Council was not asked, it was clear that many people were concerned by this and wished to express a preference for the previous routes. On commenting on the other three routes 27 people wanted the *Northern Route*, 7 wanted the *Central Route* and 1 wanted the *Western Route*. More people expressed a

desire to choose another route but did not formally do so because a suitable question for them to answer was not offered.

- 5.6 In addition to the formal questionnaire, several additional responses (written, telephone and by email) have been received many of which duplicate and expand upon responses received in the formal questionnaires. Detailed responses have also been received from Swale Borough Council, Bapchild, Tonge, and Teynham Parish Councils. Of these elected bodies all of them are opposed to the scheme as promoted by the County Council.

6.0 Issues

- 6.1 The issues are quite diverse in the locality. Many people are concerned at the current levels of traffic and are convinced of the need to complete the SNRR, which has been embedded in principle in the Local Planning Strategy for the last two decades. The desire for a “bypass” is strong (as it is in most villages). The issue of costs is a little misunderstood partly due to previous information published on the possible schemes. The misinterpretation of intention emerging from the Stones Farm consultation has unfortunately served to confuse the planning issues. The environmental impacts on both the Country Park specifically and local residents generally are of significant concern. In considering these issues, it is clear that many of them can act as barriers to delivery for the scheme and the difficulty associated with overcoming them needs to be considered carefully.
- 6.2 **Traffic** Current Traffic Flows in Bapchild are around 13,000 to 15,000 vehicles per day. This will grow with regeneration activity in Sittingbourne. The desire for traffic relief in Bapchild is difficult to balance against local environmental impacts. Connecting the SNRR to the A2 benefits Sittingbourne but impacts local communities on the A2 to the east. Effects on the M2 motorway and A249 are also predicted as the scheme has a wide sphere of influence.
- 6.3 **Costs** The scheme options are all several million pounds. The likelihood of public funding in the short to medium term is slim and the overall costs for developer contributions are significant. Members have been very clear on the need for S106 funding and this is now being developed through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) legislation. Whether the costs of this project can be sustained by developer contributions alone has not been fully resolved. Informal discussions have shown little appetite for progressive funding attached to developments as the sites required to sustain this level of funding would necessarily be very large. This is an issue being discussed with the Borough Council for resolution through the LDF process.
- 6.4 **Stones Farm** The specific development allocation at Stones Farm is locally contentious in Bapchild. The development detail is linked to the SNRR in that both the *Western* and *Combined* routes would run immediately adjacent to the development. The SNRR is not required to ameliorate the development impact, but it is geographically and financially linked – the landowner controls most of the land required in the locality. Many people believe that objecting to Stones Farm will stop the SNRR and objecting to the SNRR will stop Stones Farm. The projects are not so interconnected but clarity of intention has been obscured and it is essential to separate the two issues as far as possible to ensure decision-making is robust and can be clearly demonstrated. The

impact of the road scheme on the Open Space allocation attached to Stones Farm is unresolved but is a further complication in the planning process.

- 6.5 **Environment** The impact of the *Combined* (and *Central*) routes on the Conservation Area and Country Park (locally owned and managed – not by KCC or SBC) is severe. Some mitigation can be achieved which would restore some aspects of the environment, but it is clear that routing a scheme through the Country Park would be extremely damaging. Environmental Bodies (although not formally consulted at this stage) have raised concerns and can be expected to object strongly. The Borough and Parish Councils also have major environmental objections to any route through the Central area that cannot be mitigated.
- 6.6 The introduction of a route to the south of Hempstead Farm severs less farmland than routing to the north and maintains the integrity of the current farm processing operations, but takes the scheme very close to residential property in Hempstead Lane. This is, not surprisingly, unpopular and the detailed implications of the effects of the route cannot be fully quantified at this stage of the scheme development process. There are obvious disbenefits such as some property demolition, relocation of some farm buildings and the impacts on residents in Hempstead Lane, but there are also other potential effects such as the future of the land between the scheme and the current A2. These are more localised environmental concerns than the Conservation Area and Country Park, but are nevertheless extremely important.
- 6.7 **Delivery** Progressing a scheme in this locality requires both a successful passage through statutory processes and sufficient funding to complete the project. With any of the routes considered both of these aspects are not certain. The technical difficulties (such as the railway crossing, environmental intrusion, local opposition) could be reduced but not fully overcome, and will have a knock-on effect on funding. It is clear that all the detailed environmental issues cannot be fully mitigated by any of the possible options. Delivery will therefore be difficult and it is unlikely to be achieved in the short to medium term.

7.0 Discussion

- 7.1 The Project to complete the Northern Relief Road has strategic implications for the regeneration of Sittingbourne. It has severe local impacts, some positive, some negative and the selection of a specific route for the scheme is not unanimous. The balance of funding pressures against local impacts affect the delivery of the scheme to such an extent that success cannot be guaranteed.
- 7.2 The consultation results are broadly clear, if inconclusive. People mostly agree with the overall strategy, want local mitigation with minimal impact on the environment, but are completely divided on the scheme promoted. There is a desire for the *northern route* in many people's minds and there is also a reaction in principle against the scheme from communities to the east of Sittingbourne.
- 7.3 The issues around broader network strategy are linked to the emerging development options in the Borough Councils LDF. The promotion of a link to

