

Ashford Ring Road

A report by the Head of Major Projects to the Highways Advisory Board on 11th July 2006

Purpose of Report

1. To advise the Highways Advisory Board on scheme progress to re-configure the existing one-way A292 Ashford Ring Road into a series of two-way quality streets. The report presents initial scheme design concepts, provides feedback from a recent public exhibition exercise, examines funding sources and outlines a project delivery timetable.
2. The Board is asked to support the outline scheme design presented to convert the A292 Ashford Ring Road into a series of two-way quality streets and recommend to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Supporting Independence that the scheme is progressed to detailed design along with the advertisement of the necessary Traffic Regulation Orders

Background

3. Following publication of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities Plan 2003, Ashford is now identified as one of the major growth areas in the South-East with a total of 31,000 homes and 28,000 jobs envisaged by 2031. Detailed masterplanning studies followed which has now led to the development of mutually supporting land use and transport strategies to ensure that the town's future growth is well planned and sustainable.
4. Ashford Borough Council has recently consulted upon the Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP) which will form one of the key documents of the Ashford Local Development Framework (LDF).
5. A Transport Strategy for Ashford has also been developed by the County Council in line with the broad thrust of central government and County Council transport policy which was approved in January 2006.
6. One of the early transformational projects listed in the plan is the need to re-configure the current one-way, traffic dominated environment to a series of two-way, shared use, quality streets which will support and stimulate town centre development and encourage greater joint use by traffic and pedestrians of the public realm, whilst not prejudicing safety. An early 'mend before extend' approach to the town centre will be crucial, even before significant growth takes place, and the transformation of the Ashford Ring Road is a critical project.
7. The transformed ring road is integral to the vision for the town by setting the scene for high quality public realm as well as stimulating developer opportunities along the highway frontage.
8. Previous Highways Advisory Board (HAB) meetings on 10th January 2006 and 2nd May 2006 have both supported reports on the concept of the Ashford Ring Road Transformation and this report now seeks support to progress to detailed scheme design for Phase 1 of the scheme.

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The Ring Road Scheme

Existing Situation

9. The existing one-way A292 Ashford Ring Road, which will be 'down classified', comprises Elwick Road, West Street, Forge Lane, Somerset Road, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road. It places a stranglehold on the town centre and the fast moving, car dominated environment restricts development opportunities and severs the town centre core from the outlying residential areas. Appendix A shows the existing ring road.
10. Traffic speeds are relatively high and whilst catering adequately for vehicular capacity, the existing Ring Road adds little else to the town centre environment and will restrict its growth if changes to the current configuration are not made.

Scheme Concept

11. It is planned to turn the current one-way traffic orientated Ring Road into a series of two-way quality streets so that the current severance imposed by the Ring Road will be significantly reduced and pedestrians and cyclists given more priority.
12. The scheme principles involve the slowing of traffic to 20 mph or less in places and the narrowing of carriageways so that better eye contact is established between drivers and pedestrians. However, it is not a pedestrianisation scheme and whilst it is acknowledged that vehicles will continue to use the new transformed Ring Road, pedestrians and cyclists will have increased importance.
13. In overall terms, this project is very much an exemplar and innovative project which aims to radically change the highway environment and set the tone for the high quality public realm across Ashford over the coming years.

Scheme Aims & Objectives

14. The scheme has a number of aims and objectives which are summarised below :
 - to secure a better balance between the needs of car users, pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users.
 - to radically improve the environment of the town centre;
 - to create a quality of environment that encourages further investment in the town;
 - to set a design standard of a quality that must be replicated elsewhere in the town centre;
 - to strengthen the town centre's economy by making the centre easily accessible for all;

The Phase 1 Scheme

15. Whilst the ultimate aspiration is to provide a quality, shared space environment around the entire Ring Road, the current funding available will not stretch that far. It will enable all of the Ring Road to be converted to two-way working and Elwick Road to be radically changed to a high quality, shared space environment. It is also hoped that the quality shared space environment can be extended into West Street/Forge Lane. Funding constraints dictate though that improvements to Somerset Road, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road will be more conventional in form at this stage although with unnecessary street clutter removed and a 30mph speed limit.

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Urban Design

16. This scheme goes beyond the requirements of a traditional highway design by incorporating the facets of good urban design practice in order to deliver high quality public realm which will complement the future development aspirations in the town.
17. The proposals are exciting and traditional highway design standards cannot be applied in the normal way. In developing the detailed design, there will be a balance between the purist urban design aspirations and the operational, safety, buildability and maintenance aspects although the intention is to produce a scheme that is both innovative and high quality.
18. However, there is considerable overlap and interaction between the public highway space and adjacent private development space and the mutual benefits are highlighted below :
 - **Character** - a place with its own identity
 - **Continuity** - a place where public/private spaces are distinguished but complementary
 - **Quality** - a place with attractive and successful public realm and outdoor areas
 - **Ease of movement** - a place that is easy to get to and move through
 - **Legibility** - a place that has a clear image and is easy to understand
 - **Adaptability** - a place that can change easily
 - **Diversity** - a place with variety and choice

Scheme Design

19. Integrated Design Teams (IDTs) have been set-up to deliver the project. The IDT includes engineers, traffic planners, urban designers, landscape architects, artists and lighting specialists. It is intended that art will be an integral part of the engineering design, as well as taking the opportunity to place subsequently, specifically commissioned art works in appropriate spaces created by the scheme design.
20. All members of the IDTs are working closely together with the ultimate intention that the scheme that is evolving will be a well-balanced multi-functional project of the highest quality. Urban Design, Planning and Transport Officers from both the County Council and Ashford Borough Council are closely involved in the design process.
21. The need to de-clutter, minimise road signage & markings, introduce landscaping, use quality materials and create an enhanced widened public realm for increased social interaction will be maintained throughout the ultimate scheme.
22. Another important design concept is the creation of public squares at the main intersections around the Ring Road. These squares will aim to create areas for increased social activity whilst still catering for vehicular movement. The environment will also offer many increased opportunities for pedestrians to cross the enhanced public realm.
23. As a result of the initial design work over the past few months, an outline design scheme is shown at Appendices B1, B2 and B3 showing outline scheme layouts along Elwick Road, Somerset Road and Station Road respectively. Full-size versions of these drawings will be available for inspection at the HAB meeting. However, as highlighted in paragraph 15, funding dictates that the planned public realm improvements along Somerset Road (the northern end of Appendix B2) will not be progressed as part of the Phase 1 scheme. As a result, Somerset Road will now simply revert to two-way flow within a more traditional highway environment with traffic signal control at the junctions of New Street and North Street.

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Outline Scheme Layout

24. The junction of Elwick Road/Church Road marks the entry into the scheme where there will be a gateway entry feature and adjacent two-way 3m wide running lanes for vehicles. There will also be a distinct change of environment relying on scale, texture, colour and materials to emphasise the entry into the new space.
25. A new 'Elwick Square' will be created at the junction of Elwick Road/Bank Street which will provide for a balance between all road users including car drivers, pedestrians, cyclists and those who wish to congregate and socialise.
26. It is also anticipated that the public realm improvements to Bank Street previously progressed by Alan Baxter Associates for Ashford Borough Council will be incorporated into the broader Ring Road scheme subject to financial constraints.
27. Moving clockwise around the Ring Road, the use of adjacent running lanes along Elwick Road is maintained to Apsley Lane, where there is a transition to a split carriageway. This will facilitate a central public realm area that will include amenity space with artistic landscaping, a theme which is maintained along Elwick Road to the junction with Godinton Road and into West Street/Forge Lane.
28. Turning into the north western arc, it may be possible to continue the high quality public realm scheme to a point between the junctions with Godinton Road and New Street. Detailed design and estimates will confirm this in the coming weeks. Along Somerset Road, funding constraints will only allow reversion of the Ring Road to two-way flow with the retention of traffic signal junctions at New Street and North Street.
29. Similarly and due to the need to provide greater vehicular capacity around the Ring Road from the junction with North Street in the shorter term, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road will also revert to two-way traffic flow and the more traditional highway environment, albeit much less cluttered, will be maintained.
30. It is also intended that the scheme is extended along the A2042 over the railway bridge to the existing roundabout junction with Victoria Road/Beaver Road which will be replaced with traffic signals.

Public Realm, Art & Lighting

31. A Public Realm Strategy for the town has also been produced which sets out a vision for the public realm and establishes public art as a key driving force for new and existing areas. It has been shown elsewhere that improvements to the public realm will create a sense of civic pride, local distinctiveness and a positive, unified identity that generates economic growth.
32. There are a number of key public realm aspects to the project including the use of quality materials, appearance of street furniture, incorporation of landscaping and the use of innovative highway design. Together with the integral use of art and innovative public realm lighting to bring out the scheme identity and distinctiveness, this project aspires to be a benchmark scheme in the UK.

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Traffic & Road Safety

Traffic

33. It is acknowledged that the re-configuration of the existing traffic dominated, one-way ring road layout to a series of two-way, high quality streets with less traffic lanes will lead to a reduction in overall highway capacity.
34. However, one of the overarching aims of the transport strategy is to minimise traffic in the town centre area by a series of transport measures and car park re-location policy. Indeed, the ultimate success of the Ring Road re-configuration relies upon a host of other transport schemes coming forward in future years.
35. A comparison of before/after morning peak hour (0730 - 0930) traffic flows around the Ring Road on scheme opening in 2008 is presented at Appendix C for various traffic modelling options. The flows in the top box are 2003 base traffic flows with the existing ring road configuration. The six boxes underneath are option tests for various scenarios with different configurations of the ring road and assumptions for traffic restraint, development traffic and Station Road. For example, Case 2 simply reverses the ring road to two-way traffic flow (without shared use restraint) and Station Road is retained as one-way in Cases 4,5 and 6. The bottom box (Case 9) includes the entire ring road being two-way along with Park & Ride at the Warren, Junction 10 interim improvements and the County Square Extension complete in 2008. Case 9 is the option which provides the best traffic balance around the network, reduces ring road traffic to the minimum and is therefore the recommended scheme option.
36. For a number of reasons including the reduction in the number of available traffic lanes, the much greater route choice which two-way flow provides and the traffic restraint associated the shared use concept (20 mph/pedestrian/cycle interaction etc), morning peak hour (0730 – 0930) traffic flows around the Ring Road are predicted to notably reduce at scheme opening in 2008 as follows :
- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------|
| • Elwick Road | 3526 to 1505 vehicles | (-57%) |
| • Forge Lane | 2899 to 2189 vehicles | (-24%) |
| • Somerset Road | 3799 to 2070 vehicles | (-46%) |
| • Station Road | 3563 to 3155 vehicles | (-11%) |
37. In terms of congestion, queuing problems are not anticipated within the confines of the Ring Road since experience from other schemes tells us that traffic will move in a fairly well ordered, consistent way at low speed and there will not be long stationary queues. Any queues will occur on the approaches to the scheme although the Case 9 traffic modelling predicts that significant queues will only form at two locations. Firstly along Romney Marsh Road on the approach to the new traffic signals at Romney Marsh Road/Beaver Road junction. A maximum queue of around 700 metres is predicted although this only equates to around a 5-6 minute wait and vehicles will get through in 2-3 changes of the lights. The second predicted queue is on the Mace Lane entry to the scheme with a maximum queue length of around 300 metres, again traffic is expected to clear within 2 changes of the lights.
38. In conclusion, the traffic modelling carried out predicts that reversion of the Ring Road to a two-way shared use scheme is viable and any congestion will be tolerable and a necessary consequence of providing a sustainable growth agenda for the town.

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Road Safety

- 39. In terms of road safety, there have been a total of 48 personal injury accidents around the Ashford Ring Road in the 3 year period up to October 2005. see Appendix D : Road Safety.
- 40. A road safety analysis has also been carried out based upon the existing accident history which takes into account the reduction in traffic speed and change in highway environment which will increase driver awareness and care.
- 41. This assessment predicts that personal injury accidents will reduce by around 30%, a figure which compares favourably with the 44% reduction in personal injury accidents over three years which has been achieved following the implementation of a similar type of scheme along Kensington High Street in London.
- 42. The scheme is therefore predicted to improve road safety around the Ring Road.

Environmental Issues

- 43. In overall terms, the scheme forms part of a broad transport strategy for the town which aims to reduce reliance on the private car and promote other more environmentally friendly and sustainable forms of transport such as walking, cycling and use of passenger transport.
- 44. With the reduction in vehicle speeds and regularisation of traffic flows using the ring road, traffic noise levels are also predicted to fall slightly and this will provide some environmental benefits.
- 45. Whilst the overall traffic related impact on air quality is forecast to be broadly neutral, there are some moderately beneficial improvements in terms of reducing the production of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide.
- 46. The existing landscape along the ring road is poor and the proposed introduction of landscaping, public open space and use of quality materials will provide notable benefits to the street scene environment.
- 47. The scheme itself also provides an opportunity to stimulate appropriate development opportunities and will therefore provide moderate benefits for social, cultural, physical and visual connection.
- 48. In overall terms, the scheme provides a number of environmental benefits.

Finance

- 49. The total cost of the scheme shown on Appendices B1, B2 and B3 is currently estimated to be around £16,000,000 including costs, to date, future maintenance contribution and possible Land Compensation Act costs.
- 50. A formal funding bid to the ODPM under the second round of Growth Area Funding (GAF2) has been successful and a sum of £8,000,000 of scheme funding has now been secured from central government towards the scheme costs on the basis that it is spent by the end of the 2007/8 financial year. Further project funding of around £2,000,000 is available from a variety of sources including developer contributions secured via section 106 planning obligations and a number of other funding sources that are currently being explored. Thus around £10,000,000 should be available to finance this first phase of the project.

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51. As well as the build costs, there are financial implications for future scheme maintenance. A specialist working group of officers has been set-up to assess maintenance costs and it is likely that the available budget will be top-sliced to ensure that adequate funding is available for scheme maintenance over the first 3-5 years. After that, it is hoped that a suitable developer tariff system will be adopted by the County Council which will be imposed on town centre development to cover the ongoing maintenance costs of the scheme.
52. It has already been highlighted earlier in this report that whilst the ultimate aspiration is to provide a quality, shared space environment around the entire Ring Road, it is acknowledged that a phased approach will be necessary.
53. Following discussions with Ashford Borough Council, the following top four priorities for construction are recommended:
- Conversion of the Ring Road to two-way traffic working throughout
 - Completion of Bank Street and Elwick / Discovery Square
 - Reconstruction of Victoria Road / Beaver Road junction
 - Completion of the remainder of Elwick Road from Church Road to West Street, and the start of the 'Ashford Arc' to New Street

For future works the priorities are:

- Completion of the 'Ashford Arc' New Street Square (New Rents Square)
 - Completion of the 'Ashford Arc' to North Street (Somerset Road)
54. The current funding available will allow priorities 1-4 to be progressed to implementation at this stage. The high quality element of priorities 5-6 will need to be deferred to a future phase.
55. However, it is also anticipated that further funding bids will be made to central government in future years to complete the entire Ring Road transformation project as soon as possible. This report does not seek additional funding approval for the project and contingency arrangements have been put in place to ensure that the available budget is not exceeded.

Programme

56. The current scheme delivery programme including consultation, scheme design, advertisement of the accompanying Traffic Regulation Orders and member approval will take around 6 months to complete. On-site scheme construction is scheduled to take around 15 months with a start in March 2007.
57. However, a second phase of the project will hopefully be progressed as a natural successor to this scheme whereby a similar public realm led improvement scheme will be delivered along Somerset Road, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road including a new Station Square. The entire Ring Road will be ultimately transformed in terms of its design, appearance and functionality and will support and assist with the future growth of the town centre area.

Consultation

58. Officers from both the County Council and Ashford Borough Council have been involved in a number of project groups specially set-up to discuss the progression of this project over the past 12 months. The current scheme that is tabled for approval has been subjected to considerable discussion and has the support of officers from both Authorities together with a number of experts in the field.
59. All of the emergency services have been contacted regarding the scheme and discussions have been held with the Police and Fire Service, and are planned with the Health Service. The reaction from both the Police and Fire Service was positive toward the scheme concepts and we are confident that through further dialogue during the development of the design any detail concerns raised can be addressed satisfactorily in the final scheme.
60. In order to engage the public, a Public Exhibition of the scheme concepts was held in the Lower High Street, Ashford on 9th and 10th June 2006. The material exhibited included:
- Traffic Regulation Order for changing the ring Road from one-way to two-way.
 - Plans and text illustrating how the Ring Road proposals have arisen in parallel with the Town Centre Action Plan
 - Artist illustrations of the Ring Road concepts
 - Plans of Ashford Town Centre incorporating the concept proposals and flash-cards illustrating further development of the concepts in certain locations.
 - Two hand-outs were available, one providing answers to Frequently Asked Questions and the second requesting comments from the attendees.
61. Representatives from Kent County Council and the design team were available to discuss the concepts and respond to queries.
62. The exhibition was mounted in a marquee with two open sides and it was therefore not possible to count exact numbers of attendance. However, there was a very strong public interest with continuous attendance on both days. From experience it is judged that approximately 500 people attended and the design team were occupied continuously in responding to questions and providing additional explanation of the scheme.
63. To-date, 45 comments sheets and e-mails have been received and the comments enclosed have been paraphrased and inserted into the summary sheet in Appendix E.
64. In broad terms, it should be noted that there are few objections to the fundamentals of the scheme and the majority of comments are in support of the scheme. However, some written representations mention specific issues, the most common being :

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- need to consider more provision for cyclists
 - knock-on parking issues/problems
 - possible rat runs in parallel streets.
 - traffic congestion due to a reduced number of traffic lanes
 - road safety implications arising from informal pedestrian/driver interaction
65. The formal comments received post-exhibition have confirmed the subjective view of the KCC and design team members who were present at the exhibition and who collectively felt that the scheme proposals were supported by the great majority of the visitors.
66. It is considered that the main areas of concern raised as highlighted above are not fundamental issues and all can be satisfactorily addressed and resolved through the detailed scheme design process.

Conclusion

67. Following publication of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities Plan 2003, Ashford is now identified as one of the major growth areas in the South-East with a total of 31,000 homes and 28,000 jobs envisaged by 2031. Detailed masterplanning studies followed which has now led to the development of mutually supporting land use and transport strategies to ensure that the town's future growth is well planned and sustainable.
68. A Transport Strategy for Ashford has been developed by Kent County Council in line with central government and county council transport policy which will also support and stimulate town centre development. One of the key schemes listed in the plan is the need to re-configure the current one-way, traffic dominated environment to a series of two-way quality streets. An early 'mend before extend' approach to the town centre will be crucial, even before significant growth takes place, and the transformation of the Ring Road will play a key part in realising the future growth potential.
69. Project funding of £8 million has now also been secured from central government following a successful Growth Area Funding (GAF2) bid on the proviso that this funding is spent by March 2008 and delivery of the scheme is therefore working to a tight timescale. Developer and other external funding sources of £2m is also available. Members are therefore asked to support the scheme concept welcomed at public exhibition in June 2006 and approve the progression of the following four priority elements of the Phase 1 scheme (see paragraph 54) to detailed design along with advertisement of the necessary Traffic Regulation Orders.
- Conversion of the Ring Road to two-way traffic working throughout
 - Completion of Bank Street and Elwick / Discovery Square
 - Reconstruction of Victoria Road / Beaver Road junction
 - Completion of the remainder of Elwick Road from Church Road to West Street, and the start of the 'Ashford Arc' to New Street

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Local Member's Views

- 70. A further report will be submitted to the Board in November 2006 to present the detailed design scheme proposals and report back from the TRO consultation exercises.
- 71. All KCC/ABC ward members in Ashford have been invited to attend a series of Special Policy Advisory Group (PAG) evening meetings over the past 6 months to discuss the scheme concept and evolution of the scheme design. Indeed, at the most recent meeting on 22nd June 2006 members present voted in favour of the scheme concepts being progressed forward to scheme design.
- 72. All local Ashford members were also invited on a study tour to Holland from 19-21 June where there are a number of examples of similar concepts currently being proposed for the ring road. The feedback from this tour has also been very positive

Joint Transport Board

- 73. A report has also recently been submitted to Joint Transport Board and Ashford Borough Council Executive for consideration on 29th June seeking support for the scheme concept and progression to detailed scheme design. The recommendation from both JTB and subsequently ABC Executive was supportive of the scheme concept and progression to detailed design in accordance with the six priorities listed at paragraph 54 of this report.

Recommendation

- 74. Subject to the views of this Board it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Supporting Independence that the Phase 1 scheme to convert the A292 Ashford Ring Road into a series of two-way quality streets is progressed to detailed design including the introduction of a high quality public realm environment along Elwick Road, West Street and Forge Lane and a more traditional highway environment along Somerset Road, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road.
- 75. A further report to be submitted to the Board in November 2006 to present the detailed design scheme proposals and report back from the TRO consultation exercises.

Contact Officer: John Calder, Public Realm Implementation Manager, 01622-696818

Background Documents:

The Greater Ashford Development Framework, Urban Initiatives, April 2005.
Ashford Town Centre Development Framework, Urban Initiatives, August 2005.
Ashford Town Centre Public Realm Strategy, Alan Baxter & Associates, July 2005 (Draft)
The Transport Strategy for Ashford, Kent County Council, November 2005.

Attachments:

Appendix A : Existing Ring Road
Appendices B1, B2, B3 : Outline Scheme Layouts
Appendix C : Traffic Flows
Appendix D : Road Safety
Appendix E : Public Exhibition Comments