

From: Neil Baker – Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Simon Jones – Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee 14 January 2025

Subject: A229 Blue Bell Hill Improvement Scheme

Non-Key Decision

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: 25 June 2021

Future Pathway of report: For committee update only

Electoral Division: Maidstone Rural North - Paul Carter
Maidstone North East – Ian Chittenden
Malling North East – Andrew Kennedy

Is the decision eligible for call-in? *N/A*

Summary: This report updates the Committee on the current position of the A229 Blue Bell Hill Improvement Scheme.

Recommendation(s): Cabinet Committee is asked to NOTE the content of this report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The A229 Blue Bell Hill is a section of dual carriageway which runs between Junction 6 of the M20 in Maidstone and Junction 3 of the M2 at Blue Bell Hill village. This section of road is a key link between the M20 and M2, and between Maidstone and Medway.
- 1.2 A feasibility study was undertaken to assess the key routes in Kent against the objectives of the Major Road Network. This study ranked this part of the A229 as the second worst section of A road in the county against criteria of traffic levels, delays, collisions and journey time reliability. It also determined that the M20 and M2 junctions have a significant role in the delays and collisions on Blue Bell Hill.
- 1.3 Road users of Blue Bell Hill have long experienced high volumes of traffic which result in significant congestion issues and concerns about road safety. These congestion issues are likely to be made worse by future housing developments in the surrounding area and the potential new Lower Thames Crossing, which will both generate additional traffic.

- 1.4 Previous proposals have not been able to sufficiently address the identified issues and as such more significant improvements to Blue Bell Hill are required to improve journey time reliability, reduce delays and improve road safety across this section of the road network.



Figure 1 - Plan showing the location of the proposals

2. Scheme Description

- 2.1 The overall aim of the scheme is to improve journey time reliability and road safety. This will allow the road to accommodate an increase in future traffic, whilst also supporting active travel choices.
- 2.2 The aim of the scheme is supported by a set of objectives, agreed by the key stakeholders:
- To improve journey time reliability at M2 Junction 3 and M20 Junction 6 interchanges of the A229
 - To reduce congestion along the route
 - To enable the local area to develop in accordance with population and housing growth predicated under Local Plans
 - To reduce the impact of additional traffic from the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) and allow LTC to maximise potential benefits it can provide for the Kent area

- To improve road safety and address known collision hotspots
- To make best use of existing assets including land and highways
- To provide suitable routes and facilities for public transport
- To provide safe and improved routes for pedestrians and cyclists
- To improve air quality
- To protect and enhance the local environment.

2.3 A process was undertaken to establish options for the scheme. This involved idea generation workshops with stakeholders followed by a sifting process (making use of traffic modelling) to determine the potential impact of the different solutions upon traffic levels. The works were also assessed against a number of criteria as laid out by the Department for Transport (DfT).

2.4 The options were submitted to DfT as part of the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for funding from the Large Local Majors Programme. The SOBC was submitted in December 2020.

2.5 Approval from Government to proceed to the next stage of the project was received in October 2023.

2.6 KCC has been gathering further information to support the onward development of the scheme and has also returned to review the previously defined options and to consider feedback from the consultation in 2020.

2.7 As a result a preferred scheme has been established. A plan for the preferred scheme is provided in Appendix A and the key elements summarised in the table below.

	Option 1	Option 2	Preferred Scheme
Northern end of Blue Bell Hill			
Improvements to the slip road onto the A229 southbound at Lord Lees Roundabout	✓	✓	✓
Increase the road width between Taddington and Lord Lees Roundabouts to four lanes	✓		
A new slip road onto the M2 (westbound) from the A229 immediately after Lord Lees Roundabout	✓	✓	✓
Upgrade of the current signalised junction at Taddington Roundabout allowing traffic travelling from the M2 eastbound to A229 via a new bridge over the M2	✓		
A new separate left turn lane from the M2 westbound to the A229 at Taddington Roundabout	✓	✓	✓
A new slip road from the M2 eastbound to a new junction arrangement at Bridgewood Roundabout		✓	
A new slip road from the M2 eastbound to the southbound A229 with the A229 southbound from Bridgewood roundabout rerouted via an enlarged Lord Lees roundabout.			✓

	Option 1	Option 2	Preferred Scheme
A new roundabout at the A2045/Taddington Link junction.	✓	✓	
Modification to the existing traffic signal controlled junction at the A2045/Taddington Link junction.			✓
Southern end of Blue Bell Hill			
Enlarge the Running Horse Roundabout to the west and signalise most arms (replacing the existing 'Turbo' style roundabout)	✓	✓	✓
Improved the merge arrangement onto the M20 motorway at Junction 6.	✓	✓	✓
Along the length of Blue Bell Hill			
Widen the A229 to three lanes when travelling southbound towards Maidstone (between Lord Lees and Cobtree Roundabouts)	✓	✓	✓
Amended access arrangements around the southbound petrol station			✓

2.8 Discussions remain ongoing with National Highways in regard to the interface between the motorways and slip roads including limits of responsibility.

2.9 Traffic using the A229 together with the Strategic Road Network (either the M2 or M20) make up almost 70% of the journeys with only around 30% making journeys on the local network only. The preferred scheme now provides free flow links in both directions between the A229 (south) and the M2 (west) for a significant proportion of the strategic traffic which uses the A229, freeing up capacity at both Lord Lees and Taddington Roundabouts for local traffic.

2.10 Following feedback from the 2020 consultation and arising from further development work, the proposed roundabout on the A2045 Walderslade Woods has been removed from the design and instead the existing junction will be improved.

2.11 The proposals at the south of the route at M20 J6 remain the same.

2.12 Further work has been carried out to develop a proposal for maintaining access to the petrol station located off the A229 southbound carriageway and improving the arrangements for joining and leaving the A229 in that area. The proposal maintains access to Rochester Road and Chatham Road. The new arrangement will improve safety and creates the space for the additional lane on the A229 that is required.

2.13 Traffic modelling has shown that the preferred scheme will improve journey time and congestion to a greater extent than the previous options.

2.14 KCC are seeking to take this preferred scheme to public consultation starting on 21 January 2025.

3. Programme

3.1 KCC plan to deliver the Improvement Scheme prior to the opening of the Lower Thames Crossing to traffic. A decision is due from the Secretary of State on the Development Consent Order for the new infrastructure by 23 May 2025.

3.2 Based on the current expectations the indicative programme is:

- Public consultation on the preferred scheme – January 2025
- Submission of the OBC to the DfT including details of the preferred scheme – Mid 2026
- Submit planning permission and consents – Late 2026
- Further detailed design – Late 2026 to Late 2028
- Submission of Full Business Case (FBC) to the DfT – Late 2028
- Construction to begin – Mid 2029
- Completion of scheme – Mid 2031 (aim to be completed before the Lower Thames Crossing is scheduled to be open to traffic in 2031)

4. Financial Implications

4.1 The project is currently within the existing KCC budget book 2024/25 (Appendix B – Capital Investment Summary Row 52 Pages 17 and 21) at an estimated cost of £202.082m. As a result of delays in the approval process through the DfT and the recent inflation challenges, the current estimated total cost for the scheme is £250m.

4.2 KCC is bidding for funds for the project through a competitive process from the Large Local Majors funding programme. The DfT expects contributions from Local Authorities for the development of these schemes and in line with the original criteria, it was expected that the DfT would fund 85% of the project costs. The remaining 15% would need to come from other external funding sources such as developer contributions (s106). Opportunities for these additional funding sources are being pursued by KCC but the level of match funding for a project of this size presents a considerable challenge and to date no s106 contributions have been secured. Under the previous Government, the Network North announcement from October 2023 indicated that the project could benefit from up to 100% funding. It is expected that there will be an announcement about whether this will apply to the project in the Spring Statement 2025 when further details on the unfunded transport projects review (announced in July 2024) are also expected.

4.3 KCC has forward funded the scheme to date, as is a requirement of the DfT and the Large Local Major fund, with £1.6m from its feasibility reserve capital line for the development costs. This will be reimbursed should the DfT funding be secured and the scheme progress. If the funding bid is not successful, the feasibility costs to date will be abortive and a cost to KCC.

4.4 Following approval of the SOBC and development grants of £300,000 for the 2023/24 financial year and £6.1m for the 2024/25 financial year being received

from DfT, KCC has commenced the next stage of the scheme development work. A further review of the scheme will be carried out by the Government and reported at the Spring Budget. This will confirm how the remaining development costs and overall scheme budget will be funded. DfT has to date indicated that they will only provide two thirds of the OBC development costs leaving a potential shortfall at this stage of £3.5m, in addition to the £1.6m already committed to the project from the feasibility reserve.

- 4.5 Officers are working closely with appointed consultants to find cost savings and have already benefitted from nearly £0.5m worth of services provided by others, namely through the development of the LTC. Project Officers are also exploring other funding opportunities such as s106 and CIL.
- 4.6 Should KCC be successful with the funding bid to DfT (which will be confirmed on acceptance of the OBC), the costs for developing the scheme through the next stages will be covered by future grant from the DfT.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 There are no immediate legal implications. Legal advice will be sought from Legal Services as the scheme moves forward for elements such as DfT funding agreement review, any compulsory purchase order and agreements with National Highways, preparation of construction contracts etc.

6. Equalities implications

- 6.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been prepared and approved. This will be regularly reviewed as the scheme develops and the design is progressed. A copy is included in Appendix B.

7. Other corporate implications

- 7.1 The construction of new highway will require ongoing maintenance and will become an additional maintenance liability to KCC. At this stage it is not possible to quantify the costs of maintenance. They will be calculated once there is more detail and form part of an asset management plan going forward. The route may be trunked under current proposals by the DfT which would transfer maintenance of the route to National Highways.

8. Governance

- 8.1 A key decision for the scheme was taken in June 2021 (21/00046). The scheme will be presented for further key decisions prior to submission of the Outline Business Case and on receipt of a funding proposal.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 The DfT Large Local Majors funding programme offers KCC an opportunity to undertake a significant major project that addresses existing congestion and safety issues on the A229 Blue Bell Hill and its key junctions while allowing for future growth.

- 9.2 The scheme is still at an early stage and further work needs to be carried out through consultation with key stakeholders and other parties to develop the preferred scheme before the OBC can be submitted to DfT.
- 9.3 The current programme is reliant on confirmation of funding. Following approval of the SOBC and receipt of grants for the 2023/24 and 2024.25 financial years, KCC has commenced the next stage of the scheme development work to meet the current programme. There is a funding gap for the Outline Design and OBC, with the DfT, to date, indicating that they will only provide two thirds of the development costs leaving a potential shortfall at this stage of £3.5m. Additional funding or cost savings are therefore required to ensure that the OBC can be completed to present this scheme as positively as possible to unlock the Large Local Major funding.
- 9.4 The current programme of delivery highlights that this scheme can be in place prior to the opening of Lower Thames Crossing.

10. Recommendation(s)

Recommendation(s):

10.1 Cabinet Committee is asked to NOTE the content of this report

11. Background documents

Appendix A – Preferred Scheme Plans
Appendix B – Equalities Impact Assessment

12. Contact details

Report Author:

Victoria Soames
Project Manager, Major Capital
Programme Team
A229bluebellhill@kent.gov.uk

Relevant Director:

Simon Jones, Director of Growth,
Environment and Transport
Simon.jones@kent.gov.uk