

# **Victoria Way Phase 1, Ashford**

## **Approval to Scheme Outline Design and Implementation Strategy**

A report by the Head of Countywide Improvements to the Highways Advisory Board on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

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### **Introduction**

1. The transformation of the old ring road will be substantially completed in November 2008.
2. One of the key priorities for the newly created Ashford's Future Company and Ashford Future Partnership Board is now the implementation of Victoria Way Phase 1 which will create a new 'town centre' street and transport link between the International Station and A28 Chart Road via Leacon Road and Brookfield Road. See Fig 1.
3. This report sets out the background, design principles, funding and implementation strategy and governance issues. It also seeks approval to an initial outline design for the scheme as a basis for moving forward to public consultation, negotiations over land assembly and a planning application.

### **Background**

4. The transformation of the old ring road has removed unnecessary road space and some traffic capacity. Plans are being progressed as part of the approved Transport Strategy for Ashford, that include Park & Ride and a new SMARTLINK bus rapid transit scheme, to limit traffic flows on the old ring road to about 85% of 2003 flows. The Borough Council's plans for the first Park & Ride on land near M20 junction 9 that include an enabling development proposal have been delayed and this increases the importance of implementing Victoria Way. In addition to the need to provide an alternative route for some through traffic, Victoria Way provides an essential route to support the expansion of the town centre, that includes plans for a new Learning Campus (14,000 students), new housing (about 1500 dwellings), car parking and other mixed commercial uses.
5. The concept for Victoria Way is established in planning policy terms through the Greater Ashford Development Framework (GADF), the Local Development Core Strategy (adopted in July 08), the Ashford Town Centre Area Action Plan (ATCAAP), a draft Public Realm Strategy and a Concept Design Study Report.
6. The town centre is planned to grow to reflect the growth of Ashford as a whole and in particular to the south and southeast and extending beyond the railway corridor to the area around the existing Victoria Road. The concept for the new Victoria Way is the development of a quality street that provides a new multi-purpose street and transport route between Beaver Road and A28 Chart Road taking some traffic pressure off the transformed old ring road. A complementary but separate proposal is for the Learning Link that aims to improve the pedestrian and cyclist links across the railway corridor from South

Ashford to the town centre. The interchange between the Learning Link pathway and Victoria Way will become a focal hub not dissimilar to Elwick Square on Elwick Road.

7. Whitelaw Turkington with Jacobs as a sub-consultant, and working with artists within a multi-disciplinary team has produced a Concept Design Study for Victoria Way and the Learning Link.
8. Work to develop the scheme is currently funded from Growth Area Funding – round 3 (GAF3) and DfT has invited, following a preliminary submission, a detailed bid for £16m of Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) funding for 2009/10 and to be spent by March 2011.
9. A combination of GAF3 and CIF funding is consistent with the current £17m indicative cost estimate for the Victoria Way scheme.

### **Corridor & Highway Design Standards**

10. The transport modelling work and strategy considerations has identified that:
  - Victoria Way should be a single carriageway
  - No long term need to upgrade to dual carriageway.
  - Traffic signals at Leacon Road/Brookfield Road junction.
  - Provided the planned improvements to the A28 Chart Road are undertaken within a reasonable period (by about 2016), there is no need in traffic terms, to provide a Phase 2 extension of Victoria Way over the railway to Cobbs Wood within the period to 2031.
11. Climate change, rising fuel costs, working practices and the anticipated modal shift to public transport through the SMARTLINK bus rapid transit scheme for Ashford reinforce the unlikely need to upgrade capacity beyond a single carriageway road.
12. Although there is no immediate need to improve the A28 'Matalan' roundabout, this should follow as part of A28 Chart Road improvements and timing would be related to the rate of house building in south west Ashford and Chilmington Green.

### **The Design Concept**

13. The Concept Design Study has proposed a general 24m wide corridor over the eastern section between Beaver Road and Gas Works Lane. This is considered essential to create the high quality street scene for the new multi-purpose street including cycle and service facilities, turning lanes for traffic, trees and a significant pedestrian area as well as the built in flexibility if at any time in the future some additional transport facilities such as bus lanes, and waiting and loading areas were considered necessary.
14. Between Gasworks Lane and Leacon Road a transitional corridor dictated, by the ZED Homes development boundary to the south and the National Grid land to the north, is considered suitable where there is less emphasis on street scene as the road connects into the more established and traditional development area at Leacon Road.

15. Leacon Road will remain as it is today serving the business premises along its length. A new traffic signal junction is proposed at Brookfield Road with local widening to provide turning lanes and safeguard future SMARTLINK bus turning movements as well as crossing facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.
16. It is considered that Victoria Way should be seen as a new area of integrated public realm supporting new developments that will follow the construction of the Phase 1 scheme at a later date. However, the corridor is well defined by the end points, existing land use, an EDF sub-station constraint and ZED Homes planning consent - following an appeal against non-determination by Ashford Borough Council. Previous work by Urban Initiatives following the GADF, established the planned corridor width and tested a range of alignment options following consultation with local residents and business groups in 2005/6.
17. It is therefore reasonable to establish the road corridor now but with the pragmatism that changes can be considered to accommodate the evolving public realm ideas.

### **Public Realm Strategy**

18. The Elwick Road, West Street and Bank Street works have followed the Public Realm Strategy and undoubtedly looks attractive and creates distinctiveness for Ashford. However, there are concerns about the use of expensive materials, that either require a high degree of laying accuracy or which are not dimensionally consistent and raise issues of laying quality.
19. The implementation of high quality public realm cannot be considered in isolation from realistic needs of future maintenance, new development and statutory undertakers plant. A public highway including road and pedestrian areas is both a traffic and utility corridor and constantly vulnerable to excavation particularly along Victoria Way where developments and utility provision is as yet largely undefined. Construction of development sites will also cause damage. High quality materials with tight dimensional accuracy are difficult to lift and reinstate or repair to the original standard.
20. Buildability is also a factor and occupation of the highway for longer than necessary, laying difficult materials involving lots of disk cutting with noise and dust is not sensible.
21. In a town street environment, large clear areas of public realm are rarely achievable and paving regularly needs to accommodate utility covers, signage and street furniture that can detract from the high standards aspired to. However, the design must cater for all users and careful detailing will be required to ensure that Victoria Way is a high quality scheme that provides Ashford with a vibrant new street.
22. It is therefore proposed that the carriageway surface should be largely conventional 'blacktop'. The additional public realm should use a simple palette of materials that does not demand a high standard of dimensional accuracy for laying and that come from proprietary sources that do not require spare materials to be stored. It is far better to have a public realm that can be maintained than one that in practice can never be maintained to the original standard.

23. It is accepted that street furniture such as street lights and benches that give that visual distinctiveness are required and may not be available from proprietary sources, e.g. the bespoke artist designed street lighting columns developed for Elwick Road, that can be very expensive and their maintenance and replacement cost must be funded from the scheme budget. Indeed all operation and maintenance costs over and above that for a conventional highway improvement must initially be funded from the scheme budget. Provision for the long term maintenance of quality town centre public realm across the County is also an issue that needs to be addressed and to offset criticism from residents and the business community of what they would see as failing maintenance standards.

### **Scheme Development & Implementation Strategy**

24. A two-stage approach is proposed to acknowledge the likelihood that a final public realm scheme would be vulnerable to damage from utilities and development construction, if installed now.
25. The full proposals including the full public realm scheme will however, be developed as a whole and submitted for planning consent.
26. The scheme for Phase 1 to be funded by the anticipated CIF funding and completed by 2011 will include the following (from east to west) (see Fig.2 – 5).
- (i) Beaver Road to Victoria Road School (Fig. 5) - The works to the junction of Victoria Way and Beaver Road (currently being completed as part of the Ring Road contract), will have some minor amendments to it to provide improved turning facilities at George Street. The road will be laid out in black top on a resurfaced carriageway, new kerblines and footways all within existing property constraints, and taking account of the current uses along this length as far as Victoria Road School.
  - (ii) Victoria Way School to ZED Homes site (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) – a wider footway area is proposed fronting the school, and a school safety zone/traffic calmed area will be set out in changed carriageway materials to restrict traffic speeds to 20mph along the school frontage and extending west to include the crossing point of the Learning Link pathway. Victoria Square will be established in temporary, but good quality materials, through which the road route will pass over, requiring the demolition of the two Cherry Court office blocks. Some interim boundary treatments are proposed but respecting the existing uses.
  - (iii) The ZED Homes eastern site (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) - the full 24m corridor width of highway route can be implemented, as land has been set aside for this within the ZED Homes planning permission. The route will include a single black top carriageway construction, with interim footway paving (that can be replaced with a higher quality scheme as development progresses). A new junction will be created at Gasworks Lane with turning lanes to provide access to and from the northern ZED homes site that includes a proposed multi storey car park.
  - (iv) The ZED Homes western site (Fig. 4) – west of Gasworks Lane junction the road will be laid out as above but with a reduced width corridor to reflect the ZED Homes housing scheme on the south side, an amended

access to the Southern Gas Networks Depot (National Grid Property) site to the north, and a transition to a standard road layout at Leacon Road.

- (v) Leacon Road (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) will remain largely unaltered but a new traffic signal controlled junction with turning lanes, provision for pedestrians/cyclists to cross and safeguarding the route of future SMARTLINK buses will be installed at the junction of Brookfield Road.
27. Along development frontages, the wider public realm enhancement beyond the basic footway and cycleway provision will be regarded as a planning obligation on the respective developers and to be constructed with the development.
28. It is hoped that land for the scheme can be secured by voluntary negotiation but a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) will be promoted to give programme certainty.
29. It is not necessary to acquire all of the land for the full scheme, and therefore become legally and financially liable for its acquisition, in order to build Phase 1. It is desirable that the onus is placed on developers of the land fronting Victoria Way to not only fund and build their frontage public realm but also to transfer the land at zero cost.
30. The situation in reality is not that simple. A considered view will have to be taken in due course about the extent of the planning application and CPO because including land along the south side of the Victoria Road which has several houses and commercial development might be inappropriate initially because of the Blight and associated cost implications.
31. ZED Homes has recently achieved a planning consent and they proposed building short isolated sections of Victoria Way to access their development. The planning permission allows for the full Victoria Way corridor to be safeguarded, but an interim scheme in order to meet their planned development phasing is proposed to be delivered by ZED Homes, not the Phase 1 scheme described above. Ashford Borough Council is in negotiations with ZED Homes regarding the consent and the outcome may also have implications for the Victoria Way implementation.

## **Project Governance**

32. The old ring road transformation is being successfully achieved, but not without issues of substantial increased cost, delay to programme and governance. The difficulties have been a consequence of having a complex innovative scheme within a town centre environment where the design programme slipped and overlapped construction procurement because of the overarching constraint of achieving spend within a funding deadline. This is not to deny some project management difficulties but they must be seen against the wider picture.
33. Experience has shown:
- The need for absolute clarity and sign off of the roles, responsibilities and scheme details between Chief Officers and Members within the County Council, Ashford Borough Council, Ashford's Future Company and Ashford's Future Partnership Board.

- Clarity on budget and deadlines for spend and realism of what can be achieved within the CIF 2 year funding window ending in March 2011 reflecting the processes and statutory procedures and external influences that can affect the delivery of a major highway scheme. The use of further GAF 3 support beyond March 2011, or other Ashford's Future partners' budgets may be able to assist in reducing any risks for the County Council around this spending deadline.
  - The need to progress the scheme within the budget allocated and for all parties involved to fully respect the agreed programme for delivery.
34. Achieving the above will allow the normal project management processes to function effectively and not be compromised notwithstanding the need for clear management of the Integrated Design Team that sets it apart from the traditional management of a Major Scheme.
  35. The Ashford's Future company has been set up by the main Ashford Future partners - Ashford Borough Council, the County Council, SEEDA and English Partnerships, specifically to take the lead on the delivery of the key projects required to deliver growth in Ashford. The concept of the new Victoria Way is one of these key priority projects and involves bidding for finance, enabling individual projects such as the 'quality street', car parking and development to all come forward in a co-ordinated way involving cross partnership co-operation to deliver the agreed vision.
  36. Victoria Way is a major regeneration scheme but it is also recognised that the road scheme will be 'public highway' and as such Kent Highway Services will have statutory operational and maintenance responsibility. While working fully with partners to achieve the mutual objectives for Victoria Way this legal responsibility is recognised and hence ultimate decision making on the highway scheme rests with the County Council.
  37. Put simply, the Ashford's Future Company has the overarching interest and responsibility for delivering the wider Victoria Way vision of which the Victoria Way highway/public realm scheme is only one, albeit key, element and is the direct responsibility of Kent Highway Services.
  38. This report is the basis of a cycle of reports and meetings with the partner organisations aimed at achieving this clarity of scheme vision and management responsibilities.

## **Programme**

39. The programme is aimed to achieve construction completion by March 2011 consistent with the funding timescales for CIF 2.
40. The main risks to achieving this programme are the conclusion of environmental and ecology survey and mitigation proposals and the successful acquisition of the land being achieved in time. The programme therefore relies on land being secured by voluntary agreement and without protracted negotiation, and no major ecological or design issues that in turn would delay consideration of the planning application.

41. The programme is optimistic but the Ashford's Future Company and Ashford's Future Partnership Board have accepted the risks involved.
42. The immediate activities are to progress the ecological and engineering surveys, develop the public realm design and consult with the local community and businesses with the objective of submitting a planning application in Spring 2009.
43. Jacobs have been appointed as the Lead Consultant and an Integrated Design Team is proposed to ensure input from all disciplines. Jacobs now have an in-house urban design capacity in the Maidstone Office and work on projects such as Dover Priory has been impressive. Whitelaw Turkington has been involved in the old ring road transformation scheme and were lead consultants for the Victoria Way Concept Design Study so they clearly have acquired knowledge. In the interests of the project and fairness to both consultants, a mini - design competition is being held to choose between them. Opening out the public realm procurement to other untried consultants was not considered to be in the best interests of the project and its timetable. Competition, albeit limited, will also give confidence about securing value for money.
44. The Integrated Design Team will include a public art involvement but this is low cost and the current commissions within the Concept Design Study will be extended.
45. A further report will be brought to the Board after public consultation and after the public realm proposals have been developed as a pre-cursor to obtaining Cabinet Member authority to submit a planning application. However, if programming priorities do not tie up with the Board schedule of meetings then any reporting may of necessity be a retrospective report.

## **Finance**

46. Scheme development is currently funded from GAF(3) which is held by Ashford Borough Council on behalf of the Ashford's Future Partnership Board. The Ashford's Future Business Plan has allocated £1.0m over 2007/08 and 2008/09. Any CIF2 funding award is likely to be direct to the County Council and a decision is likely in March 2009. Unlike the ring road project, Ashford Borough Council (rather than the County Council) is the Lead Body for GAF(3) and a formal funding agreement needs to be put in place.
47. DfT has invited Ashford's Future to submit a bid for £16m of Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) funding by October 2009. A combination of GAF3 and a successful CIF2 funding bid is consistent with the current £17m indicative cost estimate.
48. The issue of future maintenance liability is accepted as an implicit factor in any new conventional highway infrastructure. However, the high quality public realm aspects of the ring road, Bank Street and now Victoria Way are a major concern. Public realm has higher maintenance costs and needs stocks of materials to be held e.g. paving materials and lighting columns. If the high quality objectives are to be sustained then maintenance also has to take place quickly after the need is identified. It is not just operational and structural maintenance that needs to be considered but the Borough Council would also

need increased resources to maintain the quality environment e.g. graffiti removal, litter clearance and chewing gum clearance.

49. GAF and CIF funding supports the capital cost but will not support the revenue implications of maintenance. These aspects are recognised by the partners and a protocol and appropriate funding mechanism will need to be established before the commitment is made to construct Victoria Way so that the County Council has the required confidence.

### **Recommendation**

50. Subject to the view of this Board it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste that:-
- (a) the outline design for Victoria Way Phase 1 including the junction improvement for Leacon Road/Brookfield Road shown on Drg. No. B0501400 and H010 RevA is approved for development control and land charge disclosures.
  - (b) the general public realm and implementation strategy is noted.
  - (c) an Integrated Design Team is commissioned to develop the scheme proposals.
  - (d) 'in principle' negotiations are commenced with the commercial sector land owners to explore the potential for voluntary land acquisition.
  - (e) A Compulsory Purchase Order be progressed to ensure assembly of the land required for the scheme.

### **Contact Officers:**

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Figures to attach:-

Fig. 1 – Plan of Victoria Way within the Ashford Growth area context

Fig. 2-5 – Outline scheme plan

### **Background Documents:-**

Drg. No. B0501400 – H010 RevA on display

Victoria Way and Learning Link – Concept Design Study – January 2008