

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Gravesham Joint Transportation Board

Date: 26 March 2008

Reporting officer: Engineering Manager

Subject: Downs Road, Northfleet

Purpose and summary of report:

To report the results of a consultation exercise that has been carried out regarding the future of Downs Road, Northfleet as to whether it should be re-opened as normal road for traffic, re-opened but restricted in some way, or closed to vehicles as a through route.

Recommendations:

That the Board recommends to the County Council's Highway Advisory Board that the Downs Road / Hogg Lane is closed to all vehicular traffic but remain open to pedestrian, cycle and equestrian traffic.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Downs Road (and its extension Hogg Lane) runs from Istead Rise to Landseer Avenue, Northfleet. For this report the term refers primarily to the section north from the junction with Board Ditch Road in Istead Rise and does not refer to Downs Road further south. The road connects Istead Rise and Northfleet Green with the Northfleet urban area (and vice versa), and therefore avoids the need to pass through the A2 junctions at Pepper Hill and Tollgate. In origin it was, and is still over substantial lengths, a narrow country lane, appropriate to the level of traffic it carries, with the occasional larger vehicle using it for access (e.g. farm equipment). At the Northfleet urban end Landseer Avenue is a normal housing estate road with on street parking, built to appropriate standards. Via Gainsborough Drive or Pickwick Gardens it is possible to reach Dene Holm Road, which is a bus route; however both these roads are designed as housing estate roads.
- 1.2 When High Speed 1 (Channel Tunnel Rail Link) was built Downs Road was realigned over a new bridge and widened to modern design standards. This included the upgrading a section of Northfleet Green Road and its junction with Downs Road, which links through the hamlet of Northfleet Green to New Barn Road. When opened there were significant problems arising from use of the widened roads for dumping rubbish, burning out cars and related activities.
- 1.3 Downs Road has now been closed since 2006, to allow the construction of the new widened A2. The section under the old A2 consists of a narrow single track

under-bridge, with limited height clearance and right angle bends with no forward visibility at each end. This could be regarded as an extreme form of traffic calming, and was probably originally built to provide access from the south to the farm land on which the Painters Ash housing estate was subsequently constructed.

- 1.4 The A2 widening project as approved replaces Downs Road / Hogg Lane with a bridge over the new A2 and an upgraded route with sweeping curves to modern standards which will connect to the existing junction with Landseer Avenue. The underpass under the old A2 will be demolished.
- 1.5 In view of the previous history of the road it was considered that the option of keeping Downs Road closed or restricted to traffic (but not to walkers, cyclists and equestrians) should be explored. Plans showing the original and proposed road configuration are included in the appendix to the report.

2. Consultation

- 2.1 In a previous consultation exercise regarding the Gravesham Local Development Framework, questions had been asked about the future of Downs Road, and the overall response had been approximately 50:50 for and against a possible closure. This indicated that there was a live issue, but one that needed more detailed consideration. A consultation has recently been carried out on the A2 Outdoor Activity centre concept, and as part of that process questions were also asked regarding the future of Downs Road. Although the issues are independent of one another, they are related by location / geography.
- 2.2 An exhibition panel was displayed in Towncentric discussing the issue, and this material was also displayed at the two Leisure Centres and online at both the Gravesham and Green Grid web sites. The exhibition at Towncentric was staffed for two days but then viewable for a further week. A special exhibition was held at Painters Ash Primary School between 17:00 and 20:00 on 12 March 2008 to which invitations were sent to 1,290 addresses. Although concerns were expressed over the extent of these invitations, over a 100 people attended.
- 2.3 315 respondents replied to the A2 questionnaire, in addition a number of letters have been received and a petition against closure from Northfleet Green with 148 signatures. As might be expected this issue generated a number of responses by residents who were strongly for and against the options.
- 2.4 The options offered were:
 - (i) I would like Downs Road to be re-opened to all vehicular traffic
 - (ii) I would like Downs Road to be re-opened to cars, LGV's (under 6ft wide), pedestrians and cyclists
 - (iii) I would like Downs Road to be closed to vehicles but remain open for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians
- 2.5 The overall result of the consultation (where this question was responded to) was that 7% would like Downs Road fully re-opened, 35% would like it re-opened with some form of restriction, and 58% would wish to see it restricted to walkers, cyclists and equestrians. This could be interpreted that 58% would like to see its closure to vehicular traffic and 42% for it to be re-opened in some form.

- 2.6 The results have also been analysed by post code, where given, which was only possible in 144 cases (45% of total). These forms produced equivalent figures of 12.5%, 20.1% and 67.3% respectively. The responses from those most immediately affected (Downs Road, Landseer Avenue, Northfleet Green etc) were too few to analyse so the comparison was made between Istead Rise and Painters Ash wards. Painter Ash results were 13.9%, 16.3% and 69.8% respectively, and 6%, 17.6% and 76.5% from Istead Rise. These should be treated with caution because of the responses that are excluded due to a lack of a lack of post code, but tend to suggest there is more support for closure from those most closely affected.

	Re-open Downs Road to vehicles	Re-open Downs Road to vehicles with restrictions	Close Downs Road to vehicular traffic
All responses	7%	35%	58%
Responses with a post code	12.5%	20.1%	67.3%
Responses from Painters Ash Ward	13.9%	16.3%	69.8%
Responses for Istead Rise Ward	6%	17.6%	76.5%

- 2.7 Comments for re-opening highlighted the role of Downs Road as a link between Istead Rise and Northfleet Green, and Northfleet (and vice versa), ease of access to elderly relatives, access to Painters Ash Primary School, and the avoidance of the congested A2 junctions. One response suggested that the road should be widened to full 2 way width. Those responses for closure highlighted the anti social activities that had occurred, the conflict between pedestrians and vehicles (and the school), and the restricted nature of Downs Road.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 It is important to emphasise that by default the Downs Road will reopen as shown in the attached plans, which form part of the approved A2 widening scheme. It is only if an alternative is considered more appropriate that any action will need to be taken. A Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) would be required to either keep the road closed to all vehicles or impose some form of weight or other restriction, which would be open to objection.
- 3.2 If the road were to remain open to vehicular traffic, the Police, who would be responsible for enforcement, would prefer a weigh restrictions as opposed to a width restrictions as many family cars are wider that the standard 6'- 6" or 2m width restriction.
- 3.3 It is the Highway Authority's view that in order for user rights to be limited/extinguished on a highway or public right of way it has to be proven that the highway is no longer required for that purpose, or there is an equally convenient (or better) alternative route. In this case, whilst many residents would prefer to close the road to vehicular traffic in view of the historical problems with it and potential future problems of recreating a rat run, the result of the consultation

do not indicate that the road doesn't serve a useful purpose to many local residents. It would also serve as a useful route for emergency vehicles. Hence, subject to the views of the emergency services, the Highway Authority would recommend that the road be kept open but with both a 3.5 tonne weight restriction and a 7 ft width restriction on it. Whilst it is understood that the Police prefer a weight limit which they can legally enforce, given that this enforcement would be likely to be sporadic at best and then only after problems occur, and given the rural location of the road, it would want to be a self-enforcing. Therefore any width restriction should include physical measures.

- 3.4 It would be necessary to agree any alterations to the approved proposal for the A2 widening scheme with the Highways Agency.
- 3.5 It is clear that there is little support for the total re-opening of the road, and that the choice is between a restricted or closed road. In this it is important to note that any negative impacts (either due to a loss of access or the impact of traffic etc) will fall on relatively few people in Northfleet Green, Downs Road and Landseer Avenue and connecting streets.
- 3.6 In all scenarios access would be maintained from the south to the farmland between the old and new A2's, and the A2 and High Speed 1 drainage lagoons for appropriate vehicles.
- 3.7 It is not desirable to create a route that is attractive to significant flows of traffic because of the restricted nature of the access routes, both rural and urban. Although this is a significant link for local residents, the present closure has resulted in a significant reduction in problems with anti-social activity.
- 3.8 Whilst there is majority for closure it is not overwhelming. Nevertheless considering the views of the wider community of Istead Rise and Painters Ash it is considered that closure to vehicular traffic is the most appropriate action.
- 3.9 Retaining this as a through route is likely to lead to a return of the former anti-social behaviour to the detriment of the local residents of Northfleet Green and Landseer Avenue. The enforcement of a weight or width restriction will also be reliant on the Police being able to provide appropriate resources.

4. Risk and Section 17

- 4.1 The risk of not re-opening the road is the loss of convenient access for local residents. In re-opening the road there is a danger of creating a rat run with both additional traffic on unsuitable roads and the prospect of anti-social activities. The latter is not specific just to this scheme and the whole A2 corridor needs to be looked at in that context.

Background Papers

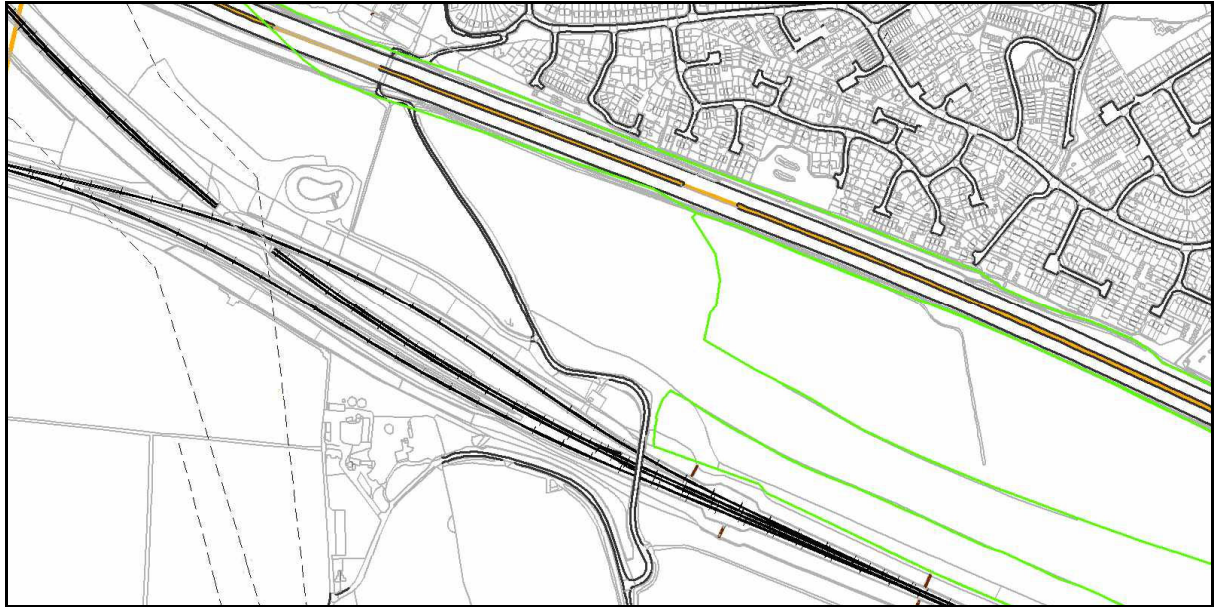
A2 Outdoor Activity Centre Consultation Report, Jacobs plus additional analysis
Original Response Forms

March 2008 Planning & Regeneration Services, Civic Centre, Gravesend.

All requests to inspect the above documents **MUST** be directed in the first instance to the Committee Section of the Democratic Services Department.

Appendix

Highway configuration before A2 widening scheme construction



Highway configuration after A2 widening scheme

