

# **Property held in Maidstone for Highway Purposes**

A report by the Head of Major Projects to the Highways Advisory Board meeting on 6 March 2007.

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## **Introduction**

1. The County Council owns property in the Wrens Cross and Upper Stone Street corridor of Maidstone for potential highway improvements that have no foreseeable likelihood of being implemented. This Report proposes realising the asset and promoting deliverable alternative operational and environmental based improvements in Upper Stone Street and improvements to the Bridge gyratory system.

## **History**

2. The original 1980's strategy for Maidstone was improvement to the A229 and A249 routes to the north of the Town and the A229 Upper Stone Street/Sheal's Crescent route to the south.
3. The two routes to the north were more straightforward and were delivered. The route to the south has always been problematic because of the gradient away from the Town and the very compact and dense older commercial and residential development. It is also complicated by the east to west crossing movement of traffic along Wat Tyler Way and Knightrider Street. By the time consideration was being given to this southern leg of the three highway schemes Government policy had moved away from substantial urban road building.
4. Over the last 30 years a number of schemes have been proposed involving a repeating cycle of activity, raised expectation, going dormant through inability to deliver and then being revisited. All schemes involved a new road that would have cut a swathe through the area creating massive blight during which the County Council was obliged to acquire a large number of properties.
5. In 1999 the impracticality of this was recognised and the concept of a major scheme was abandoned and much of the property disposed off. However, the sense of something needing to be done led to the approval of a scheme for a contra-flow bus and lorry lane down Upper Stone Street and along Knightrider Street although this has not been implemented. There was still an underlying and understandable feeling that a more substantial albeit undefined improvement of Upper Stone Street should not be prejudiced and this led to the retention of property along the corridor.

## **Discussion**

6. Some seven years on, we are no further forward. Despite Maidstone Borough Council recently achieving Growth Point status there is still no likelihood of Government funding a highway improvement of Upper Stone Street. Government funds are limited, and the perceived ideal of a dual carriageway, would not score well on the policy criteria used by SEERA when prioritising schemes on a regional basis for Government. In simple terms, a dual carriageway improvement of Upper Stone Street would be expensive and in effect just replicate the existing arrangement of two lanes into the town (Sheal's Crescent) and two

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lanes out (Upper Stone Street). Clearly some benefits would be achieved, particularly relief to Sheal's Crescent but the problem would largely be moved further along to the Armstrong Road/Park Way junction.

7. The property being held is a major concern. In the last couple of years nine residential and two commercial properties have been demolished because they had become uninhabitable or incapable of beneficial occupation. Wrens Cross is a major concern and does not reflect well on the public sector. It is a Grade 2 Listed Building and was the site of the Kent County Constabulary from 1860 shortly after it was formed in 1857. The site has several fine buildings but many are in a very poor state and are regularly subject to vandalism and anti-social activity. Something needs to be done soon before all are incapable of being saved. The County Council also remains vulnerable to Blight acquisition requests.
8. The retention of property for aspirational future highway improvements is having an adverse effect on the area. The informal blight is actually lowering land values and deterring regeneration investment that is so essential for the area.

### **All Saints Link Road**

9. The focus above has been on Upper Stone Street but Maidstone Borough Council are promoting the concept of an All Saints Link Road that would run from Bishops Way to Knightrider Street and then to Wrens Cross (see Fig. 1). It would not deliver traffic capacity benefits but would have considerable regeneration and environmental benefits. It would allow the historic Carriage Museum to become integral with the Bishops Palace and riverside area. It would allow a comprehensive development of this block of land between Knightrider Street and Palace Avenue and integrate it with the town centre and lessen the severance caused by traffic on Palace Avenue particularly at Gabriel's Hill.

### **Bridge Gyrotory**

10. Although not directly related to the property discussion above, the operation of the Bridge gyrotory system is under consideration. The recent residential and commercial developments along St Peter's Street and the need for Bishops Way traffic heading north to Fairmeadow to go around the gyrotory and across both bridges is causing difficulties. There is a proposal to relive this situation by creating a direct route for Bishops Way to Fairmeadow traffic by converting the Fairmeadow leg of the gyrotory scheme to two-way operation (see Fig. 2 and Drawing no. 16254/S/3 on display). This is an expensive (over £1m) scheme in part because of the need to move part of an electricity sub-station but it is likely to be deliverable in the short term, and the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste has already indicated County Council support for this scheme.

### **Conclusion**

11. The general conclusion is that the retention of property for aspirational highway schemes is unrealistic and ties up asset value. It is contributing to informal blight of south Maidstone and holding back inward investment. The focus should move to more pragmatic, affordable and deliverable highway and environmental improvements.

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### **Proposed Way Forward**

1. The approved scheme for the contra-flow bus and lorry lane scheme from Sheal's Crescent down Loose Road/Upper Stone Street and along Knight rider Street should be abandoned (Drawing No's 100311/1A; /2A; /3A & /4).
2. The County Council should support Maidstone Borough Council in its aspirations to achieve the All Saints Link Road and its efforts to secure funding.
3. All property held for highway purposes along Upper Stone Street/Loose Road and in the Wrens Cross/Knight rider Street area should be declared surplus and made available for disposal by Corporate Property subject to:
  - Retaining land or having a claw back option on land required by Maidstone Borough Council for the All Saints Link Road.
  - Retaining land or having a claw back option that would allow some practical operational and safety improvements to be achieved. An illegally parked vehicle or one delivering to premises on Upper Stone Street can cause an immediate problem to the free flow of traffic. The scope is limited but it should be possible between George Street and Campbell Road and possibly a little way towards Tovil Road to locally shift the road over to create a service lay-by. This in turn would give more width to the footway and protection to pedestrians with other environmental improvements if possible. Subject to detailed design and estimates, funding could come from a proportion of the property disposal capital receipts. In the longer term with the disposal of Wrens Cross linked to a possible comprehensive development of the area up to Foster Street a similar arrangement may be possible to service the commercial properties opposite centred on The Pilot public house.
4. The conversion of the Fairmeadow leg of the Bridge gyratory to two-way operation is progressed. Subject to detailed design and estimates, funding could come from the Integrated Transport pot for 2007/08 and 2008/09 with top-up from the property disposal capital receipts.
5. The environmental and safety concerns of residents and the community regarding the speed and noise of traffic coming down Loose Road and turning into Sheal's Crescent and of traffic turning right into Loose Road from Tovil Road is well understood. These are difficult issues with no easy solutions but the County Council is committed to investigating what measures are practical and worthwhile and thereafter seeking to achieve their implementation.

### **Maidstone Borough Council & Local County Member**

12. Discussions have been held with Maidstone Borough Council over recent months and there is an agreed understanding of the realities of the situation and the way forward outlined. Mr Alan Chell, the County Member for Maidstone South, has been consulted and any views received will be reported at the Board meeting.

### **Finance**

13. There are no immediate financial implications. There will need to be consideration of the extent and timing of the capital receipts that will flow and an equitable balance agreed with Maidstone Borough Council between the support to the improvements referred to above and support to the wider community service objectives of the County Council.

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### Recommendation

14. Subject to the view of this Board it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste that:

- i. the proposals outlined above under 'The Way Forward' are approved. This to include the formal abandonment of the proposals for the contra-flow bus and lorry lane between Sheal's Crescent and Knightrider Street shown on Drawing No's 100311/1A; /2A; /3A & /4.
- ii. The outline proposals for the improvement of the Fairmeadow arm of the Bridge gyratory shown on Drawing No. 16254/S/3 be approved for development control and Land Charge disclosures

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Background Documents:      None