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To: Highways Advisory Board – 5 May 2009

Subject: Ashford Ring Road Alterations

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: To restate the background to the scheme to re-configure the Ashford Ring Road (A292) into a series of two way streets and provide an enhanced public realm to Elwick Road, Bank Street, Godinton Road, West Street and Forge Lane and to provide an initial commentary on the operation of the new layout since opening in November 2008.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Following publication of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities Plan 2003, Ashford was 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.

1.2. Masterplanning studies to guide the sustainable delivery of the projected growth in the town are reported further in the Greater Ashford Development Framework (Urban Initiatives, April 2005), Ashford Town Centre Development Framework (Urban Initiatives, August 2005) and the Transport Strategy for Ashford (KCC, November 2005).

1.3. Ashford Borough Council has previously consulted upon the Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP) which will form one of the key documents of the Ashford Local Development Framework (LDF). 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.

1.4 From the Sustainable Communities Plan 2003 and the Town Centre Area Action Plan, an early transformational project was identified to re-configure the one-way, traffic dominated environment to a series of two-way quality streets which will support and stimulate town centre development, and encourage greater joint use by traffic and pedestrians of the public realm, whilst maintaining safety. An early 'mend before extend' approach to the town centre was considered to be crucial, even before significant growth takes place, and the transformation of the Ashford Ring Road was regarded as a key priority since the future growth of the town cannot be achieved with the one-way ring road configuration.

1.5 Previous reports to the Board have discussed the concept, outline design, detailed design and construction progress.

2. The Scheme

2.1 While ultimate aspiration is to provide a quality, shared space environment around the entire Ring Road, the current funding has enabled all of the Ring Road to be converted to two-way working. Elwick Road, Bank Street, parts of Godinton Road, West Street and Forge Lane have been radically changed to a high quality, shared space environment under a new 20 mph speed limit zone.

2.2 Available funding has meant that improvements to Somerset Road, Mace Lane, Wellesley Road and Station Road have been more conventional in form at this stage although with unnecessary street clutter removed and a 30mph speed limit.

2.3 A new Victoria Road/Romney Marsh Road/Beaver Road traffic signal controlled junction was also incorporated into the project.

3. Art, Engineering & Public Realm

3.1 The shared space element (Bank Street, Tufton Street, Elwick Road, Godinton Road, West Street, Forge Lane) of the Ring Road alterations is an innovative project which is an example of best practice in the UK.

3.2 It offers considerably more to the town's fabric than a standard highway scheme by incorporating a number of key shared space, urban design and artistic features.

3.3 A high quality public realm has been created by the use of quality materials, landscaping, aesthetically pleasing yet functional street furniture together with the integral use of art and street lighting to bring out the scheme identity and distinctiveness.

3.4 In order to deliver such a transformational project, an Integrated Design Team (IDT) was assembled involving engineers, consultants, urban designers, planners, landscapers, traffic experts, lighting specialists and artists to produce a high quality project along the shared space.

4. Scheme Layout

4.1 The overall scheme layout is presented within Appendix A.

4.2 Before and after photographs at various locations are presented in Appendix B.

5. Construction phases

5.1 Advance highway works along Station Road, Elwick Road, Mace Lane, North Street, Somerset Road and New Street commenced on-site on Monday 15 January 2007 and was open to 2 way operation on 1 July 2007 converting the whole of the Ring Road to a 2 way operation with temporary traffic management in place to assist in the change over period. The shared space public realm work in Bank Street, Elwick Road, Godinton Road, West Street and Forge Lane commenced in September 2007 with practical completion in Nov 2008. Landscaping work was delayed to allow Ashford to have a Christmas trading period free of road works. In February 2009, landscaping works commenced with completion in mid March 2009.

6. Traffic Flows

6.1 The re-configuration of the one-way, traffic dominated road network has deliberately reduced overall highway capacity. 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 relocation policy. Indeed, the ultimate success of the ring road alterations relies on a host of other transport schemes coming forward.

6.2 A comparison of the before/after(predicted) morning peak (0800 – 0900) traffic flows around the Ring Road is presented in Appendix C. The post scheme figures are predicted 2008 figures as surveys of traffic flows are not being carried out until later in 2009. Certain other modelling assumptions were made including the provision of a park and ride site at the Warren which the Borough Council has had difficulty in delivering.

6.3 For a number of reasons including the reduction in the number of available traffic lanes, the greater route choice which two-way flow provides and the traffic restraint associated with a shared use concept (20mph/pedestrian/cycle interaction etc), traffic flows around the Ring Road are predicted to reduce. Elwick Road in the one-way system was carrying about 19,000 vehicles per day and following the alterations (including the J10 improvements and with Dover Place car park) flows are predicted to reduce to 8000 vehicles per day. A week long survey undertaken between Tuesday 9 December 2008 and Monday 15 December 2008 indicated an even lower flow of 5,000 vehicles per day but as stated above a more comprehensive survey is to be undertaken.

6.4 In advance of formal traffic surveys, the view in overall terms is that the two-way, partly shared use scheme is proving to be viable in traffic terms and in any event is a necessary consequence of providing a sustainable growth agenda for the town.

7. Road Safety

7.1 There were a total of 48 personal injury accidents around the ring road in the 3 year period up to October 2005.

7.2 A qualitative road safety analysis was also carried out of the scheme based upon the existing accident history which took into account the reduction in traffic speed and change in highway environment which will increase driver awareness and care. This assessment predicted that personal injury accidents would reduce by around 30% as a result of the changes which compares favourably with the 44% reduction in personal injury accidents over 3 years which was achieved following the implementation of a similar type of scheme along Kensington High Street in London.

7.3 The reversion of the ring road from a fast moving, one-way traffic dominated environment to a slower, two-way, partly shared surface environment is therefore predicted to improve road safety around the town centre as well as providing greater accessibility in terms of crossing and accessibility options.

7.4 Post opening road safety audits have highlighted areas that need further consideration such as the courtesy crossings, positions of trees with regard to visibility of pedestrians and vehicular movements around Apsley Street and Godinton Road. All areas highlighted in the safety audit report will be considered and appropriate action taken if necessary.

7.5 Speed monitoring with road 'loops' was undertaken between Tuesday 9 December 2008 and Monday 15 December 2008 on the stretch of Elwick Road between Bank Street and Church Road which has a 20mph speed limit. In summary the speeds were measured as follows:

Average median speed westbound – 21.3 mph
Average median speed eastbound – 21.0 mph

Average 85%ile speed westbound – 26.6 mph
Average 85%ile speed eastbound – 25.7 mph

The range of 85%ile speeds was 25.3 – 28.4 mph

7.6 This is encouraging and it is hoped that speeds will reduce as drivers become more familiar with the concept and when the landscaping is completed that will help to reduce the openness of the area. However, complacency is not appropriate and a 'speed indicator' device has been installed in Elwick Road to assist with reducing speeds even further.

7.7 Further speed and flow monitoring is planned following completion of the landscaping and residual highway works planned in Elwick Road.

8. Environmental Impact

8.1 The ring road alteration 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.

8.2 With the reduction in vehicle speeds and regularisation of traffic flows, traffic noise levels are predicted to fall slightly.

8.3 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.

8.4 The existing landscape along the Ring Road was poor and the introduction of landscaping, public open space and use of quality materials will provide notable benefits to the street scene environment.

8.5 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.

9. Accessibility

9.1 In order to understand the accessibility issues, particularly within the shared space environment, a close working relationship was established during the design stage with representatives from Ashford Access, Wheelchair Users Group, Guide Dogs for the Blind and Kent Association for the Blind. As a result, certain amendments to the original design were incorporated such as kerb delineation in many areas, colour contrast, guidance path, informal crossing points with tactile paving on approaches and positioning of street furniture/trees to help guide vehicles.

9.2 A post scheme opening workshop involving disability groups took place on 27 January 2009 and involved group discussions and a visit to site to get first hand experience. A report is to be produced by the external facilitator as part of the monitoring of the shared space and it is expected that this will be available mid 2009.

9.3 In overall terms, the scheme attempts to create a much more friendly environment which reduces the dominance of the motor vehicle although this is not pursued without due consideration for all users including drivers, pedestrians, cyclists and people with mobility impairments. Best endeavours have been made to involve and consult widely on this project with all affected parties and provide a scheme that is accessible for all. It also worth remembering that the fast moving, traffic dominated one-way ring road environment was a barrier for both disabled and non-disabled people alike and the intention was to remove those barriers and allow other road users to reclaim the street.

9.4 Shared space is a new but proven concept but the underlying difficulty in Ashford is one of timing. Elwick Road is a very open vista. It will only be when the south side of Elwick Road is fully developed and a pavement café culture created with a critical mass of pedestrians that the concept will properly operate.

10. Finance

10.1 The total cost of the scheme including fees, works and other ancillary costs is approximately £16m and is funded as follows:

ODPM (Growth Area Fund 1)	£0.300m
ODPM (Growth Area Fund 2)	£8.262m
CLG (Growth Area Fund 3)	£3.718m
English Partnerships	£1.260m
Interreg	£0.930m
Kent County Council	£0.777m
Ashford Borough Council	£0.500m

11. General Discussion

11.1 Carrying out major road works in a town centre is always difficult and we are always mindful of the commercial impact on small businesses in particular. The argument that it is to the long term benefit of the town is not always convincing when businesses are struggling with the commercial reality of the moment. Traffic management was high on our agenda and many changes were made to the construction programme to try and minimise disruption.

11.2 When combined with public realm and innovative shared space the scheme attracted wider attention and frequently made the national press and media. Anything new attracts opinion and often views are polarised and it is sometimes difficult to separate out the genuine concerns from inbuilt fear of change. Many things that we now take for granted were considered radical when first introduced.

11.3 There is also a tension between the wider regeneration objectives and the narrower highway operational and maintenance aspects. Ashford is a major growth area and the town centre must expand to meet that challenge. It has the opportunity to be different and needs to be different and the changes have been welcomed by those most driven by the growth and regeneration agenda and as a public realm scheme it has already started to receive national recognition.

11.4 However, it is a highway scheme and the County Council has the operational, safety and maintenance responsibility and inevitably is the focus for any criticism. The scheme was developed by an Integrated Team and drawing on wider experience through a Champions Group. The shared space aspects appear to be working well but safety is the immediate focus of monitoring. The implied courtesy crossings have invited some comment and in addition to the speed indication device installation their operation will be monitored closely. It is important to remember the existing safety record of the old Ring Road and that even formal signal controlled crossings have an inherent safety risk and hence the need to monitor and avoid any possible knee jerk reactions.

11.5 The cost of some aspects of the scheme such as the street lighting and street furniture has attracted local and national comment recently. It can be argued that the street lighting is a key contributor to the aesthetic distinctiveness that has been created and is a relatively small proportion of the overall cost of the project that in the main has been funded by central Government. On the other hand, trying to justify the cost of the street lighting in isolation when there are so many other demands on public funding can seem incongruous. This is a difficult subject area and particular in the context of the current economic climate. However, the intent is not to provide this standard throughout the expanding town centre and Victoria Way will use a simpler pallet of materials and the street lighting will be elegant but using stock equipment.

11.6 The long term robustness of the public realm and increased maintenance liability is an issue both in Ashford and the wider interest being shown in such schemes in Kent and nationally. Some aspects of the 'Flume' feature in Bank Street are showing distress and this is a difficult issue because they are formed of individually created slabs. Other areas of paving are cracking but it has not yet been established whether this is a construction or design fault. These issues should not be overstated but they are indicative of aspects of high quality public realm schemes that need to be considered. Work is underway within Regeneration & Economy on a Maintenance Protocol for public realm that will include consideration of maintenance funding regimes.

12. Conclusion

12.1 This report updates the Board on proposals to re-configure the one-way A292 Ashford Ring Road into a series of two-way quality streets.

12.2 It is important to allow a settling in of the scheme as it will take several months for users to become familiar with the changes. Monitoring will be required initially and over the next 12 to 24 months and formal safety audit procedures extend beyond that period.

12.3 Ultimately, the scheme will secure a better balance between the needs of car users, pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users, radically improve the environment of the town centre, encourage further investment in the town and strengthen the town centre's economy by making the centre easily accessible for all.

Background Documents:

The Greater Ashford Development Framework – Urban Initiatives, April 2005
Ashford Town Centre Development Framework – Urban Initiatives, Aug 2005
The Transport Strategy for Ashford – Kent County Council, November 2005
Public Realm Strategy - Alan Baxter & Associates, July 2006,
Joint Transportation Board Reports 29th June 2006, 2nd November 2006, 13th March 2007, 5th June 2007, 18th September 2007, 11th December 2007, 4th March 2008, 17th June 2008, 2nd September 2008, 16th December 2008 and 3rd March 2009.
Highways Advisory Board Reports 10th January 2006, 2nd May 2006, 29th June 2006, 11th July 2006, 14th November 2006, 6th March 2007, 18th September 2007, 4th March 2008, 16th September 2008.

Appendices:

Appendix A	:	Overall scheme layout
Appendix B	:	Before and after photographs
Appendix C	:	Traffic Flows

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