South Northamptonshire Council

Scrutiny Committee

17 January 2018

Towcester Relief Road update

Report of the Executive Director: Place and Growth

This report is public

Purpose of report

To update Members on the proposed Towcester Relief Road and work currently being undertaken to deliver the proposed highway improvements in Towcester.

1.0 Recommendations

The Scrutiny Committee is invited to:

1.1 Consider the current status of the work by South Northamptonshire Council to progress the Towcester Relief Road

2.0 Introduction

2.1 The Scrutiny Committee on 22 November 2017 considered a report on the relevance of the Towcester Relief Road to the South Northamptonshire Council Air Quality Annual Status report. It requested a report updating Members on the work undertaken so far in relation to the Towcester Relief Road.

2.2 Members will be aware of the proposed Towcester relief road to divert through-traffic around the town thereby improving the town centre. The route of the proposed new road was designed during the planning application for the Towcester Southern Urban Extension expressly on the basis that it would be a relief road for Towcester relieving some of the A5 traffic (including all HGVs) with the Section of Watling Street from the A5 junction to the south to the A43 junction at Tove Roundabout restricting through traffic through potential weight and speed restrictions. This, however, was not reflected in the form of a specific planning condition as part of the Towcester South outline consent.

2.3 Work to improve the Tove and Abthorpe Roundabouts on the A43 at Towcester has been completed as part of separate projects related to the accelerated delivery of the relief road. At the same time, the Council has addressed some of the parking issues in the town and continues to monitor them as part of the new short stay and long stay car parking provision for the Moat Lane redevelopment.
Planning History

2.4 The Towcester South Sustainable Urban Extension (SUE) development site was granted outline planning consent in March 2015 (Planning Application Reference: S/2007/0374/OUTWNS). The outline planning permission includes the delivery of the relief road between the A5 and A43 trunk as a planning condition (Condition Number 23 (d)). A Section 106 agreement forms part of the planning decision. The outline planning consent also requires improvements to the Tove and Abthorpe roundabouts on the A43 and this work has been carried out by Highways England.

2.5 Other planning conditions relating to highway improvements and access are set out in the decision notice (Condition Numbers 19-26). A copy of the decision notice and Section 106 Agreement is contained in Appendix 1. Planning condition 23 states that no more than 1,016 dwellings shall be occupied until the A43/Relief Road junction improvements and a highway linking the A43 and A5 is complete and open in accordance with WSP drawing 2688/GA/015 Rev A (or as amended by Road Safety Audit or Detailed Design). A copy of the drawing is contained in Appendix 2. The provision of a relief road will require the approval of a detailed design. The timescale for this is set by the occupation of the development with the relief road required to be complete and open before the occupation of the 1,016th dwelling. The developers are currently in the process of appointing contractors to progress the detailed design of the road.

Highway improvements and parking

2.6 The A43/A5 Tove roundabout improvement scheme was completed by Highways England in March 2015 costing £4.6million. The works formed part of the £317 million “pinch point” improvement programme designed to boost local economies and address the congestion affecting the A5, A43 and local roads, particularly at peak times. The A43 Abthorpe roundabout improvement scheme was completed by Highways England in March 2017 costing £7million. The scheme takes account of the increased southbound traffic from the Tove roundabout following its improvement scheme and the general increase in traffic levels from local housing and business growth. A new roundabout at the Towcester Racecourse A5 access to the Towcester South development is currently under construction as part of the implementation of the planning consent.

2.7 In the town centre car parking has been provided as part of the regeneration proposals and includes the Tove Short and Long Stay car parks on the Northampton Road.

3.0 Report Details

3.1 This report is intended to provide Scrutiny Committee Members with information about the current position on the Towcester relief road and clarify the transport and planning policies and strategies which provide a solution to some of the transport and air quality issues in Towcester. Work continues to accelerate the delivery of the Towcester Relief Road.

Air quality, traffic and pollution issues and the relevance of the Towcester Relief Road
3.2 In 2005 the Towcester (A5 Watling Street) Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) was declared by the Council due to it exceeding the annual objective for nitrogen dioxide. The combination of a narrow road with high buildings restricts the dispersal of pollutants. This is exacerbated by the fact that for much of the time the traffic is slow moving and was the subject of a separate report to Scrutiny Committee in November 2017 which concluded the AQMA is likely to remain as Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) levels over the last 5 years remain constant with no significant change expected until the Towcester Relief Road is completed. However, to achieve a significant improvement in air quality in the town centre will require a package of measures such as a weight restriction to prevent HGV through-traffic from using the town centre, as the relief road on its own may not have a significant impact.

3.3 In the short term, the AQMA may be extended south of the town centre due to NO₂ levels from slow moving traffic (the level of exceedance has dropped since 2005 possibly due to changes in cleaner vehicle engine technology and better traffic management e.g. traffic signal phasing and new junction arrangements). The Council’s Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) includes initiatives to improve air quality.

3.4 The previous Scrutiny Committee report identified the Towcester Relief Road as key to addressing air quality issues in Towcester combined with measures to reduce volume of traffic and weight restrictions on Watling Street to tackle the volume and speed of traffic and use by heavy goods vehicles. A copy of Highways England’s response to the previous Committee report is contained in Appendix 3.

Towcester Masterplan

3.5 The Towcester Masterplan was adopted in 2011 and sets out the development strategy for Towcester. It also sets out the vision and the aims for Towcester to become a sustainable town. Improved transport, movement and connectivity is a recurring theme in the document with the A5 relief road identified as an opportunity and key objective for the town taking strategic traffic out of the town centre.

Environmental improvements

3.6 The Towcester masterplan states: “The construction of a relief road for the A5 will enable Watling Street to be de-trunked, allowing the removal of HGVs from the town centre and the full potential of the Market Square and Watling Street to be realised. This will include widening the pavements, creating new road crossings and generally enhancing the viability of the area” and this remains the aim of the Council.

Current Transport issues

3.7 The Towcester masterplan sets out to address the issues caused by the A5 in terms of its impact on the character of the town centre, the air quality and congestion due to the high number of lorries and HGVs that pass through. It masterplan proposes many transport measures including a relief road and identifies the current transport issues as follows:

3.7.1 Good accessibility and connectivity because of location close to A5 and A43;
3.7.2 AQMA on Watling Street;
3.7.3 Congestion and poor environment in town centre;
3.7.4 Significant out-commute to Northampton and MK;
3.7.5 Heavy reliance on privately-owned cars;
3.7.6 Regular but limited bus services to Northampton and MK;
3.7.7 Good pedestrian network in town centre but limited usage;
3.7.8 Good range of public walkways connecting to the surrounding countryside and
3.7.9 Serious concerns with pedestrian safety and road access at peak times around schools.

3.8 The existing road network has been reviewed in the various transport studies and
assessments carried out as part of the preparation of planning and transport
policies for the town specifically securing a relief road. The Towcester Masterplan
states: “The provision of a southern relief road is critical to enabling the town to be
regenerated, accelerate development and remove the AQMA. It will alleviate the
town centre and enable it to improve and expand to accommodate new economic
development that is currently restricted. Traffic reduction in the town centre will
allow improvements to the street scene.”

3.9 The Towcester Masterplan refers to the Towcester Transport Study and the
proposed development for the southern expansion of the town including the route
options for the relief road that were being considered at the time.

3.10 The challenges facing Towcester are set out and include transport congestion,
Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) and parking. The A5 brings heavy traffic through
the narrow streets of Towcester which has a detrimental impact on the environment,
causing it to be an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The Vision is for, “fast
road connections to a range of other towns, cities, railway stations and airports, with
a relief road taking strategic traffic away from the historic town centre... The A5 relief
road and complementary sustainable transport measures will help to improve air
quality and reduce congestion in Watling Street and the town centre, making it
pedestrian-friendly.”

Towcester Transport Study

3.11 In November 2010, the West Northamptonshire joint transport steering group, which
included Northamptonshire County Council and the Highways Agency, carried out a
study to understand the implications of growth in Towcester along the A43 corridor
and identify the scale of the transport issues in the town. The Towcester Transport
Study (TTS) was co-funded by South Northamptonshire Council (SNC),
Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) and the West Northamptonshire Joint
Planning Unit (WNJPU).

3.12 The study was completed in 2011 and informed the preparation of the West
Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy. It considers the potential transport
implications of proposed growth and assesses the effect of different transport
interventions, both in terms of modal shift and the provision of major transport
infrastructure (primarily a new south-east link road between the A43 and A5). A
relief road and HGV re-routing are explicitly sought.

3.13 The transport study was undertaken in two stages: Stage one tested a range of
options to see if there was an appropriate transport solution suitable to
accommodate development in Towcester and to derive a preferred transport
strategy; Stage two examined the preferred transport strategy in more detail. The
preferred transport mitigation strategy identified comprised modal shift plus a new at grade connection to the A43 with capacity improvements at the Tove and Abthorpe roundabouts to accommodate the Core Strategy proposals.

3.14 The study was tested using the Northamptonshire Strategic Traffic Model (NSTM) and Highways Agency VISSIM model (focussing on the A43 corridor) validated and approved by the Highways Agency. The forecast traffic flows along the A5 through the Town centre are forecast to decrease materially with the development scenarios (para 1.1.22). Paragraph 2.3.3 of the study states, “The initial assessment work also concluded that the provision of a link road with no supporting works either within Towcester, or on the A43, would not be an effective transport strategy option, as it could be expected to result in increased demands on the A43 and the sensitive junctions to the west of the town without providing appropriate levels of mitigation on key junctions along the A43”.

3.15 The next stage of intervention considered the provision of junction improvements on the A43, accommodating increases in traffic and ensuring the new link road (in combination with the A43) remains a preferable alternative to travelling through Towcester on the A5 (by improving journey times on the A43).

3.16 The final stage of intervention further dissuades non-essential traffic from using the A5 through the centre of Towcester through the introduction of measures to reduce traffic speed, as the initial modelling work demonstrated a high degree of traffic sensitivity to changes in the speed of traffic on both the A5 and A43.

3.17 The initial findings of the work on the TTS concluded:

3.17.1 A link road could remove a significant amount of traffic from the centre of Towcester, mitigating the impact of traffic from the proposed SUE; and making a significant contribution to reducing traffic flows in the AQMA and town centre.

3.17.2 The link road will not on its own relieve future congestion problems at the A43 Tove and Abthorpe roundabouts and capacity enhancement at these roundabouts will be required to accommodate 2026 traffic levels with or without the link road.

3.18 The speed limit and design standard of the link road is important, in that a higher link road speed removes more traffic from the town centre (in the TTS the Towcester Relief Road link road is assumed to have a design speed of 60mph and 20mph speed restrictions are applied on the A5 to reduce traffic flow through Towcester).

3.19 The TTS includes forecast traffic levels for 2026 as demand flows at various locations on the highway network in and around Towcester. The Study also provided a forecast of the percentage difference in flows compared with the forecast 2026 baseline showing significant decreases in traffic flows in the a.m. and p.m. peaks in the town centre and increased flows on the peripheral routes (see Table 5 of the TTS). The most notable change is a reduction in flows passing through the town centre of between 82% and 96% with an increased flow of between 23% and 32% between the Tove and Abthorpe roundabouts on the A43.

3.20 The study shows that traffic flows passing through the town centre are forecast to reduce significantly with the 3,300 dwelling scenario but the reduction is not as
great with the 1,500 dwelling scenario. The study also examines the wider network effects. This indicates that there are a number of trips in the do minimum situation that could choose to transfer to alternative routes on the wider network (outside the study area) relatively easily if congestion increases around Towcester but that these alternative routes may be reduced as congestion increases on the wider network.

3.21 Key highway design issues identified in the TTS include road design, standard and speed, all of which will contribute to the ability of the relief road to draw traffic out of Towcester, reducing delays and congestion and ensuring the maximum transport impact of the new link.

3.22 The Towcester Masterplan includes the area of search for the relief road and states: “Once confirmed, the relief road will sit within a green corridor to separate it from the town and not to form a new edge for development. The design of the relief road and associated junctions will be suitable to accommodate existing and future capacity requirements (up to 2026), including:

3.22.1 Enabling further economic development to take place in the town centre;
3.22.2 Accommodating current traffic levels and reducing congestion;
3.22.3 Meet the design requirements of the Highways Agency and the NCC Highways
3.22.4 End the current A5 AQMA;
3.22.5 Avoid pressure for further infill development between the relief road and the development area.”

Local Transport Plan: Northamptonshire Transportation Plan

3.23 The Northamptonshire Transportation Plan was adopted in March 2012 and is the Local Transport Plan and sets out the transport policies, objectives and long-term vision for the County. It includes reference to the A5 relief scheme to bypass the town and support the proposals for growth in the area.

Towcester Town Transport Strategy

3.24 The Towcester Town Transport Strategy was adopted in March 2013 as part of the Northamptonshire Transportation Plan. It sets out NCC’s plans and proposals for improving transport facilities and services in Towcester.

Adopted West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy

3.25 The West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy was adopted in December 2014 and sets out the development strategy for the area. It is supported by an Infrastructure Delivery Plan and informed by the Towcester Masterplan (2011) and the Towcester Transport Strategy (2012). The latter explicitly seeks the re-routing of heavy goods vehicles to the Towcester relief road.

Highways England Road Investment Strategy and Route Based Strategies
3.26 The A43 forms part of the Government’s Midlands to the Solent route based strategy published by the Highways Agency in March 2014. The route based strategy evidence report that supports the route based strategy identifies the A43 at Towcester in the top ten least reliable sections of the Solent to Midlands route. In 2014 the Government launched its road investment strategy setting out a long-term approach to improving England’s motorways and major roads (the “strategic road network” or SRN). The first Road Investment Strategy (RIS1) includes proposals to improve the A43 and a new relief road for Towcester.

3.27 The A43 Abthrop junction and A5/A43 Towcester Relief Road are included in Highway England’s Strategic Business Plan 2015-2020 as part of measures to improve the A43 and A5 as part of the Towcester South development proposals and proposals for a new link road to the south of the town, allowing traffic to bypass central Towcester.

3.28 Highways England is currently consulting on the second road investment strategy (RIS2) and the consultation documentation “Shaping the Future of England’s strategic roads (RIS2) includes the Towcester Relief Road in a list of major projects to commence before 2020. South Northamptonshire Council will be responding to the consultation and will repeat the importance of the Towcester Relief Road.

A5 De-trunking

3.29 The Towcester Transport Study states (paragraph 3.6): “The Towcester Relief Road will divert traffic around the town…was designed expressly on the basis it would take the majority of the A5 traffic (including HGVs) and the road [A5] would be subject to a weight and speed restriction…however this was not reflected in a planning condition.”

3.30 The A5 may need to be de-trunked when a suitable relief road is implemented as part of the action plan for transport set out in the Towcester Masterplan. The de-trunking of the A5 through Towcester is identified as a key outcome of the Towcester masterplan which states: “The new housing growth to the south provides a unique and critical opportunity to deliver a relief road that will divert longer distance traffic (including HGVs) on to a more appropriate route. As the Core Strategy proposes, ‘the provision of the A5 bypass…is an essential prerequisite to the development’ (page 157).”

3.31 The A5 will need to be de-trunked when a suitable relief road is implemented. An action plan for transport is set out in the Towcester Masterplan. The Towcester South masterplan includes an outer road, the relief road, on the south western edge of the development. A separate main street within and through the development, the inner road, will act as a spine road serving the proposed land uses.

3.32 The Council continues to progress work to deliver the Towcester Relief Road as supporting infrastructure for the town’s growth and wider area working collaboratively with the developers, Northamptonshire County Council and Highways England as part of a delivery group set up to progress the scheme. The delivery group will focus on the detailed scheme design, working collaboratively to agree the delivery timescale and project management with the objective to ensure that the construction begins before the end of the first road investment strategy period of March 2020. Once the detailed design has been agreed, the construction
is anticipated to take between 12 and 18 months to complete. Contractors to
design and build the road are expected to be appointed by the developers at the
end of January 2018 following which a meeting of all parties will be arranged to take
place in February.

3.33 At the same time, the Council will work to progress the “de-trunking” of the A5
through the town with the Government (Department of Transport). The details of
this arrangement will need to be agreed with NCC as the Highways Authority and
the Department for Transport with responsibility for the Strategic Road Network
(SRN). It is expected that this will result in a reduction in traffic through the town,
particularly heavy goods vehicle movements, reducing congestion, improving air
quality and the overall quality of the environment in the town centre.

3.34 Improvements to the A43 roundabouts at the Tove/A5 and Abthorpe junctions have
already taken place as set out above. The Council will work to progress a proposal
to “de-trunk” the A5 section through the town as set out above. This will be a
separate process to the construction of the relief road. The details of the de-trunking
need to be agreed. The proposed road to the south of Towcester will provide a
strategic link between the A5 and A43 trunk roads. It will provide a peripheral route
and alternative for through traffic to alleviate the impact of traffic on the town and
accommodate increase traffic levels expected as part of the planned growth
including the new homes and mixed-use development on the Towcester South site.
The priority at present is securing a relief road of the necessary standard to secure
the rerouting of HGVs.

3.35 The site masterplan currently shows the link road as a single carriageway road with
roundabouts providing access to the A5, A43 and access into the Towcester South
development site. It is important to note, that the detailed design of the new
highway has not been finalised and will be completed by the developer who is in the
process of appointing contractors to deliver the scheme.

Funding

3.36 The relief road is to be delivered by the private sector as part of the developer
contributions to the Towcester South development. The Government’s Road
Investment Strategy includes the Towcester Relief Road as a committed scheme
subject to other contributions which means the Government is committed to provide
part of the anticipated funding for this scheme, based on the expectation that the
balance of funding will be available from other parties. The Council continues to
work with Highways England, the developer and other parties to secure the funding
for this scheme to bring forward the construction of the relief road ahead of the
developer’s development programme.

3.37 The Council is also exploring other funding opportunities to accelerate the delivery
of the scheme including the Government’s Housing Infrastructure Fund. The
Housing Infrastructure Fund is a government capital grant programme of up to
£2.3 billion and was launched in July 2017. One of the purposes of the fund is to
deliver new physical infrastructure to support new and existing communities.

3.38 A decision on the Council’s expression of interest submission to the Housing
Infrastructure Fund is expected in late January 2018. A copy of the submission
summary is contained in Appendix 4.
4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 The Towcester Relief Road is a fundamental part of the masterplan and transport strategy for Towcester. It will provide an important role in enhancing the town, particularly the town centre which will benefit from the provision of an alternative route allowing heavy goods vehicles and through traffic to avoid the current congestion.

4.2 The Council remains committed to accelerating delivery of the relief road, removing HGVs from the town centre and progressing the delivery of the transport infrastructure to support the long-term growth of the town. It is working with Northamptonshire County Council as the Local Transport and Highways Authority, Highways England and the private sector to progress the design of the road whilst pursuing funding options to facilitate the construction of the road infrastructure in advance of the wider development.

4.3 A submission to the Housing and Infrastructure Fund (HIF) was submitted to the Government and a decision is expected at the end of January 2018. The Council will review the funding decision when it is made and consider the implications on the relief road scheme.

4.4 Further dialogue is required with Highways England, Northamptonshire County Council and the developer as part of a working group set up to deliver the relief road.

4.5 South Northamptonshire Council will progress the proposals for the de-trunking of Watling Street to ensure the de-trunking is aligned with the completed Towcester relief road.

4.6 The de-trunking of the A5 through Towcester will require the Council to review the process and consider a proposal with the DfT following liaison with the local highway authority. The de-trunking process should be considered separately to the relief road with SNC and NCC developing a proposal to align with the delivery of the relief road. Any proposal to de-trunk the A5 will be made by the local authority and submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) for approval. Highways England’s role will be limited to the strategic road network.

5.0 Consultation

Highways England

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

6.1 Do nothing. This would lead to uncertainty and delay. It may also lead to a slowing in the delivery of the development proposals in Towcester and continued transport issues in the town centre.
7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

7.1 There are no direct resource implications for the Council as the proposed transport improvement and infrastructure delivery are part of the Council’s core business in delivering the growth and place agenda. Financial risks associated with the early delivery of the relief road will be considered as the proposals progress.

Comments checked by Paul Sutton, Executive Director: Finance and Governance, 01295 221634, paul.sutton@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

Legal Implications

7.2 There are no direct legal implications arising as a result of this report.

Comments checked by: Chris Mace, Solicitor, 01327 322125, christopher.mace@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

WardsAffected

All Towcester wards

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Protect the District: Preserve the Environmental Quality of the District: Work with Highways England and partners to secure early delivery of the Towcester Relief Road

Lead Councillor

Councillor Steve Clarke, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration Housing and the Economy

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**Background Papers**

None

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