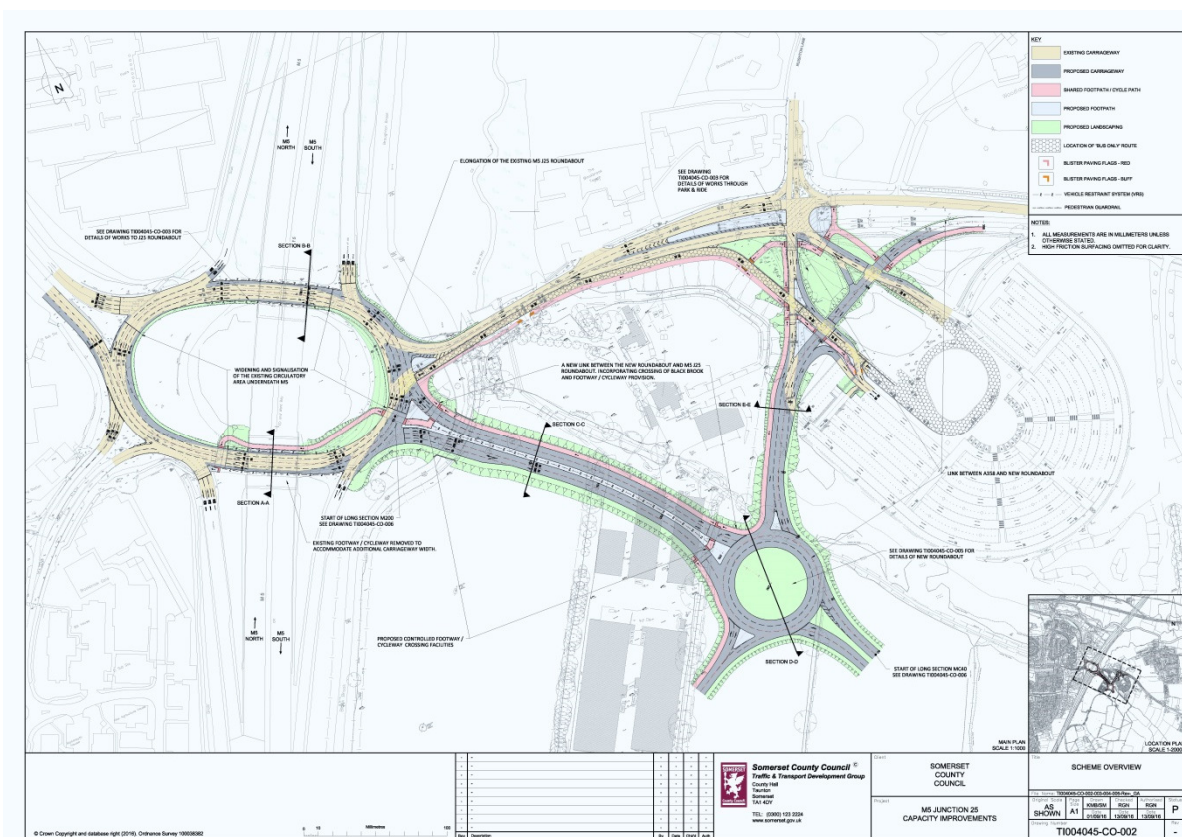


M5 Junction 25

Public Consultation Report

March 2017



M5 J25 Improvement Scheme Consultation Report

1. Introduction

Junction 25 is a critical node on the local and strategic highway network and the interaction with the trunk road is vital to the county town of Taunton and environs. The Junction currently suffers from congestion at peak times which, at times, has an impact on the safety and free flow of the M5.

There is a significant level of growth planned across Taunton and in addition Taunton Deane Borough Council is proposing to allocate a strategic employment site close to Junction 25.

Junction 25 of the M5 is a large five-arm grade separated roundabout with a 3-lane circulatory carriageway beneath the motorway mainline. The junction is heavily used at peak times and experiences high levels of traffic congestion with queues frequently extending along the A358.

The junction has limited facilities for non-motorised users, a cycle and footpath runs around the southern side of the junction however users find crossing the southbound M5 on-slip difficult due to the lack of priority and accelerating vehicles. The route is unpleasant to use and perceived as dangerous.

The proposed scheme involves full signalisation and widening of the roundabout, improved signs on approach to the junction, widening of the eastern exit, a new roundabout to access the proposed Strategic Employment Site, and improved pedestrian and cycling facilities.

It is expected to cost around £18m with funding from the LEP Local Transport Board, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Highways England and developer contributions.

The aim of the scheme is to

- manage peak hour traffic congestion better
- help reduce journey times with improved accessibility to the roundabout.
- improve access to Taunton and the motorway
- benefit the economy by supporting the growth of employment and residential development across Taunton, which includes 13,000 new homes and 6,000 jobs.

In the autumn of 2016 Somerset County Council carried out a public consultation on the proposed design of the improvements. The purpose of the consultation was not to test the premise of the need for the scheme; this is clearly set out in policy. Nor was the intention to understand opinion regarding the proposed Strategic Employment Site, this will be understood through a dedicated consultation led by Taunton Deane Borough Council.

2. Purpose of Report

This report describes the Public Consultation for the improvement scheme and summarises the responses, written contributions and discussions that took place.

On the basis of the report changes to the scheme design were considered and will be implemented, where appropriate, through the detailed design of the scheme.

3. Method

Public Consultation for the improvement opened on 19th September 2016 and closed on 12th October 2016. In order to engage with the public, two drop in events were held on 19th September

2016 at Ruishton Village Hall and 21st September 2016 at Taunton Library. Presentations also took place at Ruishton, Stoke St Mary and West Monkton Parish Councils.

Relevant County Council staff were present to answer questions including the Project Manager and Design Engineer.

Posters advertising the public events were placed across the area and the events were reported in the local media and on SCC's website. Publicity material including leaflets and maps were produced and copies of this can all be found at Appendix 1.

Questionnaires were made available at the events and online through the SCC consultation portal and 83 responses were received, with 21 letter and email responses. A copy of the questionnaire can be found at Appendix 1.

The questionnaire consisted of the five following questions;

1. Post code (optional)
2. What do you like about the proposed scheme?
3. What don't you like about the proposed scheme?
4. If we were to go ahead with the scheme, what could we do to minimise the impact on the local community during and after construction?
5. Is there anything else you think we should consider when deciding whether or not to go ahead with our preferred options?

Signing in sheets were placed at both public events and 134 names were recorded although not everyone signed in. Postcodes were noted to be able to see where people came from; results are shown at Appendix 2.

Several key themes were raised and answers provided and a summary of questions and responses can be found below.

4. Issues Raised

4.1. General Comments

There was a high level of support for the scheme with people writing comments such as –

“Will/should improve traffic flow”.

“It looks good, I had not appreciated the scale of the proposal. I like the one way idea and incorporating the roundabout for the employment site”.

“Much needed improvements, appears to make sense”.

Specific issues and concerns raised regarding the scheme are discussed in the following sections.

4.2. Highways England Scheme

Although it was generally agreed that work needed to take place to improve the junction and reduce congestion in the area, there was some concern expressed around the Highways England scheme for the A358 and how that would fit alongside this scheme –

“I think the A358 plans for improvement (and/or dualling) should be clarified more before embarking on this prevent unnecessary expense or white elephant areas”

“This scheme must link to HE’s scheme for A358 dualling”

“It seems unwise to proceed with this scheme until the dualling of the A358 has been decided as it could result in a large expenditure that could have been reduced. Work should start when new route decided.”

Our Response - This scheme is designed as a ‘standalone’ scheme to the A358, and serves a current need regardless of the A358 improvements. However, we are working closely with Highways England (HE) to develop this scheme as their plans progress. HE understand it is their responsibility to take the J25 improvement scheme into account in their future designs for the A358.

SCC carefully considered whether to bring the scheme forward in advance of the improvements planned by HE however there is uncertainty around the scheme until such time as a preferred route announcement is made. It could be 6-8 years before the A358 scheme is complete and local growth-enabling infrastructure is needed before then. HE will be publishing their preferred route option during 2017 and this will be taken into account before finalising the design of the J25 improvement.

4.3. Congestion Elsewhere

A further concern was regarding other junctions approaching the J25 –

“No point in enlarging the roundabout if the real bottlenecks are not addressed first”

“Whilst you may be able to get more traffic through the junction, it doesn’t help if the traffic has nowhere to go”

“ With the Sainsbury roundabout /Creech Castle creating tail backs onto the J25 roundabout. Would not it be better to sort this out first?”

Our Response – We are committed to making other highways improvements in Taunton to enable growth. J25 is one of a number of highway improvements that are set out within the transport strategy for Taunton. Our technical assessment demonstrates that the proposed scheme improves journey times into Taunton. The funding available for such schemes is limited so we must take every opportunity to secure funds and build improvements incrementally. We are actively pursuing all options to secure potential funding and have recently secured funds for improvements to Toneway Corridor which will follow-on from the J25 improvement.

4.4. Cycling & Walking Facilities

There were comments supporting the provision of signalised crossings but some criticized the number of crossings in place –

“I like the planned provision for cyclists and pedestrians”.

“(I like) signal controlled cycle route from P&R to Blackbrook Business Park”

“The arrangements for cyclists/pedestrians/children & disabled people seem highly unsatisfactory”

“Will make this junction even more intimidating for cyclists and pedestrians”.

“The proposed cycle and walking route will face those using it with longer journey due to two extra sets of traffic lights”.

“Consult the new Taunton cycling group who know about good design”.

Our Response - The proposed scheme does provide suitable improvement for cyclists and pedestrians with controlled crossings at slip roads and a path through the central reserve. Whilst the proposals may not suit the aspirations of all users, they do provide a much safer route across the roundabout by eliminating the need to cross the uncontrolled M5 southbound slip road. We will look at any opportunities to improve facilities for non-motorised users through the next stage of design.

Grade separated cycle crossings whilst potentially feasible, would be extremely challenging to accommodate due to the length of ramps and associated land-take required to get enough height over the road system, and would be prohibitively expensive in the context of the funding available for the scheme.

We are in discussions with Highways England on the potential use of funding streams for sustainable transport that are available to them. SCC is working with Sustrans and Highways England on improved cycle connections to overcome the barrier created by the M5, however ideas are at an early stage and a funding package has yet to be secured.

A meeting with Taunton Area Cycling Campaign took place to discuss the design of the scheme in detail.

4.5. Design and Construction Queries

There were a number of common areas that arose during the consultation -

“Could there be some improvement to the footpaths into the P&R site?”

“Lane marking and signage needs to be considered”.

“What are you going to do about rat running?”

“Tortuous route west bound through Park & Ride”.

“The proposed scheme seems overcomplicated”

“Too many traffic lights”.

“A second junction at Walford Cross would benefit the town much more”.

“Why can’t you open up Ilminster Road bus lane to all traffic?”.

“The scheme is not future proofed, won’t it be congested by the time that it is built”.

“What is going to happen during construction?”.

“Can foresee that this will have a great impact during construction”.

Our Response – We will look at the footpaths, lane markings and signage through the next design stage including reviewing the detail of connections to the Park and Ride site.

The indications from the traffic modelling are that use of minor roads to avoid the junction should reduce due to the increased capacity and reduced journey times through junction 25.

The proposed route for westbound traffic is slightly longer in distance than the current route but the journey time should be improved due to the increased capacity of the junction and reduced queuing. The new road links have been designed to national standards and therefore should be no more difficult to use than other urban roads.

The traffic lights are required to enable the best management of the conflicting traffic movements and to allow pedestrians and cyclists to safely cross the busy roads. The traffic lights allow SCC to manage the flow entering the roundabout and maximise the capacity, removing them would mean exacerbating the existing situation.

A new junction at Walford Cross is not being considered through this consultation. The assessment of the road network carried out in 2011 as part of the Somerset Future Transport Plan evidence base indicated that Junction 25 would be facing significant pressure from the planned growth and therefore SCC has brought this scheme forward for delivery. Proposing a new motorway junction at this stage would be premature while the details of the improvements to the A358 between Southfields and Taunton are unknown.

Ilminster Road bus gate is designed to provide a priority route into town for buses. The roads in the vicinity of the bus gate are not designed to accommodate heavy traffic and opening it to general use would encourage a huge amount of traffic and congestion in residential areas where it would be unsuitable; where children are walking and cycling to school for example. Our strategy is to ensure the main roads into Taunton are improved to accommodate planned growth.

The scheme is future proofed to the best of our ability. It has been designed with the knowledge of the current planned growth to 2033, this is the best information

that is available. The traffic modelling still shows some congestion in the future however it is significantly less than if the scheme were not delivered.

The construction management plan will be determined by the contractor that is appointed to deliver the scheme however it is currently expected that the new road links and new roundabout will be constructed 'off-line' as a first phase, this can be carried out with very little disruption to the existing traffic. The second phase of work would be to elongate and widen the existing roundabout, given the nature of the demands on the roundabout we would envisage much of the work taking place at night in order to minimise, where possible the impact on traffic.

4.6. Employment Site

Questions arose regarding the proposed employment site –

“Concern that it is solely to bring forward the employment site”.

“You would have a very different scheme without the employment site”.

“How will the junction cope with the extra traffic from the development?”.

“If there were no proposed business park, then this proposal would be an entirely different and wholly re-worked J25”.

Our Response – The need for a strategic employment site is a matter for Taunton Deane Borough Council to consider

The junction improvement is needed to enable growth across the whole of Taunton and has been designed to provide access to the proposed employment site subject to the development gaining planning approval. Funding contributions to the scheme have been secured on the basis that the scheme should enable growth in housing and employment. SCC is working closely with TDBC on the development of the Local Development Order and this will be the mechanism by which traffic generation will be managed.

SCC has carried out extensive traffic modelling to consider the impacts of planned local growth and extra traffic from the employment site.

4.7. Funding

Questions arose around the financing of the scheme –

“Have you got all of the money to deliver the scheme?”.

“Not a good cost/benefit ratio”.

“Surely £18m would be much better spent on town centre public realm enhancement, partial pedestrianisation and improving the cycle network”.

“£18m is an awful lot of money; much more important things need the money”.

Our Response – The current estimated scheme cost is £18.02m, and sufficient contributions have been secured or committed from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Highways England and Developers to cover the estimated cost. The value for money (benefit to cost ratio) of the scheme has been considered by all funding partners and is considered to be good value for money with the quantified value of the benefits significantly exceeding the costs.

The funding for this project could not be diverted by Somerset County Council to other projects as it has been awarded/ring fenced by the LEP and Highways England for this specific scheme as it enables growth and development. If we do not progress the scheme then those funds will be used elsewhere in the LEP area (Somerset, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay) or nationally in the case of HE funding.

Somerset County Council and the District Council continue to explore all opportunities for funding for the other infrastructure needs of the area such as cycle networks and town centre improvements.

4.8. The Environment

Questions were raised regarding environmental and ecological factors –

“The P&R site is known to be of national archaeological interest – need for careful excavation”.

“Has the flood risk been properly thought through?”

“There is an important area of wetland behind the P&R”.

“This work will only increase the flood risk”.

“You need to look at the impact on Henlade – the air quality is a concern”.

Our Response – Archaeology will be considered in detail during the next phase of design work.

SCC, TDBC and the developer of the Employment Site are working with the Environment Agency (EA) to determine appropriate flood mitigation measures across the whole site. Any planning application will require the measures to have been determined and approved by the EA.

Initial air quality and noise modelling work has taken place as part of the business case development but more detailed work will be carried out as part of the planning application. Archaeological and environmental surveys will also be undertaken as part of this process.

5. Conclusion

The public consultation gave the public and stakeholders an opportunity to express their views on the proposed design of the scheme. This has allowed comments and concerns to be taken into consideration during further development of the scheme. Despite the interest in the scheme a limited number of comments were received and very few made specific representations about the design of the scheme.

The number of people that visited the drop in sessions, the number of questionnaires that were completed and the level of correspondence received suggest that the consultation was generally successful in providing a valuable opportunity to comment on the scheme.

APPENDIX 1

Publicity Materials



Consultation_Boards
.pdf



M5_J25_Consultatio
n_Leaflet.pdf



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Questionnaire J25
v1.pdf

APPENDIX 2

Attendees at the drop in sessions

