

TRANSPORT DECISIONS COMMITTEE – 11 FEBRUARY 2010

OXFORD, HIGHFIELD TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT SCHEME

Report by Head of Transport

Introduction

1. This report outlines investigations carried out into the feasibility of a trial closure of the Highfield area of Headington to through traffic. As a result of the investigation, a course of action is recommended for the development of a traffic management scheme which does not include consultation on closing the area to through traffic.

Background

2. The streets between London Road and Old Road in Headington (highlighted on the plan at Annex 1) have long been used as a through route by drivers wishing to avoid signalised junctions at Windmill Road or Gipsy Lane, but traffic has increased in the area in recent years due to developments at the Churchill Hospital site. These streets cover the Highfield area and a part of New Headington (referred to hereafter as the Highfield Area).
3. Approximately 70% of traffic on the highlighted streets is through traffic. The dominant flows are from SE to NW and vice versa, between the Cowley and Marston areas. Looking at northbound flows, which are slightly heavier than southbound during the 7am to 7pm period, average weekday 12-hr flow northbound through the area is approx 2,500 vehicles. This compares with 3,000 and 4,200 northbound on Gipsy Lane and Windmill Road respectively, showing that, rightly or wrongly, the route through Highfield is an important link in the city's road network. Of the traffic exiting onto London Road via Lime Walk or Latimer Road, 70% exits from Lime Walk. Flows on Bickerton and Stapleton Road are much lower, with less than 30% of the flow on Lime Walk.
4. Lime Walk is straight and comparable in width with Windmill Road, and can accommodate parking on both sides with traffic usually passing in both directions, over much of its length. It is the obvious main choice for traffic as a through route, though Latimer Road is clearly used as an alternative to the northern part of Lime Walk, to avoid congestion.
5. Impatient and aggressive driving in the area can make conditions uncomfortable for pedestrians and cyclists, although there have been very few reported accidents in the area. There are, however, clusters of reported accidents (mainly minor) at the junctions with London Road and Old Road.

6. The county council has been in discussion with the Highfield Residents' Association (HRA) for several years, over a potential scheme for mitigating the impact of through traffic on the area. Developer funding money is available for such a scheme, but there has been a long-running debate over the degree to which the volume of through traffic should be reduced. Officers consider that a suitable traffic calming scheme would be effective in reducing speeds, whilst having a modest impact in reducing traffic volume. However, HRA would like to see a greater reduction in through traffic. Various options have been discussed and there has been pressure from HRA to consult on a range of options including significantly restricting access through Highfield.
7. Officers recognise that there would be benefits to closing or severely restricting the area to through traffic. In addition to the main benefit, which is improved amenity for residents, it would also make the area quieter and more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists, and may encourage some traffic to stay on the ring-road and not go through Headington at all. Additionally, fewer turning movements may improve safety at the junctions with Old Road and London Road. However, officers have always had serious concerns about the potential impact on the surrounding road network, principally in connection with the impact on bus reliability. There are also concerns about residential amenity in streets that would take the additional traffic. Without expensive modelling work it would be impossible to predict this impact unless a trial was carried out.
8. In September 2009 officers agreed to investigate the feasibility of a month-long trial closure of Highfield to through traffic, in order to assess the impact on the surrounding road network and public transport services in the area. Some informal consultation was carried out with groups and organisations likely to be affected.

Feasibility and Informal Consultation

Location and type of closure

9. Officers investigated where closures might be placed, taking into account the need to provide space for vehicles to turn. At first it was thought that leaving a minor route through the area via New High Street and Kennett Road might be acceptable, as it would probably not be an attractive route for the bulk of the through traffic, but it quickly became apparent that this would be very unpopular with the residents of those streets. It would also increase turning movements within the Headington shopping area, which would be undesirable in the context of the objectives of the current London Road scheme.
10. Closures at the junctions with either London Road or Old Road may be least confusing to drivers and would have little or no impact on parking provision. However, objections to closures at the London Road end were raised by businesses and organisations whose major access routes are via London Road. It was found that closure points at either London Road or Old Road would not provide sufficient turning space for refuse and delivery vehicles and in some of the roads would force these vehicles to reverse over distances that would pose a potential safety risk.

11. Potentially acceptable closure points are indicated on the plan at Annex 2. However, these would still be very difficult for larger vehicles turning at the end of Bickerton Road, even if some parking was removed. While refuse vehicle drivers have tested this and found it possible to turn, delivery drivers who may be less skilled and not familiar with the area may find it very difficult and end up reversing back the entire length of Bickerton Road, and out onto Old Road. An alternative might involve a closure point part way along Latimer Road, immediately north of The Brambles, but this would have the disadvantage of splitting Latimer Road in two (causing confusion for emergency services and delivery drivers) requiring parking to be removed, and causing vehicles to use a non-adopted road for turning.
12. None of the closure points identified at Annex 2 conform to the standards set in the county council's Residential Roads Design Guide, which specify a greater width required for turning. They would also have the disbenefit of splitting All Saints Road, which may cause confusion for emergency services and delivery vehicles. However, no other potentially suitable alternatives were identified.
13. Although it has been suggested by residents that non-permanent closures could be used to enable emergency access, these are not considered acceptable to the emergency services. Gates present problems over access to keys. Fire crews carry cutters and break locks, which enables access but then presents maintenance problems. Rising bollards have a reputation for being unreliable, and have high ongoing maintenance costs, which would cause a strain on electrical services revenue budgets.

Informal consultation

14. Discussions were held with representatives from bus operators, local hospitals, the emergency services, Oxford Brookes University, and Headington Committee for Development Action (representing residents' associations and other organisations in Headington). Network management, maintenance and traffic signals colleagues were consulted
15. Bus operators had serious concerns about the impact on bus reliability, particularly on routes along Windmill Road, which could experience an increase in traffic flow of over 20% if the Highfield routes were closed. The resulting delay to buses may seriously affect the ability of the number 10 service and the newly extended 700 hospital service to meet their timetables. Signals at the junction of Windmill Road and London Road could be adjusted to help reduce queueing in Windmill Road, but this would lead to additional delays on London Road, affecting many more bus passengers.

16. The Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals Trust (ORHT) was particularly concerned about the impact of the closures on their inter-site staff shuttle bus, which runs at 15-minute intervals throughout the day between the John Radcliffe and Churchill sites, via Lime Walk and the Osler Road bus gate. Journey time surveys carried out by Oxfordshire County Council found that off-peak, journey times were almost equivalent using Gypsy Lane, but that in the peak, this route was slower by up to 18 minutes.
17. In recent weeks the ORHT has put forward a proposed trial redirection of outbound general traffic from the Churchill Hospital in the afternoon peak period, so that Roosevelt Drive becomes the principal exit onto Old Road. This is to reduce the unreliability of the park and ride bus services and would operate for a limited period initially. The county council, whilst having no direct veto of this proposal, supports the trial and officers are working closely with ORHT and bus company representatives on this. One potential positive benefit such a proposal could have is to reduce the flow of traffic through the Highfield area in the afternoon peak period. The county council will be monitoring the effects and liaising with local people as the trial progresses.
18. Concerns were expressed by residents in other parts of Headington, especially the Quarry area, that closure of the Highfield routes might lead to additional through traffic in their streets. This is a risk, but it could be monitored as part of a trial.
19. The Fire & Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service were both strongly concerned that closures and the necessary diversions would lead to an unacceptable delay in emergency response times, which could cost lives, both within Highfield and across a wider area of the city. This is not specifically related to the position of the Oxford Ambulance Station, which is in Churchill Drive, but because of the nature and length of the diversion routes, which are congested at peak times, and would become more so because of the closures. Even on a blue light emergency, progress can be slow along congested routes and at very busy junctions such as that of Windmill and London Road. The potential impact on emergency response times is not something that most people would want to see put to the test as part of a trial road closure.
20. The South Central Ambulance Service were also concerned about the impact on their day-to-day operational efficiency, as crews are stationed during the day at the John Radcliffe Hospital and return to the Station during the day for necessary maintenance, breaks, etc. Emergency ambulances are fitted with transponders which allow them to use the Osler Road bus gate, making Lime Walk the shortest route between the sites. Patient Transport ambulances, on the other hand, are not permitted to use the bus gate.

Conclusions

21. For several years, developer funding has been allocated by the county council for a traffic management scheme in the area to mitigate the impact of nearby development, and officers would like to progress a scheme as soon as possible. However, officers do not consider that the extent of the likely

benefits of the scheme in terms of the county council's strategic transport objectives is sufficient to warrant the risk to emergency access posed by closing the area to through traffic as part of any scheme. Although it would be interesting to carry out a trial to test the impact on the surrounding road network, regardless of whether the impact was judged to be acceptable, it is unlikely that a permanent closure could be justified. On this basis, officers believe it would be wrong to carry out a trial. The ORHT proposal for the Churchill Hospital could potentially take some pressure off the streets in the Highfield area, at least for parts of the day.

22. Officers would like to be able to progress a range of up to five options, for consultation with residents and stakeholders. These options would not include closing the area to through traffic. They *may* include raised entry treatments, raised table junctions, pedestrian crossings, narrowings, speed cushions, minor rearrangements of parking and turning bans with the possibility of a closure of All Saints Road, which would not prevent through traffic but would deliver some quieter community space in the heart of the area.

Financial and Staffing implications

23. Developer funding of £131,305 is secured and has been allocated for this scheme. There is no time limit by which this must be spent. The contributions are as follows:
 - £92,805 is available from a contribution related to developments at the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital Site. The terms of use are: '(4.2) to use the sum towards the cost of implementing measures to protect the streets around the centre from parking including the enforcement and administration of any parking controls, transport improvements in the area and /or otherwise encourage use of modes of transport other than the car to reach the Land.'
 - The remainder relates to development in Latimer Road and has terms which are more specific, stating (8) shall not use the £38,500 of the sum for any purpose other than towards safety improvement measures in Latimer Road and All Saints Road and where required by the County Council other traffic management and safety measures in the area.' Although the development has been completed for some time, the developer has not yet paid this sum, and the county council is involved in legal proceedings to recover it.
24. The scheme could be implemented using existing and planned staffing resource.

RECOMMENDATION

25. The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to authorise officers to develop a range of options for consultation on a traffic management scheme for the Highfield area, limiting these options only to those that do not involve closing the area to through traffic.

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Background papers: Oxfordshire County Council Residential Roads Design Guide

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Annex 1



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Centre = 454335 E 206662 N

Highfield Area



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