

Individual Executive Member Decision

Title of Report:	Thatcham Level Crossing Improvements
Report to be considered by:	Individual Executive Member Decision
Date on which Decision is to be taken:	8 July 2013
Forward Plan Ref:	ID2684

Purpose of Report: To review the results of a consultation into proposed improvements on the southbound approach to Thatcham Level Crossing involving the creation of a right turn lane into the Royal Mail delivery office and industrial area.

Recommended Action: That the scheme detailed on drawing no. 81560/009/03 in Appendix A be implemented.

Reason for decision to be taken: To improve traffic flow in the vicinity of Thatcham Level crossing.

Other options considered: The provision of a bridge has been considered and is discussed within the body of the report.

Key background documentation: SMA Report - Thatcham Level Crossing Study 2012.

Portfolio Member Details	
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Implications

Policy:	The scheme has been identified in the Highways and Transport Capital Programme.
Financial:	The improvement scheme will cost approximately £70k which will be paid from existing S106 contributions. In addition to the works the opportunity will be taken to maintain the footway and carriageway which will cost an additional £30k funded from the Local Transport Plan Capital Grant.
Personnel:	None
Legal/Procurement:	The scheme will be procured through the Highways Term Contract.
Property:	None
Risk Management:	A full risk management plan has been developed for this project.

Is this item relevant to equality?	Please tick relevant boxes		Yes	No
Does the policy affect service users, employees or the wider community and:				
• Is it likely to affect people with particular protected characteristics differently?			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Is it a major policy, significantly affecting how functions are delivered?			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Will the policy have a significant impact on how other organisations operate in terms of equality?			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to functions that engagement has identified as being important to people with particular protected characteristics?			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to an area with known inequalities?			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Outcome (Where one or more 'Yes' boxes are ticked, the item is relevant to equality)				
Relevant to equality - Complete an EIA available at www.westberks.gov.uk/eia			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Not relevant to equality			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Consultation Responses

Members:

Leader of Council:	Cllr Gordon Lundie has no comments and fully supports the recommendation.
Overview & Scrutiny Management Commission Chairman:	Cllr Brian Bedwell accepts the findings discussed in the report and therefore supports the recommendations
Ward Members:	Cllrs Roger Croft and Dominic Boeck fully support the proposed scheme and recommendation.
Opposition Spokesperson:	Cllr Keith Woodhams' comments can be seen in Appendix C along with an Officer's response.
Local Stakeholders:	Local residents and businesses have been consulted as detailed in Appendix C.

Officers Consulted: Mark Edwards, Andrew Garratt.

Trade Union: N/A

Is this item subject to call-in?	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No: <input type="checkbox"/>
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Supporting Information

1. Background

- 1.1 Congestion in the vicinity of Thatcham Level Crossing is a long standing issue within West Berkshire. Locally it is the cause of air pollution and driver frustration in an area of Thatcham that has seen significant residential and industrial development in recent years. Of particular note is the development of the old MoD site with 750 residential properties to the west of the level crossing.
- 1.2 The level crossing forms part of the main east-west line between London and Penzance. It is located immediately adjacent to Thatcham Rail Station and is situated to the south east of Thatcham on Crookham Hill approximately 300m to the south of its junction with Pipers Way/Station Rd. Pipers Way connects to the A4 (Eastbound) and Station Road connects to Thatcham's main southern residential areas and the Town Centre
- 1.3 Following a successful Member's bid by the Local Ward Members; a study was commissioned in 2012 to consider possible improvements to reduce congestion on the approach to the crossing. The study was undertaken by consultants Stuart Michael Associates and can be read at:
 - <http://www.westberks.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=31766>
- 1.4 The study considers a number of possible improvements including the provision of a bridge, the use of variable message signs and interactive signs to warn approaching motorists that the barriers are down along with physical traffic management improvements to improve traffic flow.
- 1.5 The provision of a bridge was found not to be practical due to design/financial constraints. Variable message signage on the approaches to the level crossing to warn when the barriers would be down was also found to have its difficulties. This was due to the fact that the signs would have to be placed a considerable distance from the level crossing in a position that motorists could make a choice about their route. The distance of the signs from the crossing would mean that in many instances if the motorist passed a sign informing them the barrier is down, by the time they reach the level crossing the barrier would in fact be raised.
- 1.6 A number of improvement options recommended within the study are being taken forward. Two of these are being progressed with Network Rail including a review of the stopping point for trains on Thatcham Station which will prevent some trains from overhanging the level crossing when stopped; reducing the time the barrier is down. Also as part of the electrification programme Network Rail will be reviewing the striking points which dictate when the barriers are lowered when a train is approaching. The review will consider whether the new technology can offer efficiencies to increase the barrier 'up' time for road users.
- 1.7 Additionally the report identified the improvements to the junction with the Royal Mail delivery office and industrial area, as detailed in Appendix A. This scheme represents a physical traffic management improvement that is relatively easy to implement, does not require third party involvement, can be funded from existing S106 funds and will deliver immediate improvements. The scheme will provide a right turn lane into the industrial area, which means that traffic waiting to turn right

will no longer block the queue of traffic on the southbound approach to the level crossing.

- 1.8 Traffic surveys taken during January 2012 revealed that the barriers can be down for up to 9 minutes at any one time and are down for approximately 39% to 51% of the peak hours. It can be particularly frustrating for motorists who wait in the queue of traffic for the barrier to raise only to have to wait behind a vehicle turning right into the industrial area. Surveys indicate that up to 26 vehicles turn right into the industrial area during the peak hour.

2. Consultation

- 2.1 A consultation exercise was undertaken during March and April 2013 which involved the delivery of 150 leaflets to local businesses and residents. Leaflets were also sent to Thatcham Ward Members and Thatcham Town Council. The leaflet offered an overview of the Level Crossing Study and requested comments on the proposed Royal Mail delivery junction improvement scheme. The leaflet can be seen in Appendix B. The scheme was also publicised through the local media.
- 2.2 A total of 30 responses were received to the consultation and these are summarised in Appendix C along with an officer response. Two responses were received in support of the proposed scheme. The scheme has also received the support of the Local Ward Members. However, the general feeling from respondents is that a bridge is the only solution to the traffic problems at the level crossing, that the proposed junction improvement scheme (when compared to the provision of a bridge) will not resolve the queuing problems southbound and will have no benefit for northbound motorists.
- 2.3 Responses from Thatcham Town Council and from Councillor Keith Woodhams (shadow Portfolio Holder for Highways) can also be seen in Appendix C and reflect the general feeling that a bridge is the only solution.

3. Equalities Impact Assessment Outcomes

- 3.1 The decision will not impact on people with particular protected characteristics and no Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 It is accepted that a bridge would remove the congestion at the level crossing; however there are a number of practical, financial, environmental, engineering and aesthetic reasons why it is not possible to provide a bridge in the foreseeable future. These reasons are detailed below.
- 4.2 Given the impending electrification, the current minimum clearance over a rail line is 5.2m. Along with the bridge construction this would mean the total structure height would be 7.2m (over 23.5 ft). This would have a significant visual impact on the surrounding environment.
- 4.3 The ramps on the approach to the bridge would be substantial and, given the current highway design standards, in order to achieve the required gradient on the approach, the Pipers Lane/Station Road roundabout would have to be raised by approximately 2.9m (almost 10ft). This in turn would have a knock on effect on the surrounding roads and accesses onto them.

- 4.4 The provision of a bridge would inevitably improve the attractiveness of this route to many road users that currently travel through Newbury or Aldermaston. It is considered that this increase could be significant compared to the number of vehicles currently using the route. This gives rise to concerns about additional air and noise pollution through the residential areas of south Thatcham. It also raises the issue of road safety concerns on Thornford Road and Crookham Hill. It is possible that the provision of a bridge would require a complete upgrade of this route to accommodate the additional traffic at further significant expense.
- 4.5 Any bridge at this location would need to span both the River Kennet and the Canal in addition to the rail line. A study undertaken in 2004 estimated the cost of such a structure at £20 million. To raise this level of funding, the Council would have to apply to the Department for Transport for Major Scheme funding. Given that this road is not on the strategic road network, and although the local benefits are plain to see, the benefits to the strategic road network will be minimal. Indeed the environmental issues associated with the increase in traffic along this route may well cancel out the traffic flow benefits. This proposal would therefore be given low priority against other improvements on the strategic network.
- 4.6 It is also accepted that the proposed scheme detailed in Appendix A will have limited benefit when compared to the provision of a bridge. However, site observations and the survey information demonstrates that the proposed scheme will remove the issue of right turning vehicles blocking the southbound traffic queue, will help improve traffic flow through the level crossing and reduce driver frustration.
- 4.7 It is therefore Officer's views that the proposed scheme will offer the best value for money given the financial and practical limitations of other improvement options. It is proposed that the scheme be progressed and constructed during the school summer holidays to minimise impact during construction.

Appendices

Appendix A – Drawing No. 81560/009/3;
Appendix B – Consultation Leaflet;
Appendix C – Consultation Responses.