

Environment, Development and Transport Committee

Item No.

Report title:	Norwich Western Link Project
Date of meeting:	8 July 2016
Responsible Chief Officer:	Tom McCabe, Executive Director, Community and Environmental Services
Strategic impact A report to Committee in September 2014 set out that 'The [Western] Link would provide improved highway infrastructure in response to concerns about existing traffic impacts on communities, and would provide the potential to improve linkages between housing and employment areas, enhancing job opportunities'. This report further considers the potential that an intervention would provide taking into account other strategic factors, including delivery of the NDR (now in construction) and delivery of the North Tuddenham to Easton dualling of the A47 (now funded and being progressed by Highways England).	

Executive summary

<p>A cross-party Member Group, agreed by Committee, first met in January 2016 and updates have been provided to Committee by the Group in March and May 2016. A report by Mouchel is attached at https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/-/media/5D5F049C601A494C8B67166A6CB11A73. This provides an appraisal of potential solutions to the transport issues in the western quadrant of Norwich and considers the next steps in progressing a project that could resolve those issues.</p> <p>The Mouchel report considers the strategic background to the proposal of a Norwich Western Link, the strength of the evidence and policy supporting it, the gaps in the appraisal to date, and the possible difficulties in delivering the various scheme options and alignments. The report also notes the importance of the environmental designation of the River Wensum as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the habitats directive. Discussions have been held with the Environment Agency and Natural England, and neither agency has ruled out the possibility of an acceptable scheme being devised.</p> <p>A tentative programme envisages some preliminary work prior to the opening of the NDR and work required after the NDR is opened and following a period of monitoring. This would also need to take regard of A47 improvements being progressed by Highways England (with construction currently suggested to start in 2020), the Food Hub proposal, and the update of the Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP). This report therefore recommends options to be progressed in the short-term over the next 18 months, in 6 month phases, with appropriate "review gateways" before further work is progressed.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That Committee agrees to the proposed staged approach to deliver the project, taking into account the timescales set out and with a requirement to receive update reports at the completion of each stage/milestone.2. Linked to above, the Committee agrees the first step in the process, to gather further evidence to fully understand the extent of traffic problems in the Norwich western quadrant.3. Committee agrees to the funding proposal for up to £425,000 to be drawn down from the A47 reserve to fund study works up to June 2017 as set out in
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1. Proposal

- 1.1. The background for Norwich Western Link Project was set out in a report to Committee at its September 2014 meeting. The report indicated that further work could be completed early in 2015 following decisions by Government around funding of the A47 improvements that were anticipated in December 2014. Although that announcement was positive, it would have been premature to bring further reports to Committee ahead of more detailed knowledge of Highway England's proposals for the A47 (Easton to North Tuddenham section in particular) and without confirmation of the funding and more certainty of delivery of the NDR.
- 1.2. A Member Group, which was agreed by Committee and is cross-party consisting of Tim East (Lib Dem), Bill Borrett (Con), Stuart Clancy (Con), Bert Bremner (Lab), Margaret Dewsbury (Con) & Shelagh Gurney (Con), first met early in January 2016. This timing took account of the NDR construction start and the early stages of design of the A47 Easton to North Tuddenham dual carriageway improvements by Highways England. This has been followed by meetings in March and May, with updates made to EDT Committee.
- 1.3. As agreed with the Member Working Group, a report was commissioned from Mouchel to complete an appraisal of potential solutions to the transport issues in the western quadrant of Norwich and to consider the next steps in progressing a project that could resolve those issues. The report by Mouchel is provided at <https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/-/media/5D5F049C601A494C8B67166A6CB11A73>.
- 1.4. The report considers the strategic background to the proposal of a Norwich Western Link (NWL), the strength of the evidence and policy supporting it, the gaps in the appraisal to date, and the possible difficulties in delivering the various scheme options and alignments. It concludes by setting out a series of timetabled actions to support the next stage of development for the project.
The report notes the importance of the environmental designation of the River Wensum as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the habitats directive. Discussions have been held with the Environment Agency and Natural England, and neither agency has ruled out the possibility of an acceptable scheme being devised.
The report details that for a scheme to be delivered, a major scheme business case would need to be prepared for submission to either the New Anglia Local Transport Body or to the DfT. It would need to set out a compelling case for the scheme and must provide evidence that:
 - There is a real problem to be solved.
 - The scheme is part of a coherent wider strategy.
 - A full range of options has been considered, and the best scheme has been selected.
 - The scheme represents high or very high value for money.
 - The scheme is feasible and affordable, and can be delivered within the planned timescale.

A tentative programme envisages some preliminary work prior to the opening of the NDR, with the main appraisal taking place after 2018 leading to a Full

Business Case in 2022. This would need to take due regard of plans for A47 improvements being progressed by Highways England, the progression of the Food Hub, and the update of the Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP).

- 1.5. The Mouchel report also includes recommendations to consider the following next steps in the delivery process:
 - 1.5.1. To prepare a robust case for planning consent, and to satisfy-DfT expectations, there needs to be a focus on establishing a strong evidence base to identify the transportation and environmental problems, particularly those existing upon completion of the NDR. This would then underpin the development and further assessment of objectives and options. However, it is probably best not to fully progress compilation of this evidence until mid-2018 when the impacts of the NDR and mitigation measures are known. There should then be clarity regarding the A47 dualling, the Food Hub and the GNLP.
 - 1.5.2. There are options that could be progressed in the short term (up to December 2017) and in the medium to long term (January 2017 to December 2021). In the latter timescale (to December 2021), the gathering of robust evidence forms the basis of the options (Ref A.2), however, other key options worth noting include:
 - a. Traffic modelling and economic appraisal work (Ref A.3) to provide an assessment of the implications and benefits associated with changes to local traffic and strategic traffic. This would include updated and 'real' traffic data following the opening of the NDR and implementation of mitigation measures, and the inclusion of options for the A47, Food Hub and site allocations.
 - b. Assessment work to understand the implications of future development and how any intervention would be included within the emerging GNLP (Ref A.5 and A.6).
 - c. Developing a robust set of objectives for a transport intervention (Ref A.8) based on the evidence gathered.
 - d. Developing a number of options (Ref A.9) that meet the agreed objectives. This would consider all options including non-car (ie walking, cycling and public transport and highway and traffic management options).
 - e. Agreeing and completing an appropriate assessment of the environmental impacts (Ref A.11) based on the options that could be progressed. Based on feedback from Environment Agency and Natural England, this could be based on notional bridge designs.
 - 1.5.3. However, Mouchel has recommended a number of options to be progressed in the short-term over the next 18 months in 6 month phases with appropriate "review gateways" before further work is progressed. The recommended options are as follows:

July 2016 to December 2016

- a) Develop a local strategy (Ref B.5) to demonstrate commitment to address

existing local problems and to feed in to the GNLP.

- b) Undertake initial traffic modelling (Ref B.7a) and appraisal using the existing traffic model and broad assumptions to test the economic viability of a link scheme.
- c) Undertake a Quality Audit review of the currently proposed NDR traffic management mitigation measures (Ref B.2). This is to ensure the full benefit of those measures can be maximised to address local problems.
- d) Develop a full monitoring and evaluation plan (Ref B.3). This would set out a plan to fully capture the transportation and environmental problems to ensure a robust evidence base can be collated at a later stage. It would include a review and potentially an enhancement to, the NDR monitoring and evaluation plan, and would set out the likely timescales for environmental surveys.
- e) Engage with Highways England regarding the A47 improvements (Ref B.4) to discuss route options and junction strategy to ensure it does not preclude any future scheme, and also to discuss the timescales associated with the second iteration of the Road Investment Strategy.
- f) Identify work required to respond to funding opportunities (Ref B.10). This would involve identifying the priority of intervention in the western quadrant compared to interventions elsewhere in the county and develop a plan to ensure the County Council and partners can effectively react to future funding opportunities such as the Access Fund and any future rounds of the Local Majors fund.
- g) During this time, NCC should take advice from legal specialists to determine the level of requirement for the EIA/SEA (Ref. B11)

Mouchel suggest that a gateway review takes place to review the outcomes of the work above and agree the detail of the next phase of work.

1.5.4. January 2017 to June 2017

- a) Undertake work to provide input to the GNLP and NATS review (Ref B.6). This would assess how a Western Link intervention would align with, and benefit from the emerging GNLP, and to identify its role in the update to the NATS. This would support future work as suggested in option ref A.5 and A.6.
- b) Explore engineering solutions (Ref B.15) to be discussed with Environment Agency and Natural England so feasibility and possible mitigation can be considered.
- c) Identify and agree the likely appropriate assessment (Ref B.12) to clarify what level of EIA / SEA is needed, and agree a scoping report with Environment Agency and Natural England, which would include consideration of effects on the Wensum SAC and the development of mitigation measures.
- d) Outline the scope of work required to prepare a DfT WebTAG compliant Strategic Outline Business Case (Ref B.14).

Mouchel suggest a gateway review take place at this point to review the work done, in particular the implications of the GNLP and the feasibility of agreeing an acceptable robust strategic case and engineering solution, before further work is progressed.

1.5.5. July 2017 to December 2017

- a) Undertake initial traffic modelling (Ref B.7b) using the updated model to undertake testing of options identified through the local strategy and GNLP / NATS work stages (B.5 and B.6). This would inform later modelling (as per option Ref A.3).
- b) Undertake initial design and costing exercise for identified options (B.8) to identify the likely level of funding to be required.
- c) Undertake an initial economic appraisal (Ref B.9) using the outputs from B.7b and B.8 to identify likely benefit to cost ratios and value for money.

Mouchel suggest a gateway review be undertaken at this stage to consider the findings and consider possible next steps.

- 1.5.6. If a strategic case is made, it would make sense to promote any scheme as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project, and seek to obtain a Development Consent Order, (as per the NDR), as this is likely to provide a quicker route to construction. It is likely that this would need to follow on behind Highways England's proposal for dualling the A47.

2. Evidence

- 2.1. The 2014 Scoping Report advised that a structured investigation of the issues and the need for intervention would be necessary in further stages of the scheme development. This latest Mouchel report provides a start in that process by completing a high level review with some early discussions with communities and consideration of the current and future issues that need to be addressed.
- 2.2. The Mouchel report assesses the evidence base for a scheme and formulates proposals in order to progress the project, taking this evidence into account. Their recommendations set out in section 1 above are reflective of this.

In the report Mouchel have detailed the policy and strategy context, detailed the current situation and how it is likely to change in future, and made a preliminary assessment of the need for a Western Link scheme. They note that traffic volumes and patterns will change on opening of the NDR, and that further work would be required at that stage to update traffic modelling in order to provide robust evidence for a scheme. They have formulated preliminary objectives for a scheme based on current information, listed a wide range of potential transport interventions, and reviewed previous work on scheme options and value for money.

Mouchel note the importance of the designated Wensum Special Area of Conservation, and have detailed the steps necessary to demonstrate that any scheme crossing it could be acceptable. The importance of this issue has been

highlighted by Mouchel's consultations with Natural England and the Environment Agency.

2.3. The link road and the Local Plan

A review of the Local Plan for Broadland, Norwich and South Norfolk has recently begun. Elsewhere on the Committee meeting agenda is a report on the governance arrangements for this process through the Greater Norwich Development Partnership.

Important infrastructure for transport, such as a Norwich Western Link Project, is expected to be addressed within the plan-making process, and it is likely that there will be a need to develop complementary and/or shared evidence particularly on sustainability, environmental and traffic modelling issues.

The timetable for the production of this Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP) envisages full public consultation in 2017, pre-submission publication in 2019, with examination and adoption in 2020. Consequently there could be an overlap with the timetable for the development of any preferred scheme for the Western Link project.

2.4. Feedback from previous and recent meetings with Parish Councils

During the development and progression of the NDR scheme there has been significant consultation with Parish Councils. Views on the NDR have been mixed; however, many Parish Councils in the Western quadrant have consistently expressed concern at the potential adverse effects of the NDR and their wish for a Western Link scheme.

As part of Mouchel's study, two 'drop-in' sessions were held in March 2016 for Parish Councillors to obtain updated views. Concerns were expressed about traffic 'rat-running' through villages, lack of connectivity between the A47 and the NDR, numbers of HGVs using routes through villages, even where weight limits and width restrictions are signed, the lack of footways/pedestrian routes within the area, additional traffic which will arise from planned residential developments and the proposed Food Hub near Easton, and lack of public transport connections around Norwich, e.g to the University and Hospital areas.

There were mixed views about the likely effects of the opening of the NDR. Some specific issues were raised including the safety and capacity of the Longwater junction, and congestion due to the single point of access for Queen's Hills.

A written representation was received from the Wensum Valley Alliance raising various issues about a Western Link road and also about a potential bus service.

It is clear the level of support for a western link is mixed and directly related to the route options. The consultation with Parish Councils undertaken in March 2016 highlighted a number of issues and various councils restated their support for a western link subject to the "right" route being progressed.

2.5. Summary of feedback from recent meetings with Environment Agency (EA) and Natural England (NE)

Mouchel also consulted with both the Environment Agency and Natural England, using the Scoping Study options as a basis for discussion.

Due to uncertainty about the nature of any structure over the Wensum, the EA noted that all options would have “Very Large Adverse” impacts, as previously assessed. Nevertheless, the EA did not suggest that the principle of a Wensum Link is unacceptable to them and believe that they could support a crossing with sufficient mitigation and careful design. Natural England highlighted similar concerns, also raising more general points relating to the diversity of species within the Wensum corridor which would require consideration, not necessarily associated with the SAC designation.

Deliverability would therefore hinge around finding a feasible engineering solution to crossing the River Wensum, compatible with the conservation objectives of the SAC designation.

3. Financial Implications

3.1. The potential costs of the specialist work relating to the phases detailed in Section 1.5 above are given as ranges due to uncertainty at this stage:-

	Phasing	Timing	Estimated cost	Details of work involved
3.1.1	Short term – next 6 months	July 16 to Dec 16	£75k to £225k	As per paragraph 1.5.3
3.1.2	Short term 6 to 12 months	Jan 17 to June 17	£85k to £200k	As per paragraph 1.5.4
3.1.3	Short term 12 to 18 months	July 17 to Dec 17	£125k to £250k	As per paragraph 1.5.5
	Total estimated cost of specialist activity during the next 18 months (excluding NCC costs) July 16 – Dec 17		<u>£285k to £675k</u>	

There is currently no allocated funding to undertake this work. Because the scheme is at the early stages of development it would not be eligible for any additional support from the Governments major local transport schemes funding.

Members have previously agreed to establish a £1m reserve to support work on the A47, and could decide to allocate some of that funding to support this work.

3.2. In the longer term (January 2018 to December 2021), subject to the outcomes of the work undertaken it is possible that further funding will need to be identified. This is likely to involve funding to conduct robust assessments and gathering of

evidence (as per paragraph 1.5.2) and undertaking further development work to prepare business case and planning documentation. Any request for further funding would be the subject of a future Committee paper.

4. Issues, risks and innovation

4.1. There are significant issues with progressing the project, and these have been discussed with legal advisers. The environmental designation of the Wensum as a Special Area of Conservation necessitates detailed work and liaison with English Nature and Natural England to develop potentially acceptable proposals. Also a structured process is required to demonstrate the need for a scheme, to develop appropriate objectives for it, to test proposals against these, and to obtain necessary planning consents. Dealing with all of these issues will not be simple, and the timetable constraints and linkages with the following will require particular attention:

- NDR impact on traffic (including associated schemes that are Requirements in the DCO)
- HE A47 dualling from Easton to North Tuddenham (and possible associated improvements at Longwater junction);
- Additional access to existing Queen's Hills housing development;
- HE Thickthorn improvement;
- Emerging Local Plan update (and growth not considered in current JCS);
- Details relating to proposed Food Hub (and Local Development Order).

To mitigate the risks associated with the above, a progressive staged approach is proposed, so that expenditure is committed in a progressive and phased way.

Officer Contact

If you have any questions about matters contained in this paper or want to see copies of any assessments, eg equality impact assessment, please get in touch with:

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