

Environment, Development and Transport Service Committee

Item No.

Report title:	Wensum Valley Link
Date of meeting:	18 September 2014
Responsible Chief Officer:	Tom McCabe
Strategic impact The Wensum Valley Link would provide improved highway infrastructure in response to local concerns about existing traffic impacts on communities, and would provide the potential to improve linkages between housing and employment areas, enhancing job opportunities.	

Executive summary

Recommendations:

- 1) To note the outcome of the initial scoping report (Appendix 1), this has considered 13 options for road schemes as well as a public transport alternative.
- 2) To consider the timeliness of feasibility work, which is impacted on by the timing of government decisions in relation to potential investment improvements to the A47 and the delivery of the NDR.
- 3) To agree that the project brief for the next phase of feasibility work includes consideration of wider Public Transport and Non-Motorised User benefits (as part of NATS), and that in-combination complementary measures to reduce traffic on the existing routes.
- 4) That Committee agrees the timing of a further report in 2015 that provides an update in relation to the A47 and the Government's Autumn Statement announcement, and whether this report should be before or after a decision by the Secretary of State on the delivery of the NDR.

1. Proposal

- 1.1. In 2005, as part of the development of the NDR project, Cabinet agreed that the NDR should be progressed from the A47 at Postwick to the east of Norwich to the A1067. The main reason for not including a link across the Wensum Valley was due to its status as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), protected due to its international importance in biodiversity conservation.
- 1.2. Separate to this process, a Full Council motion was agreed to continue the delivery of the NDR as quickly as possible and to commission a report to complete a link across the Wensum Valley from the A1067 to the A47. The NDR is currently progressing through its public examination.
- 1.3. An initial scoping report to consider options for a possible route from the A1067 to the A47 west of Norwich has now also been completed. The report is at Appendix 1.
- 1.4. However, since the Full Council motion was made, the very successful A47 campaign has resulted in the Department for Transport (DfT) commissioning a Feasibility Study for the A47, which is due to report in the autumn. Work on this has led to uncertainty regarding the potential for changes to the A47 between Easton and North Tuddenham. Subject to completion of the study work, this

length could potentially be included in the Highways Agency's programme for upgrading to a dual carriageway. Until an announcement is made, potentially as part of the Government's Autumn Statement in December, it is not possible to assess the route options with confidence, as the implications of the A47 being upgraded are significant, particularly in relation to the junction strategy for that section of the A47.

- 1.5. Committee is asked at this time to note the findings of the scoping report and to consider funding required to progress the next stages of work required, including comprehensive Environmental Assessment studies that would need to be completed. However in light of the uncertainty surrounding potential investment in the A47 and the current status of the NDR in the development process, there is a high degree of risk of incurring abortive costs if any work is started now.
- 1.6. It is proposed that the outcome of the DfT A47 study and the autumn statement are reviewed when known and a further update report to Committee is brought that can consider the implications and opportunities that may arise as a result. It is expected that this report can be progressed early in 2015, whereby the options considered in the current scoping report can be reviewed against the knowledge of the scope and timing of any possible improvements to the A47.
- 1.7. A further Committee report early in 2015 is likely to pre-date any announcements by the Secretary of State regarding the Development Consent Order for the NDR. However, as set out in the current scoping report, it is an assumption in the traffic modeling completed that the Joint Core Strategy, which includes the NDR, is delivered. Therefore Committee is asked to consider whether it wishes to receive a report ahead of the Secretary of State's decision regarding the NDR. The logic of a report ahead of the decision is that any further work will be ready to be delivered as soon as any NDR announcement is received.

2. Evidence

- 2.1. In all, 13 options for road schemes have been considered, as well as a public transport alternative, and they have been evaluated assuming delivery of the agreed Joint Core Strategy, which includes growth and the NDR. The evaluation has been made against 'sifting objectives', which include headings covering Strategic, Economic, Carbon, Socio-distributional Impacts, Local Environment, Well Being, Managerial, Financial and Commercial.
- 2.2. The detail of what each of these headings covers is provided in the scoping report, but the 'Strategic' heading provides a specific consideration of the impacts to local communities, taking into account the need case for the scheme to improve the situation for existing communities within the Wensum Valley corridor to the west of Norwich. This covers:
 1. Reduce adverse impacts in Taverham/Costessey area caused by traffic routing between the A47 and A1067
 2. Reduce adverse impacts in Ringland area caused by traffic routing between the A47 and A1067
 3. Reduce adverse impacts in Weston Longville/Hockering area caused by traffic routing between the A47 and A1067
 4. Accessibility to Queens Hills
 5. Sustainable transport opportunities – public transport, cycling and walking
 6. Potential to provide improvements to strategic connections
- 2.3. Whilst NCC has a good understanding of the issues from its earlier work and previous consultations, the Committee will note the advice in the scoping report that a structured investigation of problem identification and the need for intervention would be necessary in further stages of scheme development. That

structured investigation will also need to form part of the further work required.

- 2.4. It is not appropriate at this stage to provide clear guidance as to which options should be considered further as part of the next stage of feasibility work, as they perform differently for each of the objectives. There has also been no consultation completed or economic appraisal.
- 2.5. It is appropriate that any further work should compare all options set out in the Scoping Report with a Do Nothing scenario, and should also include the Public Transport option (or a variant of this). Although not included in detail in the Scoping Report (Appendix 1), it is also suggested that a further option to make further improvements to the Lenwade to Honingham link is considered. This link has already been improved, following a decision by Cabinet in 2005, and it is due to be reclassified later in 2014 as a B class road within the County Council's Route Hierarchy.
- 2.6. It is also recommended that wider opportunities are included in any further work undertaken. This could include the potential to support and improve public transport and non-motorised users (NMU) provision, particularly where it supports the delivery of the Norwich Area Transportation Strategy Implementation Plan. This could include a review of the park and ride sites, their locations, and provision of the associated bus services, as well as the provision of Bus Rapid Transit and improved Core Bus Route services, and any opportunities in relation to cycling and walking benefits, including a review of the use and potential for Marriott's Way.
- 2.7. In addition to the above, it is also noteworthy that whilst an initial modelling exercise has been completed to review options at a very high level, this has not included detailed analysis of complementary traffic restrictions within the existing communities in order to discourage use of the existing routes and to focus traffic on the new proposed options. This is an area that will also need to be considered as part of the next stage of feasibility work.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1. The scoping report sets out preliminary estimates of capital costs of the highway infrastructure associated with each of the road options. These range in cost from £28m to £106m based on 2014 prices and whether the options are single or dual carriageway. All prices include a 44% 'optimism bias', which takes into account the high level nature of the costing and the relative lack of detail available at present in relation to establishing a cost.
- 3.2. Further work required to take forward the feasibility of the various options will be to complete a more detailed cost benefit analysis. It has not been possible to complete this as part of the initial scoping work due to the more detailed level of modelling and costing information required. As part of this, there is also a need to complete a more detailed assessment of the environmental impacts each option has on the Wensum Special Area of Conservation and the scale of mitigation measures that would be necessary.
- 3.3. Initial assessments of the timescales for completing the further feasibility work have been assessed by the Scoping Report consultant, and are set out in the scoping report (Appendix 1). In summary, the timescales are:
 - **Stage 1** – 6 months to one year depending on level of traffic information available at the start of the scheme
 - **Stage 2** – two years (needs at least one full year of environmental surveys)

- **Stage 3** – up to three years depending on the complexity and size of the scheme (assuming that the scheme gains planning permission and is not unduly challenged in Court)”

- 3.4. A high level assessment of the costs of delivering each of the stages set out above has also been completed. The details of this are included in the scoping report, which sets out a cost for each option based on an assumed fee total of 9% of the schemes capital cost. It can be seen therefore that the cost required to get an option to construction phase (i.e. completion of Stages 1 to 3 above) is likely to be in the range of £1.6m to £5.9m depending on which option is taken forwards.
- 3.5. The initial scoping report provides a high level view that the likelihood of funding from Government is low. This is based on the previous decisions by the Department for Transport regarding funding for the NDR, and the fact that they are already funding a significant proportion of the NDR. Any further feasibility work will also therefore need to consider the potential for any funding opportunities to deliver the Wensum Valley link. No revenue funding allowance has been made for this further work. If Officers were to proceed with the feasibility work, the cost would need to be considered as part of the revenue budget setting exercise and would add to the authority’s existing budget pressures.

4. Issues, risks and innovation

- 4.1. There are significant risks in carrying forward further work. The scoping report sets out three sequential ‘tests’ that need to be satisfied should a proposal be taken forward:
1. There must be no feasible alternative solutions to the plan or project which are less damaging to the affected European site(s)
 2. There must be ‘Imperative Reason of Overriding Public Interest’ for the plan or project to proceed
 3. All necessary compensatory measures must be secured to ensure that the overall coherence of the network of European sites is protected

The environmental designation of the Wensum Valley is such that there is a chance that no options can ultimately be delivered, particularly that will provide the relief considered necessary to the existing communities identified in the Strategic objectives (paragraph 2.2 above). All expenditure therefore needs to be considered in light of this overall risk to delivery.

- 4.2. Whether the NDR will be delivered will not be known until the Secretary of State makes the decision regarding the Development Consent Order for that project. This will then determine whether the NDR can be delivered having completed its statutory processes, which includes a 6 week legal challenge period after the Secretary of States decision has been published. Until that time, any work to consider a link across the Wensum Valley, especially that assumes the NDR as part of the highway network, will be at risk. It is expected that the Secretary of State will be in a position to make a decision regarding the NDR in the Spring of 2015, following completion of the current public examination and the completion of the Examining Authorities report.
- 4.3. Paragraph 1.4 above also sets out the current uncertainty relating the A47.

5. Background

- 5.1. At its meeting in April 2014, Cabinet received a report providing an update on the

