

Traffic Congestion on the Strategic Route Network in Slough

Findings of the Neighbourhoods and
Community Services Scrutiny Panel

6 March 2013



Preface

I am happy to introduce the findings of the Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel's Review into the issue of Traffic Congestion in Slough.

This Review took place during the Panel's meeting on Wednesday 6 March, with the aim to starting the discussion around potential solutions to the growing problem on our strategic route network.

The Report summarises these findings and looks to set in motion further in-depth investigation of possibilities for tackling the issues through improvements in public transport and working with schools and businesses in order to ease the pressure on our roads during peak periods.

On behalf of the Members of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel, I would like to thank all those who provided information in support of this Review.

Councillor Anna Wright
Vice Chair, Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel



Summary of Recommendations

The Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel would like to propose the following recommendations to Cabinet based on its investigations:

- 1) the formation of a Working Group to investigate possible solutions and report back on its findings;
- 2) that this Group include the relevant Cabinet Members (identifying those responsible for Transport and Education specifically) and a Representative from the Scrutiny Function (to be named at a later date); and
- 3) that the Group's Terms of Reference are published, for information, in the next agenda of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel.

Background to the Review

1. Introduction

1.1 At its meeting on the 10 January 2013, the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel agreed the Terms of Reference for a Review of traffic congestion on the strategic route network in Slough.

1.2 The Review was intended to look at the current situation in Slough and the potential impact of future development: commercial, residential and education on the strategic route network's ability to absorb the levels of traffic expected in the future.

2. The Approach

2.1 The Review was undertaken using the following Terms of Reference:

Title	Traffic Congestion in Slough
Membership	Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel
Chairing	Councillor Minhas
Lead Executive Member	Councillor Swindlehurst – Commissioner for Neighbourhoods and Renewal Councillor Munawar – Commissioner for Community and Leisure
Strategic Director	Roger Parkin – Strategic Director, Customer and Community Services
Officers	Joe Carter – Head of Transport Gillian Ralphs – Assistant Director, Enforcement and Regulatory Services Paul Stimpson – Head of Planning Policy Sarah Forsyth – Scrutiny Officer
Objectives	To seek realistic and effective suggestions and solutions to the traffic congestion issues facing Slough on the strategic route network.
Key Lines of Enquiry	1. To investigate the measures currently being undertaken to alleviate congestion on major traffic routes in Slough. 2. To investigate methods used elsewhere, in areas with similar problems.

	3. To consider the major challenges to improving traffic congestion in Slough, and what additional/alternative steps that could be taken to improve the situation.
Operation	The Panel will produce a report following evidence gathering at the meeting, which will be submitted to Cabinet for consideration of any recommendations.
Schedule of Meeting(s)	6 March 2013
Commissioned	10 January 2012

3. Findings

- 3.1 There is a significant amount of traffic using Slough's strategic route network. On a typical weekday approximately 65,000 people commute into and out of Slough for work, including 7,200 who work at Heathrow. Of those commuting into Slough, many are destined for major concentrations of employment in the town centre, along the A4 Bath Road corridor, Poyle Trading Estate and Wexham Park Hospital. Slough Trading Estate is a key destination, currently home to 17,000 employees.
- 3.2 The private car is the most common mode of travel to work, albeit less dominant amongst those who both live and work in Slough, who are more likely to have shorter commuting distances. This latter group rate walking as the second most popular mode of travel to work (20%). For those travelling into the Borough by public transport, the train is the most popular method, predominantly through Slough station.
- 3.3 In addition to employment, schools travel can account for a significant share of traffic and already contributes towards congestion levels. Traffic levels during the morning peak hour on Wexham Road and the A4 are typically 10% lower in school holidays. Nationally during the morning peak time one in five journeys is taking a child to school; in Slough this is one in three journeys. Journeys where parents are taking children to school by car and then going on to work is one aspect, but there is also a significant proportion of parents who drive their children to school and immediately return home.
- 3.4 Slough has one of the fastest growing birth rates in the country, with a 48% increase in the number of births since 2001/2. This has led to an increasing demand for school places, initially in reception but shortly in secondary schools as well; with an additional seven to 10 classes in primary schools by 2015/16 and up to six additional secondary schools (34 classes) by 2019/20. This expansion, and the numbers accessing schools, on top of the current levels will have an impact on the ability of the strategic route network to cope.
- 3.5 The issue around school travel, with increasing demand and its link to the obesity agenda, needed to be addressed. The success of school travel plans must be looked at as the message does not appear to be reaching parents, and schools should be engaged in order to explore the possibilities of staggering start times to spread out the peak travel periods.
- 3.6 This all equates to travel in Slough being dominated by the car, with 450 million vehicle kilometres travelled in the Borough each year (excluding M4 traffic which is outside of the remit of this Review). This results in severe peak period congestion on the strategic route network. It is estimated that congestion costs the town £34 million each year in wasted travel time, and reduces average speeds by 8%.

3.7 Future development, both commercial and residential, required through the natural growth of the town means that there is likely to be a gradual increase in car ownership and increased levels of traffic on the strategic route network as a result.

3.8 In reviewing the current Council policies which could, potentially, impact on levels of traffic in the Borough, the Panel reviewed:

3.8.1 Core Strategy (including strategic objectives for Slough, Spatial Strategy and core policies designed to deliver the strategic planning policies)

- The strategic objectives are: meeting Slough's housing allocation; maintaining a sustainable buoyant and diverse economy; and encouraging the regeneration of the town centre, district centres and the existing business areas.
- The Spatial Strategy establishes the role principle of 'concentrating development but spreading the benefits to help build local communities'. This is focus future development on the town centre as the most accessible location for public transport and provides the best opportunities for carrying out more than one activity in a single journey.
- A restriction of car parking for new residential and commercial developments in the town centre, would limit the ability of those resident and/or working in the area to own and use cars, and encourage the use of public transport through the bus and train station.

3.8.2 Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3)

- Focuses on encouraging sustainable economic growth.
- Includes 12 Objectives, including:
 - to ensure that the transport system helps Slough sustain its economic competitiveness and retain its position as an economic hub of the South East;
 - to facilitate the development of new housing in accordance with the Local Development Framework;
 - to reduce transport's CO2 emissions and make the transport network resilient to the effects of climate change; and
 - to mitigate the effects of travel and the transport system on the natural environment, heritage and landscape.

3.8.3 Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF)

- An award of £4.305m made to the Council in June 2012 (paid over a period of three years, scheduled to end in March 2015) aimed at bringing about a modal shift and congestion reduction through encouraging behavioural change through the provision of attractive alternatives to car usage.
- The specific objectives of the LSTF are:
 - to improve the efficiency of Slough's businesses;
 - to support retention and growth of employment in Slough by protecting and enhancing the connectivity advantages which make Slough a good place to do business and a focus on future inward investment;
 - to reduce CO2 emissions from road traffic; and
 - to improve the health of our residents by improving air quality and encouraging active travel.
- The LSTF package contains six elements to achieve these objectives through changes in travel behaviour:
 - coordinating an employer shuttle bus club to rationalise existing services, and provide supporting infrastructure, to generate a mode shift from car to rail/shuttle bus;

- a step-change in cycling infrastructure, in particular a new east-west cycle spine route, two new cycle hubs, match-funded employer cycle grants, and a bike share scheme;
- improvements to local walking and cycling networks to improve access to security and permeability to and from key destinations;
- broadening the Intelligent Transport System (ITS) and Split Cycle Offset Optimisation Technique (SCOOT) network coverage to enhance traffic management, bus priority and real-time information on the strategic route network, together with greater parking enforcement;
- a major workplace behavioural change programme in the key employment sites in Slough; and
- a focused schools' behavioural change programme.

3.8.4 The Better Bus Fund

- An award of £1.415m made to the Council in March 2012 for the improvement of the No.78 bus service.
- The benefits of this grant will be wider than the No.78 bus service alone as it will drive improvements along the route which includes the A4 and Farnham Road, improving congestion in general.

3.8.5 The Urban Traffic Management Control (UTMC) and Common Database

- A new system being introduced in Slough which is able to assist the Signals Team in dealing with complex issues on the network through advance planning.
- Provides the ability to develop strategies for dealing with planned or non-planned events, such as processions or motorway closures, through changes to signal timings if certain thresholds are triggered by heavier traffic. Linked to the Variable Message Signs in the Borough advising motorists if there are delays.

4. Conclusions

4.1 There are a lot of programmes underway to attempt to combat the issue of traffic congestion. As these develop, particularly those attached to the LSTF, monitoring of their levels of success will need to take place; and ensuring that, where there are successes that these are built upon for sustainable solutions.

4.2 However, whilst there are a number of solutions being implemented within Slough, there are alternatives that still need to be investigated to assess whether implementing them in Slough would be a viable option. In particular, investigation should be given to the following:

- that any future work to reduce congestion levels within the Borough should also link in with the motorway network, not just the national pinch-point programme which focuses on journey reliability, but also capacity issues in this regard;
- that, whilst recognising that the Council must work in partnership with schools, a strong stance should be taken around the effectiveness of school travel plans and the potential for staggering school start times in order to extend the morning peak period;
- that thought be given to improving the accessibility of general and real time information for public transport, particularly buses, in Slough so that the customer experience can be enhanced; and
- how best to engage with major employers in the Borough to encourage alternative workforce travel patterns to help alleviate the evening peak problem.

4.3 Without further action, traffic levels could increase by at least 20% by 2026 and congestion on the A4 during peak hours is predicted to reach stress levels by 2021. Traffic congestion has already had an adverse impact on business efficiency and inward investment in Slough, and therefore is a threat to the future viability of the town.

4.2 It should be the objective of the Council, through working with partners, that various schemes to reduce the level of traffic on the strategic route network during peak hours by 10% be developed, as this could have a dramatic effect on the flow of traffic throughout the Borough and reverse any potential adverse impact on the future viability of the town.

Recommendation – that the Cabinet agree:

- 1) the formation of a Working Group to investigate possible solutions and report back on its findings;
- 2) that this Group include the relevant Cabinet Members (identifying those responsible for Traffic and Education specifically) and a Representative from the Scrutiny Function (to be named at a later date); and
- 3) that the Group's Terms of Reference are published, for information, in the next agenda of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel.

Additional Information on Review

Witnesses

The Panel would like to thank the following for providing evidence for the Review:

- Joe Carter – Head of Transport
- Paul Stimpson – Head of Planning Policy and Projects
- Tony Browne – Head of School Services
- Savio DeCruz – Principal Engineer
- Gillian Ralphs – Assistant Director, Enforcement and Regulatory Services
- Councillor James Swindlehurst – Commissioner for Neighbourhoods and Renewal

Written Evidence

The Panel would like to thank the following for providing written evidence for the Review:

- Gillian Ralphs – Assistant Director, Enforcement and Regulatory Services