

08 September, 2016

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M6 Junction 10 Major Highway Improvements

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr L Jeavons - Cabinet Member for Regeneration

Executive Summary:

The report gives the panel an opportunity to scrutinise the progress of the road improvement scheme being promoted by the Council for M6 Junction 10 (M6J10). The report asks that Scrutiny note particularly recommendations 2-4 which highlight the key milestones that are approaching on this scheme between now and early 2017, the last and most significant of which will be the submission of a planning application to the Local Planning Authority.

This report is not coming to scrutiny so the panel can make subsequent recommendations to Cabinet.

Reason for scrutiny:

The scheme at M6J10 is a high profile project. It is a busy location and the improvement of this section of the road network will involve the construction of new bridge structures, followed by the demolition of existing bridge structures. The scheme is also the largest item on the budget of the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership for the years 2015-16 to 2020-21 and will be important to the future business conditions of the Black Country Enterprise Zone sites close to the junction. As such the scheme is an important project for the Council and this report to scrutiny represents a key opportunity for the panel to input into the development of this strategic project.

Recommendations:

That:

1. Scrutiny Panel note the progress made to date in the 12 months since the last scrutiny report on this scheme, held on Thursday 10th September 2015.
2. Scrutiny Panel note that Walsall Council and Highways England currently intend to enter into a legally binding partnership for the duration of the scheme by the end of calendar year 2016.
3. Scrutiny Panel note that Walsall Council and Highways England will select the preferred design for the scheme during September 2016.
4. Scrutiny Panel note that Walsall Council and Highways England expect to apply

for planning permission to the Local Planning Authority early in 2017, with the exact date still to be confirmed.

Background papers:

N/A

Resource and legal considerations:

There are no resource considerations beyond the continuing provision of the Council staff already working on the project. In terms of legal considerations, the scheme will require planning permission but this will be sought in the coming months, as detailed in the report below. Also, statutory orders may be required for the scheme but whether this is or is not the case has not yet been confirmed.

All legal staffing support for the scheme is being provided by external counsel, Weightmans LLP.

Citizen impact:

The construction of the junction will be managed in a manner that minimises impacts on road users at the junction and in the local area. However, impacts are expected upon users of both the local and national road networks during the works. Public transport provision will be maintained and the Council will make best use of available communications channels to promote the use of sustainable transport during the construction period so as to mitigate potential congestion.

Environmental impact:

The scheme's potential environmental impacts are unclear at this stage but are currently being assessed via an Environmental Impact Assessment. The results of this will be subject to full public scrutiny during the scheme's planning application to be submitted in early 2017

Performance management:

The improvement of M6J10 is highlighted within the relevant spatial planning document, 'The Black Country Core Strategy', and was highlighted by the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (BCLEP) as a priority in the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) upon the publication of these two documents in 2010 and 2014. Thus its implementation will directly achieve a key strategic policy priority in the physical regeneration of the borough. Further it should help contribute to the achievement of other planning policy priorities such as the delivery of key sites within the Black Country Enterprise Zone.

Equality Implications:


An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out as part of a previous Cabinet Report in 2013. The assessment was submitted to Cabinet along with the relevant report at Cabinet in October 2013. The key findings were that the scheme was anticipated to have no adverse equality implications.

Consultation:

No other service areas or organisations have been consulted as part of this scrutiny exercise. However other consultation more generally has taken place with stakeholders, both internal and external, within the last 12 months on the scheme. Regarding internal stakeholders, a wide variety of departments within Walsall Council have been consulted as part of the scheme's pre-application (planning) discussions, with a formal Development Team meeting being held on Thursday 30th June 2016. Further, external stakeholders (e.g. Natural England, Canal & Rivers Trust, English Heritage, local bus companies etc) were consulted as part of the public consultation that took place during December 2015/January 2016.

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1. Report

1.1 Initial development of the scheme and funding arrangements

The Council has been working on proposals for M6J10 since 2012 at the same time as developing its partnership with Highways England who own and manage the junction. A key milestone in the scheme was reached by the end of 2014 when in December a formal funding commitment was announced by central government and Highways England, with their decision to allocate £32.88m to the scheme. This was preceded by the announcement in July 2014 by central government and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership of £29.65m. Together this means the scheme is funded by £62.53m capital funding from external sources.

1.2 Creation of legal partnership between Walsall Council & Highways England

Since the above funding announcements work has continued on developing the scheme. Firstly, the Council and Highways England have been working to enter into a legally binding partnership. This will govern the way in which the organisations work together for the full duration of the scheme. The first (non-binding) step to that partnership, the 'Collaboration Agreement', was signed in summer 2016. The final step, the legally binding 'Development Agreement' is being drafted between both parties and their legal representatives to be signed before the end of calendar year 2016.

1.3 Public Consultation

As part of the process to develop plans to provide a long term improvement to M6 J10, five non-statutory public consultation events were held in December 2015. The first event was on 3rd December 2015 and this was held to announce the scheme to the media and to key organisational stakeholders (emergency services, bus companies, etc). The subsequent four events between 4th December and 9th December allowed the general public time to review information shown on standing banners and leaflets and to question officers about the scheme before giving comments and feedback which the Council sought to inform the final option selection and help shape the design.

The results of the consultation were derived from the questionnaire that was offered to all consultation attendees. This asked attendees their opinions about the scheme on a number of issues. The majority of the 217 questionnaire responses were positive; with 92% either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that M6 J10 needs improvement. Further, 65% felt that the design was broadly on the right track, with that 65% being split fairly evenly between Option 1a, Option 1b, or either Option 1a or Option 1b. Further, congestion was highlighted by respondents as their main issue, being rated as significantly more important to this scheme as other significant issues, such as time taken to complete the construction of the scheme, or, the potential for traffic disruption during construction.

Further consultation and information provision will take place during the scheme before and during construction, with the next exercise planned to take place prior to the submission of the planning application.

1.4 Progress of design & assessments

Further to the creation of this legally binding partnership which has taken place since the funding announcement, significant work has also taken place on the scheme around design and a number of different types of assessment.

1.5 Traffic Assessment

Regarding design, a number of design options were initially reviewed prior to the funding announcements of 2014 which saw the majority of options rejected for further consideration. After the funding announcements, the Council and Highways England then settled on two options which are currently being subject to formal and detailed testing. Regarding assessment, the initial results of the traffic assessment suggests that both options perform well in traffic terms, presenting a strong case for the scheme whichever option is ultimately selected. Walsall Council and Highways England will select the preferred design for the scheme during September 2016.

1.6 Equalities Impact Assessment

An Equalities Impact Assessment was undertaken as part of a Cabinet Report which went to Cabinet in October 2013. The assessment found that there were no anticipated adverse impacts upon any group or protected characteristic. Since then the scheme design has been further refined and it has been established that the pedestrian crossing points on two slip roads (northbound on-slip and southbound off-slip) will be upgraded to provide longer periods of time for pedestrian movements. During construction, appropriate diversion routes will be put in place and will be well sign-posted for all Non-Motorised road Users (NMU's). Further Equalities Impact Assessment will be carried out again prior to the submission of the planning application.

1.7 Environmental Impact Assessment & Planning Application

Environmental assessment has also recently begun and results are expected in early 2017. The results of this and the other two assessments mentioned above will be detailed in the planning application for the scheme. As also mentioned above, the Council will undertake a publicity exercise prior to the submission of the planning application and the Local Planning Authority will also conduct its statutory consultation activities as part of the planning process. Walsall Council and Highways England expect to apply for planning permission to the Local Planning Authority early in 2017, with the exact date still to be confirmed.

1.8 Timescale for 2017 onwards

The scheme is expected to take time to progress through the assessments outlined above. Related to the above assessments is the submission of a planning application which is expected early in 2017. Following that the Council and Highways England need to finalise all details of the design, publish one or several statutory orders if any statutory orders are needed, and appoint a construction contractor. It is expected that in order to complete all of these essential pre-construction work streams, construction of the scheme will not start until August 2018. Construction is expected to take around 21 months at present, with completion of construction and the opening of the improved junction currently expected around March 2020.