

Formal Response to South Tyneside Council's Proposals to Replace Boldon and Tiledsheds Level Crossings with a Bypass & Bridge

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 East Boldon Forum (EBF) is a constituted body recognised by South Tyneside Council and is close to completing a Neighbourhood Plan for East Boldon. The bypass and bridge are located immediately adjacent to the Forum's boundary and will have a profound effect upon the environment and lives of the people who reside or work in the Forum area. The proposals will also have an impact on many of the policies set out in the emerging Neighbourhood Plan, including those relating to Active Travel.

1.2 For well over a year the Forum has made representations to the Local Authority concerning the need to facilitate community engagement in relation to this proposal. EBF set out in the 2019 response to the Council's Draft Local Plan the need for clarity and scrutiny. On 13 July 2020, the Forum wrote to the Council expressing concern that there was still no community consultation, even though the scheme was being progressed. EBF therefore welcome the release of the information on the Council's website and provide this submission in response to the limited details and information now provided.

1.3 East Boldon Forum wish to be considered by the Council as an "interested party or body", thereby receiving regular update communications from the Council, regarding these proposals.

2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The Forum has a number of major issues and concerns in relation to the proposal. These are developed in the Detailed Considerations sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, but can be summarised here as:

- The lack of effective consultation, transparency and poor information.
- The effects associated with the bridge including environmental impact.
- The design of the bridge, in particular its appearance and impact on walking, cycling and horse riding.

2.2 Whilst all concerns detailed by the Forum require a response, those set out at the end of the document, in section 3.4, Key Issues and Questions (largely relating to lack of information), need immediate action, BEFORE the current consultation period has been concluded. This is essential if the community is to be allowed sufficient insight so that they can give considered and informed feedback, and feel confident that they are being openly consulted in a meaningful way.

2.3 **CONCLUSIONS:** The Forum concludes in section 4.0 that the project lacks the necessary detail and supporting evidence to allow scrutiny and understanding, that the negatives significantly outweigh the positives and that the project, as it stands, cannot be supported by the Forum.

3.0 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 **Concern over lack of effective consultation, transparency, limited information and supporting evidence.**

3.1.1 **Limitations of the information provided:** Having taken so long to produce, the Forum is dissatisfied with the lack of important information, the thoroughness of the analysis, and the effectiveness of the visualisations to convey the impact of the proposal. The title of the project itself is also misleading; this should more properly be referred to as a road bypass scheme. Perhaps, ***Tilesheds Road Bypass and Bridge Project*** would be a more accurate description.

3.1.2 **Link to Future Housing Plans:** The Forum find it difficult to understand that there is no reference to the fact that this project is also required to facilitate the one thousand houses envisaged in the draft local plan, and which is clearly set out in the application for funding for the scheme (the Transforming Cities Fund Bid document submitted in December 2019, states "the Boldon/Tileshed level crossing closure scheme with the provision of a new road bridge and highway links, will unlock development sites with potential for over 1000 housing units"). This seems at best disingenuous and is information that the community needs in order fully evaluate the scheme in the round.

3.1.3 **Double Barrier Down-time:** Importantly there is no detailed Information which supports the closure time referred to for a full barriers option, nor mention of how state of the art technology could be used to improve the viability of this option. Claims of longer down-times for a full barrier system must be substantiated with a detailed analysis that includes such technology.

3.1.4 **Evaluation of SSSI and mitigation of loss:** There is no detailed Information from Natural England concerning the SSSI affected, nor information on how or where such environmental damage will be mitigated.

3.1.5 **Visual Impact:** The drawings etc., do not give a clear impression of the extent and impact of the proposal. For instance, existing and proposed sections at various points through the site should be given, especially in relation to the present houses so that the visual impact of the bridge and embankments are clearly understood. It would have been helpful if the proposals had been superimposed onto an aerial photograph of the site making it easier for lay people to identify significant landmarks etc. This is especially important at a time when public meetings cannot be held and questions so easily asked.

3.1.6 **Air Quality & Pollution:** An important justification of the bridge scheme is that increased levels of queuing traffic (due to additional down-time for double barriers) will create higher and excessive levels of pollution. However no mention is made of the mitigating effect of modern cars engines to automatically switch off when at a standstill. Disappointingly there is no detailed information given to quantify the effect of higher levels of traffic arising from the 1000 houses that the scheme will facilitate The impact of this aspect on the air quality of those living or attending schools in Cleadon or Boldon Colliery is of major concern, why has this not been investigated as part of the initial scheme?

3.1.7 **Feasibility Study and Cost Information:** The proposals are based on the feasibility study undertaken by Aecom. However, no information has been published to explain the scope of the design work, justification of costs, or if other options exist. The present estimated cost of the project is £15M - this figure may well increase at the detailed design and construction stages. Network Rail has stated that double barriers will address their safety concerns; this option will also provide a much more cost effective solution. Generally, financial prudence is the over-riding factor - why does this not apply here? The Council should also make available their cost benefit analysis for the project. It is stated that the funding will come from the North East Transforming Cities Fund, with support from Network

Rail. The Council will also make a financial contribution. The Council must be transparent about how the bridge is to be funded, especially in relation to their financial contribution, including any indirect funding to be received from housing developers in the form of S106 payments etc.

3.1.8 Site investigation works: The Forum would like to understand the source of funding for the current investigative work being carried out. Is this from the Council's own budget or is it drawn down from an external source?

3.1.9 Future Metro Station: The newly published North East Transport Plan includes a proposal for a new metro station at Boldon for delivery in the post 10 year period. There is no reference to this in the Council's document. The location of this station and access to it are clearly relevant to the proposed scheme and should be included.

3.2. Concern over the effects associated with the bridge including environmental impact.

3.2.1 Loss of Habitat and Green Space: The Forum has major concerns over the loss of the SSSI and effect on the Boldon Crossings Pond Wildlife Site. The loss of so many well established trees, together with the scale and position of the proposal, will have a serious impact on the Wild Life Corridor running through this area. The area around the Boldons has already lost many acres of Green Belt to the Testo's A19 flyover project, and further large losses will result from the development of IAMP 1 and 2. The effect in relation to loss of habitat are well documented and a recent Government report confirms the national long term decline in biodiversity as a result. In these circumstances, how can the Council reconcile the bridge and bypass proposals with these issues and its own position on the Climate Change and the Environment?

3.2.2 Environmental Impact Assessment: EBF is informed that this assessment report will not be made available until the submission of a planning application. To propose such environmentally harmful and disruptive work and spend so much tax payer's money on a detailed feasibility study, without also considering this aspect, seems reckless and unethical and to fly in the face of the Council's position on the Environment.

3.2.3 Erosion of Green Belt: The proposal is an incursion into the Green Belt and will result in a significant loss of farmland, woodland & natural habitat, in the following areas:

- West Farm Meadow, a designated SSSI,
- Tileded Local Nature Reserve, particularly the pond.
- Boldon Crossings Pond Wildlife Site, a 2.4 hectares area, which includes lowland meadow and pasture.

With regard to the Boldon crossings, it should be noted that the pond contains Great Crested Newts, a protected species. The northern area of this wildlife site may well be affected by the construction of the bridge embankment. This loss is in addition to the significant areas of Green Belt proposed for housing in the Council's emerging local plan. The only (dubious) justification for this seems to be a reduction in waiting times for cars etc.

3.2.4 Pollution and loss of amenity: The Forum would like to know what assessment has been undertaken to evaluate the impact on noise, air pollution and loss of amenity on nearby houses and businesses, and has the likely impact of traffic arising from additional housing been considered in this regard?

3.2.5 Wellbeing issues: The loss of green space and the environmental impact of the proposals will undoubtedly have an adverse effect on the mental health of the local population, as evidenced in the Research Briefing Green Space & Health (Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology) 2016.

3.3 Concern over the design of the proposal, in particular its appearance, and impact on walking, cycling and horse riding.

3.3.1 Loss of Tiledsheds crossing for Cycling and Walking: The loss of Tiledsheds Crossing, an active travel route identified in the draft Neighbourhood Plan, will remove an important and well used route connecting the Boldons to Cleadon and beyond. This will result in a significant and lengthy re-route along the elevated (and exposed) road bypass and will be particularly problematic for the less fit cyclists and walkers, families with young children and horse riders. An appropriate tunnel or light controlled pedestrian crossing at the existing Tiledsheds location would address this issue. The Forum fails to understand why this has not been addressed as part of the scheme, and why cycling and walking is given so little regard.

3.3.2 Strategic Considerations for Cycling and Walking: The proposal cuts through a very well used network of cycle and walking routes, linking Biddick Hall, Whiteleas, Cleadon and East Boldon. The proposal gives an opportunity to make improvements to these routes as well as mitigate any negative effects from the scheme. What discussions have the designers had with Sustrans and what proposals are being considered?

3.3.3 Controlled Road Crossings and Road Safety: The plan does not include details for proposed controlled crossings at the roundabouts for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders. The junctions and road bypass will need to deal with significant pedestrian flows. The route is popular for children from Biddick Hall etc. who attend Boldon School and who will have to negotiate the elevated road bypass and bridge. The design of the proposal as it currently stands prioritises use by motor vehicles. Pedestrian safety must be given consideration from the outset.

For instance, why do pedestrian routes need to be hard up to the road carriageway for the entire length of the new road? Has the use of signalised crossings as an alternative to the two roundabouts been considered? Signalised junctions reduce the carriageway and environmental footprint and can cater much better for the crossing of non-motorised traffic.

3.3.4 Landscaping and Street Lighting: The plan does not show any hard and soft landscaping proposals. It seems as if most of the existing (and redundant) road network is retained. Why is this? Is this in part to access the proposed North Farm housing site? What has been included in the estimate for landscaping? What are the proposals and costs to compensate for the loss of Green Belt, woodland & natural habitat? What are the proposals for street lighting and has any consideration been given to how this might impact the environment or amenity of adjacent houses? Has an assessment been made of light pollution implications?

3.3.5 Benton Road Bus Stop: There is an existing northbound bus stop on Benton Road, very close to the existing mini-roundabout. Will this be incorporated into the new scheme, for instance just north of the proposed Boker Lane roundabout? If so, should a lay-by with an extended footpath not be provided (effectively replacing the existing bus stop on New Road, for northbound services). This would greatly reduce existing traffic congestion adjacent to the existing bus stop on New Road, which is very close to the Boker Lane junction.

3.4 KEY QUESTIONS AND ISSUES (requiring immediate action)

Due to the groundswell of local opposition against this proposal, EBF believe it is essential to allow the community sufficient insight so that they can provide informed feedback and feel confident that they are being honestly and openly consulted. Whilst all the issues and questions (developed in 3.1; 3.2 and 3.3) require a reply, the Forum requests that the following **actions are prioritised and a response is provided as a matter of urgency, BEFORE the end of the consultation period** and prior to the scheme being progressed.

3.4.1 The Council need to publicly acknowledge and document the **link to future housing plans**, and fully explain this crucial matter. (Ref. 3.1.2)

3.4.2 Network Rail must be asked to provide: a detailed explanation (in lay terms) to support and explain why **double barriers** will increase **down-time**; an evaluation of how new technology can mitigate closure times; historic data for level crossing accidents; further evidence to justify safety arguments against retaining the level crossings. (Ref. 3.1.3)

3.4.3 **Natural England's comments** should be publicly available. (Ref. 3.1.4)

3.4.4 The consultant working for the Council should be required to **provide better information** to indicate the proposal including:

- Indicative drawings of each elevation,
- Indicative sectional elevations through the bridge structure and southern embankment, including approximate dimensioned heights,
- Appropriate, longer range CGI views of the bridge & embankments from relevant positions, i.e. new Boker Lane roundabout, Tiledshed Lane, Heaton Gardens, Newton Garth Farm. (Ref. 3.1.5)
- An aerial photograph of the site with the proposal superimposed.

3.4.5 Further **assessments of air quality and pollution** issues and **traffic flow** data to cover all scenarios are required. (Ref 3.1.6)

3.4.6 For comparison purposes and to put the **cost of the bridge** option into perspective, the estimated cost of the double barrier option should be provided and the Council's level of financial contribution for the bridge & bypasses (how this will be funded), should be made clear. (Ref. 3.1.7)

3.4.7 Council to publish **Aecom's Feasibility Study**, in its entirety. (Ref. 3.1.7)

3.4.8 Council to disclose the **source of funding** for the current **investigative work** near the bridge site to be carried out. (Ref. 3.1.8)

3.4.9 An **Environmental Impact Assessment** should be provided to assess damage to the adjacent wildlife sites. (Ref. 3.2.2)

3.4.10 The Council's **mitigation proposals** to compensate for the loss of areas of environmental assets and green belt should be made available. (Ref. 3.3.4)

4.0 CONCLUSIONS:

The Forum concludes that the project proposal greatly lacks the necessary detail and supporting evidence to allow adequate scrutiny and understanding. As a consequence many people in the local community remain unconvinced that it is necessary or good use of public money. The negatives seem to significantly outweigh the positives and therefore the project, as it stands, cannot be supported by East Boldon Neighbourhood Forum.

EBF is committed to work with the Council in a positive way and look forward to being involved with developments in relation to this project.