

Department for Regional Development
The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993

Departmental Statement
on the
M2/A26 Ballee Road East link

Environmental Statement Public Inquiry
Direction Order Public Inquiry
Vesting Order Public Inquiry

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Department proposes to construct a new 1.6km length of dual carriageway to link the existing A26 Ballee Road East with M2 (Ballymena By Pass). The new link road will pass under the existing Larne Road Roundabout utilising two bridges constructed to facilitate a former proposal to extend the M2 motorway network from Ballymena Bypass towards Antrim.
- 1.2 The proposal will necessitate the closure of Limentary Road at its junction with Ballee Road East. The Limentary Road will be realigned to provide entry/exit with the Larne Road Roundabout
- 1.3 The proposed scheme will comprise the construction of new roads as follows:
 - 680m of proposed dual carriageway constructed in the townlands of Ballycreggy and Ballykeel, County Antrim from a point 270m south-west of the centre point of the Larne Road Roundabout South Bridge to appoint 278m north of the centre point of Larne Road Roundabout North Bridge shall be a special road and form part of the M2 Motorway and part of the trunk road system
 - 1685m of new road in the townlands of Ballylesson and Ballycreggy, County Antrim consisting of;
 - 990 metres, from a point 885meteres southwest of the junction of the existing A26 Ballee Road East and C64 Limentary Road, to a point 270 metres south west of the centre point of Larne Road Roundabout South Bridge
 - 275 metres of slip road, from appoint on the Larne Road Roundabout 65 metres west of the centre point of the south Bridge for a distance of 275 metres in a generally southerly direction
 - 420 metres of slip road, from appoint on the Larne Road Roundabout 85 metres east of the centre point of the South Bridge for a distance of 420 metres in a generally south-westerly direction

are to be constructed as trunk roads and form part of the Belfast-Coleraine-Londonderry Trunk Road T7
- 1.4 The scheme will also include the realignment of C46 Limentary Road, to connect directly with the Larne Road Roundabout.

2.0 The Existing Situation

- 2.1 The existing A26 Ballee Road East, connecting Seven Towers Roundabout and the Larne Road Roundabout, is a short section of dual carriageway (less than 2km) forming part of the A26/M2 bypass around the east side of Ballymena.
- 2.2 The two lane dual carriageway link with 3m wide hard shoulders was constructed in 1969 and has recently been resurfaced.
- 2.3 The existing Seven Towers Roundabout, located at the northern end of the recently completed A26 Antrim to Ballymena dual carriageway, allows local traffic to access to Ballymena south and strategic traffic to bypass Ballymena.
- 2.4 The M2 Ballymena Bypass terminates at the Larne Road Roundabout. The roundabout provides entry/exit to Moorefields Road (to Larne); A26 Ballee Road East; on and off slips to M2 Ballymena By Pass and the Larne Road Link (to Ballymena) The elevated roundabout, includes two bridges constructed to accommodate an extension of the M2 Ballymena Bypass underneath the roundabout.
- 2.5 The Larne Road Roundabout has been the scene of 39 personal injury accidents over the four year period between 2000 and 2004. The total accident figure of 39 included two serious accidents. This is more than double the national average for this type of junction.
- 2.6 Traffic using the A26 and M2 Ballymena Bypass, from Londonderry to Belfast (and vice versa), must traverse the existing Larne Road Roundabout before continuing their onward journey.
- 2.7 Seven private properties have direct access on to the Ballee Road East dual carriageway (between the two roundabouts). Gaps in the wide central reserve accommodate traffic right turning to and from these properties.
- 2.8 Two junctions located on Ballee Road East provide access to the Pennybridge Industrial Estate to the north and Limentary Road, serving a small rural community and farm lands to the south east.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The A26 route forms part of the Northern Corridor, one of the Key Transport Corridors identified in the Regional Development Strategy document “Shaping our Future”, published by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland. The corridor is of strategic and economic importance within Northern Ireland, providing an essential road link to the ports of Belfast and Londonderry. It is also the main road connecting the major hub towns of Antrim, Ballymena and Coleraine.
- 3.2 The construction of the M2/A26 Link is part of Road Service’s strategy to improve the Northern Strategic Key Transport Corridor. The proposed improvement is required to realise the economic potential of the corridor, between Belfast and Londonderry where there is a significant international movement of goods.
- 3.3 Roads Service has just completed or is advancing the following improvements along the A26 road:
- provision of a wide single carriageway on the Frosses Road at Newbuildings, facilitating overtaking towards Ballymena;
 - provision of a wide single carriageway on the Frosses Road at Ballynaloob, facilitating overtaking towards Ballymoney;
 - the Ballynaloob scheme also include a section of single lane dualling to improve safety at Dunloy Crossroads;
 - dualling of the entire length of A26 Lisnevenagh Road (Antrim – Ballymena) has been completed;
 - dualling of the Frosses Road from M2 Ballymena Bypass to Glarryford has been completed;
 - a scheme to provide a dual carriageway on A26 Frosses Road from Glarryford to A44 Ballycastle Fork is included in the Department’s 10 Year Forward Planning Schedule. The investigation of route corridors associated with this scheme has recently commenced.
- 3.4 In October 2003, under the Consultancy Framework Contract, the DRD invited submissions for a commission to progress a scheme linking the M2 and A26 through the Statutory Procedures and provide a Specimen Design. The commission was awarded to Bullen Consultants (now Faber Maunsell) later that year.
- 3.5 Because of the existing road layout and constraints associated with the locations of the existing bridges on Larne Road Roundabout, only one route corridor is feasible.
- 3.6 A public exhibition of the design was held in Ballymena Showgrounds on 8th and 9th March 2005, at which members of the public and their representatives had an opportunity to discuss the scheme.
- 3.7 A public announcement of the Preferred Route was made by Roads Service on 12 October 2005.

3.8 An Environmental Statement for the scheme setting out the impact of the proposal and listing measures to mitigate those effects was published on weeks ending 22nd and 29th September 2006.

Also published on the same dates was;

- the draft Direction Order, setting out the line of the new trunk road and also specifying abandonments and stopping-up of side roads.
- the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order for the necessary land required to construct the scheme.

3.9 A total of 6 objections were received before the closure of the objection period on 27th October 2006. Due to the nature of these objections the Department considered that they should be put forward to a public inquiry.

3.10 A Cost/Benefit analysis showed a large positive return for this project, confirming it is a viable proposal.

4.0 The Department's Consideration

- 4.1 The Department for Regional Development has developed a 10 year Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's population is served by an extensive road network of almost 25,000 kilometres. Of these, 1,200 kilometres are trunk roads (Key Strategic Transport Corridors and Link Corridors and other main traffic routes) linking the major towns. Traffic congestion and delays occur at a number of locations on these trunk roads resulting in 'bottlenecks' particularly during weekday peak periods. A number of sections of the Key Strategic Transport Corridors and Link Corridors have thus been identified by the RTS as being in need of improvement.
- 4.2 Based on guidance set out in the RTS, the DRD has developed a Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP) for the maintenance, management and development of the strategic transport network up to the end of 2015. The plan includes a programme for the implementation of Strategic Road Improvements (SRIs) to remove bottlenecks on the key network where lack of capacity is causing serious congestion and to improve the environment by providing bypasses to towns situated on the RSTN, thus relieving the effects of heavy through traffic.
- 4.3 The A26 which is an integral part of the route between Belfast and Londonderry is a strategic economic link within the Province. It provides an important road link to the ports of Belfast and Londonderry. The Northern Corridor incorporating the A26 was defined in 'Shaping our Future', the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025, as one of five key transport Corridors.
- 4.4 The road network is the 'artery' for the Region's economy with almost all goods being transported by road. Upgrading the key transport corridors and associated trunk road links will provide a strategic framework for infrastructure investment, improvement of public transport, future urban development and economic development, especially for large scale sites to accommodate industry and commerce, and assisting tourist travel around the region.
- 4.5 The Larne Road Roundabout at Ballymena currently joins the Ballee Road East dual carriageway to the Ballymena Bypass and the A36 radial route connecting Ballymena to Larne. This large five-arm roundabout includes two underbridges originally planned to allow the Ballymena Bypass to be continued underneath the roundabout. North of the roundabout the Ballymena Bypass is dual 2-lane motorway carrying flows in excess of 25,500 vehicles per day. South west of the roundabout Ballee Road East is 2-lane all-purpose dual carriageway carrying flows in excess of 22,500 vehicles per day. Approximately 15,000 vehicles per day is long distance north south strategic traffic which must negotiate the Larne Road Roundabout. This long distance strategic traffic conflicts with local traffic negotiating the roundabout and results in queues and delays at peak times. The high speeds on the large roundabout are a contributory factor in the unacceptably high number of accidents at this junction. This improvement will in turn contribute towards the continued economic development of Northern Ireland and efforts to improve road safety.

- 4.6 The principal objectives of Roads Service in implementing the scheme are therefore to improve conditions for road users by seeking to reduce journey times between the major commercial centres served by the route together with an improvement in road safety.
- 4.7 The main objectives of the scheme are to:
- assist economic growth by reducing journey times;
 - conserve and enhance the environment;
 - reduce congestion and delays and accommodate increasing traffic flows;
 - improve safety by reducing the number and severity of road accidents;
 - design a high standard dual carriageway, passing under the Larne Road Roundabout, to link M2 Ballymena By Pass with A26 Ballee Road East;
 - optimise achievement of the 5 Government Objectives (Environment, Accessibility, Economy, Safety and Integration).
- 4.8 These objectives are in line with the Department's policy as set out in the 'Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002 – 2012'.
- 4.9 The main advantage of lower congestion costs to business is not only the reduction in journey times but also the reduction in the probability of delay. This will be attractive to businesses where delivery of the final product is paramount.
- 4.10 Roads Service concluded that on the A26 Ballee Road East to M2 Ballymena Bypass:-
- the current level of traffic and resulting delays has compromised the corridor's ability to function as a key link within the strategic road network;
 - provision of the link is justified for the existing volumes of traffic; and
 - 'Do Minimum' or carrying out 'selective' improvements are not considered to be realistic long-term options.

5.0 The Proposal

- 5.1 The scheme would divert strategic north-south traffic onto a new dual carriageway underneath the Larne Road Roundabout, connecting Ballymena Bypass and Ballee Road East.
- 5.2 The geometry of the roundabout underbridges, the motorway to the north and the dual carriageway to the south west, fixes the line of the proposed all-purpose dual carriageway road.
- 5.3 The new link comprises a dual two lane all-purpose carriageway approximately 1.6 kilometres long. New merge and diverge facilities will be provided to the south of the existing half diamond interchange at the Larne Road Roundabout.
- 5.4 At the tight radius, the central reserve and the verge will require to be increased in width to permit the appropriate forward visibility for road users.
- 5.5 It is likely that some property demolition would be necessary and alternative links would be provided to connect remaining properties to the local road network.
- 5.6 East of the new link road, the Liminary Road from Kells would be realigned to connect directly to the Larne Road Roundabout.
- 5.7 West of the new link the redundant part of Ballee Road East would retain its connection with the Larne Road Roundabout and would continue to service Pennybridge Industrial Estate; it may also offer possible future access to lands south west of Pennybridge Industrial Estate, which are zoned for industry and housing.
- 5.8 Gaps in the central reserve on Ballee Road East will be closed and replaced by a single gap incorporating a 'u-turn' facility. Access to the properties will be made via this u turn facility and an access road constructed parallel to and along the south east edge of the dual carriageway. Drivers wishing to turn right out of their properties will be directed along the one way access road to the Seven Towers Roundabout to complete this movement

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 The Department have carried out a comprehensive study into the various options and undertaken a full environmental impact assessment of the preferred scheme. They have concluded that although the construction of this scheme will have some environmental impact on the surrounding area, this will be mitigated where possible. The construction of the M2/A26 Link on the proposed line is preferred to a “do nothing” approach.
- 6.2 ‘Shaping our Future’, the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, recognises that upgrading will be required on key sections of the strategic road network to reduce congestion and improve reliability of journey times. Northern Ireland is almost totally dependant on a road based transport system reflecting the small internal transport market and dispersed settlement pattern. The A26 forms one of the most important transport corridors in Northern Ireland and it is therefore essential to ensure this route is conducive to both social and economic traffic.