

Introduction

The Department for Regional Development has developed a 10 year Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's dispersed population is served by an extensive road network of almost 25,000 kilometres, of which some 1,200 kilometres are trunk roads, Key Strategic Transport Corridors or Link Corridors connecting 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.

Based on the 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 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. One of these Strategic Road Improvements is the provision of a dual carriageway underneath the Larne Road Roundabout to connect the M2 Ballymena Bypass to the A26 Ballee Road East dual carriageway.

This summary describes the Scheme and summarises, in non-technical language, the Environmental Statement, or ES. The ES presents the findings of an environmental assessment of the Scheme and describes the measures proposed to reduce its impact. The ES is issued in accordance with EC Directive 85/337 EEC, as amended by Council Directive 97/11/EC and Articles 67 and 67A of The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 (as substituted by the Roads (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999).

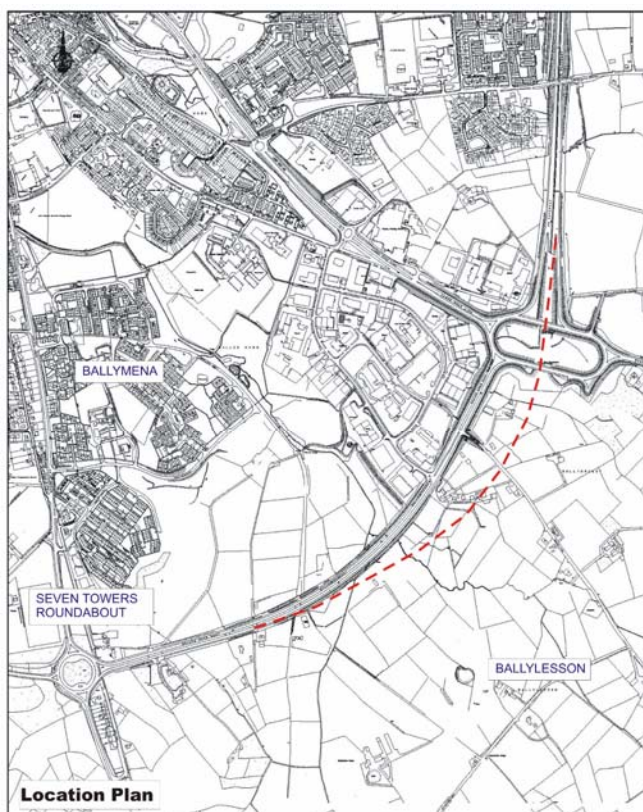
Why the Scheme is Needed

The A26 is part of the Northern Key Strategic Transport Corridor connecting Belfast to Londonderry. It is the main road connecting the major hub towns of Antrim, Ballymena and Coleraine. There are an unac-

ceptably high number of accidents where traffic on this strategic route circulates around the Larne Road Roundabout.

Existing Conditions

The Larne Road Roundabout at Ballymena currently joins the A26 Ballee Road East dual carriageway to the M2 Ballymena Bypass and the A36 Larne radial route connecting Ballymena to Larne. This large five-arm roundabout includes two underbridges originally planned to allow the Ballymena Bypass to be contin-



ued 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 a 2-lane all-purpose dual carriageway carrying flows in excess of 22,500 vehicles per day. About 15,000 vehicles per day are long distance north south strategic traffic passing straight through the 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. There have been 39 Personal Injury Accidents at the Larne Road Roundabout between 2000 and 2004.

Scheme Objectives

The main objectives of the scheme are:

- To assist economic growth by reducing journey times;
- To conserve and enhance the environment;
- To reduce congestion and delays and accommodate increasing traffic flows;
- To improve safety by reducing the number and severity of road accidents;
- To make the best use of the existing strategic road network.

The Proposed Scheme

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. 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.

The new dual carriageway link road would be approximately 1.6 kilometres long and would include new merge and diverge facilities to the south of the existing half diamond interchange at the Larne Road Roundabout. 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. East of the new link road, the Limentary Road from Kells would be realigned to connect directly to the Larne Road Roundabout. 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.

Gaps in the central reserve on Ballee Road East will be closed and replaced by a single gap incorporating a 'u-turn' facility to maintain access to several properties along the south east of the dual carriageway.

Mitigation Measures

Measures are proposed as integral parts of the design to limit the adverse environmental effects of the scheme. These measures include:

- Following and alignment that fits into existing landscape pattern and utilises the existing road as much as is practicable;
- Extensive planting of native trees and shrubs at key locations to help re-assimilate the scheme into existing landscape setting;
- Re-use of topsoil on new verges to ensure conservation of residual seedbanks of locally occurring plant species;
- Provision of pollution control measures as part of the highway drainage system which would include the creation of balancing/retention ponds and swales which would provide additional wetland areas for wildlife;
- Use of low-noise surfacing which would reduce the level of traffic noise when compared to traditional forms of road surface;
- Proposed lighting along the A26 will be designed to limit light pollution;
- Slopes will be in keeping with the local landform and be either grassed or planted with a woodland mix.

Environmental Effects

The scheme design and mitigation measures have been designed to minimise adverse environmental effects. Nonetheless, some impacts would arise from the proposals, the most significant of which are summarised below.

Traffic

With the scheme open to traffic, there would be a significant change in the distribution of traffic, with a significant reduction in traffic on the Larne Road Roundabout. There would be a significant journey time reduction for north south strategic traffic continuing unimpeded underneath the roundabout.

Air Quality

Traffic related pollutants are expected to increase slightly, in line with traffic growth and the emission forecasts inherent with the Atmospheric Emissions Inventory. Predicted levels would not exceed the criteria required by the National Air Quality Standard at any location within the scheme.

Cultural Heritage

Cropmarks and stone work possibly indicating former buildings would be adversely affected by the scheme. The setting of farm buildings would also be slightly adversely affected. The potential for archaeological interest is considered high with the potential that pre-historic find spots, Early Christian settlement and medieval remains associated with the town of Ballymena may be disturbed by the scheme.

Disruption due to Construction

Construction would take about ten months. During the construction period the existing roads would remain open to traffic and the aim would be to minimise disruption to local residents and road users.

The detailed construction sequence would be a matter for the contractor, but certain guiding principles would be stipulated. Such measures would include limiting disruption to existing patterns of movement and limiting routes for construction traffic use. The contract would include provisions to minimise the effects of construction noise, temporary diversions, works access and working hours.

Construction methods would be closely monitored by both the supervisory staff and the Health and Safety Executive to ensure compliance with current legislation. Routes to the construction site would be discussed and agreed with the Roads Service, although the existing A26 would be the main means of access.

An archaeological watching brief would be maintained throughout construction, with excavation and recording of any remains discovered.

Ecology and Nature Conservation

The overall impact of the scheme is assessed as moderate adverse. This judgement is based on the potential moderate adverse impact on bats, together with cumulative slight adverse effects on water-courses, scrub, a species-rich hedgerow, species-rich grassland, breeding birds and badgers.

The major residual impact of the scheme in terms of spatial extent will be a reduction in the area of grassland of low conservation value. Some less spatially extensive habitats of greater conservation value will however also be affected. Species-rich grassland will be removed but re-use of the topsoil and its seed

bank will result in redistribution of this habitat and with sensitive siting, there should be little change in the total area of this habitat.

There are unlikely to be any major long-term residual effects on the fish populations of the local river system, since the current biochemical status of the Deerfin Burn downstream of the M2 is poor. There should also be no impact on an area of likely ancient woodland which is marginal to the scheme.

Landscape and Visual Amenity

The existing A26 and M2 roads are prominent features in the area and already impose a degree of visual impact on the landscape. The proposed development would alter current views and increase the degree of visual impact until mitigating measures became effective. There would be the loss of one dwelling, a number of outbuildings, agricultural land and existing vegetation.

Eleven out of 16 receptors have been identified as likely to experience substantial or moderate adverse visual effects on the day of opening. All but seven could be sufficiently mitigated to result in the effects reducing to slight by Year 15. Mitigation would include off-site planting, advance planting and screen fencing and would be subject to agreement with the individual receptors.

Landscape proposals would be developed to maximise the reduction of the predicted impacts. The landscape proposals would also seek to enhance the wider landscape and to integrate the road scheme into the surrounding landscape.

Land Use

The greater part of the route crosses agricultural land, mainly under grass for beef enterprises, but with some fields used for silage. The scheme would affect eight agricultural units through land severance issues and issues associated with moving livestock across the realigned roads safely. The influence on the viability of local agriculture is not considered to be great. Where the scheme cuts across the existing pattern of farm access an alternative access routes would be provided. Demolition of one residential property and a number of outbuildings will be required.

The land take will affect a large amount of agricultural

land but there will also be an effect on neutral grass-land, scrub and the Deerfin Burn (a designated salmonid fishery).

Pedestrians, Cyclists, and Community Effects

Although there are no formal footpaths along the Ballee Road East, the route is still used by pedestrians and cyclists mostly for informal recreational purposes as there are no bus routes or community facilities in the area that can be accessed from the road.

Community severance will be reduced following improvements to the Ballee Road East. Residents along Ballee Road and Limentary Road will enjoy safer access to and from their homes. Ballee Road will remain available to pedestrians and cyclists once the improvements are complete and the traffic on the bypassed section of Ballee Road East at Pennybridge Industrial Estate will be substantially reduced.

Vehicle Travellers

The impact on views from the road would be neutral. Driver stress levels would be significantly reduced as the road scheme would improve traffic flow. Safer access to Ballee Road East from Limentary Road would also significantly reduce stress.

Water Quality and Drainage

The existing roads are drained into the local system of ditches and watercourses without any containment or pollution control measures. The proposed scheme would drain into a segregated system of drainage ponds and swales. These would control the rate of outfall into the local watercourses and could be shut off in the event of a major accident in order to contain any pollution and to help protect the sensitive aquatic environment. This drainage system could also be the basis of creating wet and marginal habitats and would help reduce pollutant levels in the highway runoff.

Alternative schemes

The geometry of the Larne Road Roundabout under-bridges, the motorway to the north and the dual carriageway to the south west effectively fixes the line of the proposed all-purpose dual carriageway link road.

The redundant northbound lane of Ballee Road east considered as an off-slip from the proposed link road to the Larne Road Roundabout. This was rejected because of possible conflict between slow moving

traffic accessing Pennybridge Industrial estate and fast moving traffic diverging from the proposed link road.

Bridging the Limentary Road over the proposed link road was considered, this would have maintained the Limentary Road connection to the redundant part of Ballee Road east. This was rejected because of unacceptable geometry and possible demolition of property on the Limentary Road.