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Birchley Island improvements Public Exhibition Report

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report has been prepared to describe and provide a write up for the virtual engagement undertaken by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) on the proposed A4123 Birchley Island Improvement Scheme. The proposed scheme will provide a major improvement in capability of Birchley Island.
- 1.2 The Birchley Island Improvement Scheme will widen all the approaches to the junction and introduce signal controls to ensure the maximum benefit of a fully intelligent signal-controlled junction.
- 1.3 A key aspect of the scheme is to improve the usability of the junction for pedestrians and cyclists. Controlled crossings have been added to each of the junction approaches and a segregated pedestrian and cycle route will run around the junction.
- 1.4 The improvement scheme will help to resolve Sandwell's transport problems, encourage effective use of the Local and Strategic Road Network links to the wider West Midlands as well as provide new opportunities for local and regional growth and development in Sandwell.

2. Background to the scheme

2.1 Scheme and area context

- 2.1.1 Birchley Island lies at the intersection of the A4123 and the A4034 and is immediately adjacent to the M5 Junction 2 in Sandwell Metropolitan Borough. The junction acts as a vital link between the Black Country and the wider West Midlands. It is a key connection between Birmingham, Blackheath, Dudley, Oldbury, Walsall, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton.
- 2.1.2 Birchley Island has to support considerable traffic movements on a daily-basis due to its strategic location. Therefore, it is crucial the junction functions as efficiently as possible.
- 2.1.3 Currently users find their journeys inconvenienced by delays. Birchley Island suffers from significant levels of congestion, not only during peak times, but throughout the day, with traffic queues averaging between 10-70 vehicles.

2.2 Scheme Aims and Objectives

- 2.2.1 The improvement scheme will reduce congestion in the area, enabling the junction to cope better with the number of daily journeys. The reduced congestion will also increase the reliability of the junction for road users, who will have more certainty over how long it will take them to complete their journey.
- 2.2.2 The congestion has detrimental impacts on the reliability of the bus services which use the A4123 and the A4034. Users of these public transport facilities currently negotiate unpredictable journey times. As the Improvement Scheme alleviates congestion, this will increase the predictability of journey times, improving the reliability of the bus services in the area.
- 2.2.3 Birchley Island is currently regarded as an unfriendly environment for pedestrians and cyclists, acting as a significant barrier to pedestrian movement and the passage of cyclists. The improvement scheme introduces controlled crossings at the junction's approaches and the provision of a segregated pedestrian and cycle route around the junction. This will increase the safety of non-motorised users at the junction and improve the attractiveness of walking and cycling in the area.
- 2.2.4 The junction improvements will cut wait times at the junction, reducing emissions from queuing traffic. Adding to this, by improving facilities for cyclists and pedestrians, the scheme may assist in encouraging a modal shift from private cars to alternative methods of transport.
- 2.2.5 Improvements to the Birchley Island Junction will assist Sandwell MBC in fulfilling its wider ambitions of growth and development.

- 2.2.6 Unreliable journey times, high levels of congestion and the need for improvements are all factors that make Birchley Island a key limiting factor for investment in sustainable economic growth in the area.
- 2.2.7 As Birchley Island acts as a key point of connectivity for regional corridors, improving the junction will better connect people to job opportunities in Sandwell and throughout the wider West Midlands. Adding to this, improvements to freight operations and distribution will make the area more attractive to investors.
- 2.2.8 The improvement scheme also provides the necessary infrastructure to unlock investment in new potential residential and employment land.

2.3 Timeline

- 2.3.1 In April 2014 a consultation event was held seeking opinions on four scheme options. This event provided insight into what stakeholders felt were the most important factors when considering making improvements at this junction.
- 2.3.2 A second consultation was held in January 2015 to inform around the ongoing scheme development. Here two options were presented, which were refined from the initial 2014 consultation, asking for further opinions about these proposals.
- 2.3.3 Since then the proposals have been refined further and additional traffic modelling work has been undertaken, alongside pavement and ground investigations.
- 2.3.4 The final exhibition ran in autumn 2020 to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to view the preferred option for Birchley Island. Later in 2020 the Outline Business Case will be submitted to the Department for Transport, with a Full Business Case submission following this. Construction works are likely to commence in two to three years' time.

2.4 Purpose of the report

- 2.4.1 The purpose of this report is to outline the approach taken to engagement by Sandwell MBC for this scheme and an analysis of feedback received.
- 2.4.2 The report will outline the methodology taken and summarise the overall response to the engagement, summarise the feedback sentiments and finally provide conclusions. This report will support the Outline Business Case submitted later in 2020. Engagement has been carried out due to changes in the design of the scheme since the consultation in 2015. It is important that stakeholders within the locality of Birchley Island, as well as regular users, have the opportunity to comment on the changes being progressed by Sandwell MBC.

3. Methodology

3.1 Virtual exhibition

- 3.1.1 In light of COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, specifically the local lockdowns, it has not been possible to hold a traditional public exhibitions to discuss the plans for the junction with members of the public.
- 3.1.2 In place of face-to-face events, a virtual exhibition was used which allows online access to the plans, available at all times. The virtual room is a 360-degree visualisation of the traditional event. Information boards were laid out around the room outlining the scheme, it's history and next steps. The room also has a central table which holds the design plans and an FAQ document. Participants were able to provide feedback via a screen which links to a survey (see Appendix A).



Figure 1: Exhibition Room View 1



Figure 2: Exhibition Room View 2

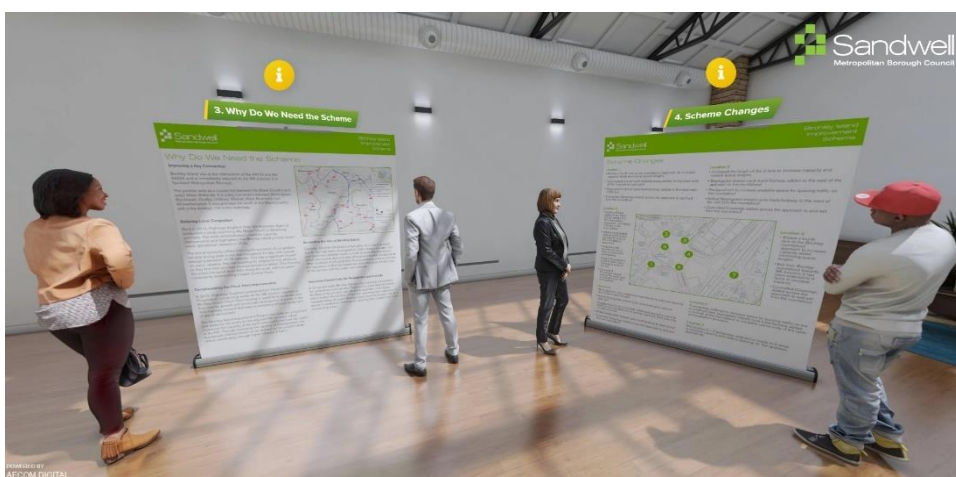


Figure 3: Exhibition Room View 3

3.1.3 The use of this room, and its promotion, has meant the information was made accessible to local people. It is a fully accessible webpage available to the local community and businesses during lockdown. A further benefit of the use of the virtual exhibition is to engage with groups who may not have attended traditional face-to-face events.

3.1.4 Analysis was also conducted on comments received via the promotional posts on Sandwell MBC Facebook page, to gain more detail on views from those interested in the scheme

- 3.1.5 The virtual exhibition has been promoted via Sandwell MBC's website and social media pages, to reach stakeholders and members of the community who live locally and travel through the area for work and leisure.
- 3.1.6 The virtual exhibition room launched on 9th November 2020 and the feedback survey remained open until 30th November 2020. During this time 1,966 visitors entered the virtual exhibition. The virtual exhibition room remains open for the public to view, however the link to provide feedback is no longer available.

4. Findings

4.1 Survey results

- 4.1.1 34 unique responses were received to the feedback survey hosted within the virtual exhibition. As this is a relatively low number of responses the data in the following section is presented as whole numbers rather than as percentages.
- 4.1.2 As users navigated the Birchley Island exhibition, they were invited to leave a comment with regards to the Scheme. They were also asked to give the first three characters of their postcode to identify where they were from, whilst maintaining anonymity.
- 4.1.3 As shown in Table 1 below, the majority of respondents who submitted feedback were local residents, with 11 responses from B69, nine responses from B68 and eight responses from B65. The majority of the remaining responses come from a range of addresses in the local area, except one respondent who indicated they were from Stratford-Upon-Avon. Please note that one respondent provided two postcodes in their submission.

Postcode	Number of Participants
B69	10
B69 + TF2	1
B68	9
B65	4
DY4	3
DY1	2
DY2	1
B70	1
B3	1
B30	1
CV37	1
Total	(34)

Table 1: Table showing postcode area codes provided by respondents

- 4.1.4 As part of this exhibition, the public were asked to leave a comment on the proposed improvements to Birchley Island. Comments were coded and assigned to one of four 'sentiment' categories, these categories were:
- Support the Scheme: those comments which showed support for the scheme;
 - Neutral: those comments which did not indicate whether they supported or opposed the scheme;
 - Oppose the Scheme: those comments which opposed the scheme and finally;
 - Alternative option suggested: Those assigned to 'Alternative option suggested' acknowledged that improvement work is needed at Birchley Island, but discussed the benefits of alternative options that they felt should be considered.

- 4.1.5 As is shown in Table 2 below, 12 respondents are supportive of the Improvement Scheme, whereas 9 respondents oppose the Scheme. 8 respondents indicate that although improvement works at Birchley Island are needed, alternative options should be considered. The remaining 5 responses do not indicate whether they support or oppose the scheme.

Sentiment of comments in Survey	Number of responses
Support the scheme	12
Neutral	5
Oppose the scheme	9
Alternative Option suggested	8

Table 2: Sentiment of comments received in the survey responses

Once responses were assigned to overarching 'sentiment' categories, they were coded further to draw out the recurring themes discussed by respondents in their comments. Each of these key themes are outlined and evidenced below, under its own subheading.

4.1.6 Congestion Relief

- 4.1.6.1 Congestion relief was mentioned by many of those who responded to the survey, with eight respondents commenting positively with regards to the impact improvements will have on alleviating congestion and improving traffic flow at this junction. One respondent states the work is

'Much required- I have to queue on a daily basis in the morning rush hour'

While another comments:

'Fantastic news that you are planning something like this, it is long overdue. This road not only is awful at high commute times but all hours of the day even in lockdown!'

- 4.1.6.2 It is generally accepted that improvement works are necessary at Birchley Island, and the majority of respondents responded positively to the planned improvements.

4.1.7 Alternative Options

- 4.1.7.1 Despite agreeing improvements works are necessary at Birchley Island, eight respondents suggest that alternative options should be considered for the design of the scheme. Several respondents questioned why the previously proposed 'hamburger' junction design had been superseded, as one resident asks

'What happened to the 'hamburger' island that people actually voted for being the most popular idea/plan?'

While another states:

'I thought it was going to be a burger island.'

- 4.1.7.2 Several other respondents believe that the scheme should include an underpass or a flyover. One response reads

'Of the several options that have been suggested over the years this is the best one...' but goes on to state *'...it is quite apparent that an at grade junction isn't going to solve the problem.'*

Similarly, another respondent comments:

'I don't think this goes far enough... ..you should look at doing something similar to the expressway at West Bromwich with an underpass.'

- 4.1.7.3 Whilst acknowledging the need for improvements at Birchley Island, these respondents believe that alternative designs could be more beneficial to the area.

4.1.8 Improved Road Markings and Signage

- 4.1.8.1 Five respondents indicate that as part of any improvements to Birchley Island it is essential to improve the road markings and signs, which are currently unclear. One respondent states

'As part of this work, the link roundabout to the M5 needs better lane markings'

While another argues;

'Yea spend money on something better like improvement to road markings and signs such as the slip road to M5.'

- 4.1.8.2 Many respondents believe the obscure road markings and signage causes confusion, which leads to existing issues of congestion, poor lane discipline and sometimes collisions. One respondent summarises this in their comment

'Construction to start in 2 to 3 years, yet today the road markings are poor and on the approach from Tivdale, the road markings don't match the signs. No wonder there's confusion and vehicles in the incorrect lane.'

4.1.9 Driver Behaviour

- 4.1.9.1 Following on from this, a recurring issue noted by respondents is driver behaviour; specifically, poor lane discipline. A total of five respondents discussed this; one respondent states

'It is a horrid junction with poor lane discipline which I hate using, despite it being a key point on most of my routes to work' and 'cars leave the roundabout at significant speeds, often with poor lane discipline and without indicating.'

While another comments;

'At present vehicles weave across lanes indiscriminately and dangerously just to be 'first' into exit road.'

- 4.1.9.2 Respondents indicated that whilst improvements to the junction were needed, it is vitally important that the Scheme helps to tackle these issues, as two respondents summarise:

'Any plan that helps traffic flow in this area is to be commended but how to ensure road users 'correctly' use the route is the question?'

'any work done to identify lane discipline can only be an improvement.'

4.1.10 Non-Motorised Users

- 4.1.10.1 Respondents also acknowledge the need for the Scheme to improve the safety of non-motorised users at the junction. Five respondents discussed improvements for non-motorised users, including the following comments

'it is very difficult to cross Birchfield Lane near the roundabout... .. a proper crossing facility, where drivers are required to stop, is needed to overcome this,'

'Not to mention it is impossible to cross for pedestrians or cyclists'

'Anything that can improve a busy and tedious junction for motorists would be appreciated but it must work for cyclists and pedestrians too which at present it does not.'

- 4.1.10.2 Although welcoming the proposed cycle routes, two of these respondents believed that the cycling routes could be improved further by integrating them into an extended segregated route;

'Whilst the improved cycle route is good, it doesn't link to any other improved routes'

'It's great having cycle track around the roundabout but this needs to then link up to segregated cycle routes.'

- 4.1.10.3 However, a third respondent questioned the safety of the new cycle route. As the junction-exits put cyclists back into high-speed traffic, they argued that

'Your quite frankly going to be putting more cyclists at risk.'

4.1.11 Public Transport

- 4.1.11.1 Finally, three respondents also comment that more could be done to accommodate and develop an integrated transport system in the area, with a wider goal of supporting a desired modal shift from car travel. Exemplifying this, two separate responses state:

'We should be aiming to minimise car use. There doesn't appear to be any priority measures for buses'

'...by allowing more cars at the junction it won't support a modal shift. There are also no bus lanes included in the design, despite this island being used by buses.'

4.2 Social Media

- 4.2.1 During this period Sandwell MBC publicised the exhibition on their social media platforms. They posted several updates on social media, details of which can be found in the table below.

Post	Social Media	Date
1	Facebook Post	10 th November 2020
2	Tweet	10 th November 2020
3	Facebook Post	18 th November 2020
4	Tweet	18 th November 2020
5	Facebook Post	24 th November 2020
6	Tweet	24 th November 2020

- 4.2.2 Due to the interactive nature of Facebook, the comments on Sandwell MBC's three Facebook posts have been analysed and summarised in the paragraphs below.
- 4.2.3 Post 1 received 18 comments, two of which were added by Sandwell MBC in response to questions by Facebook users. Several users questioned the design of the scheme, in particular why the 'hamburger' design that had been proposed at previous consultations had been superseded; this comment attracted three comments from other Facebook users. Several users also discussed the extent of the benefits that the proposed Improvements Scheme will bring. Several other themes discussed in the comments regarded driver behaviour on the roundabout and the construction programme. There were also several comments about Burnt Tree Island in Dudley (North-West along the A4123 towards Wolverhampton) which was developed into a full signal-controlled junction, having previously been a roundabout. There were mixed views on the success of this. Another user also commented that he hoped the scheme would make Birchley Island safe for walkers.
- 4.2.4 Post 3 received 76 comments from Facebook users, three of which were added by Sandwell MBC in response to Facebook users. The most common theme arising in Facebook user comments on this post regarded driver behaviour and poor lane discipline at the roundabout. Concerns were raised that adding further lanes to the Island could exacerbate these existing problems. Similarly, other users commented that they hoped improvements would be made to both the road markings and signs at Birchley Island in order to reduce confusion at the junction.
- Another prevalent theme in the comments section of the post was the scheme design and the decision not to use the 'hamburger' design, with Facebook users discussing the extent of the benefits that the outlined Scheme would bring. Finally, several users commented with regards to the construction programme.
- 4.2.5 Post 5 received 30 comments from Facebook users; seven of which were comments by users tagging their friends/family. Once again the design of the Scheme was a recurrent theme in the comments, including questions regarding the superseded hamburger design and the potential to include an underpass/flyover. Facebook users also argued that by reviewing the sequences of the existing traffic lights the flow of traffic could be improved. Finally, users again commented

that poor driver behaviour and a lack of lane discipline causes much congestion at Birchley Island.

5. Summary

5.1 Summary

- 5.1.1 The virtual exhibition on the Birchley Island improvements scheme received 1,966 visitors during the feedback period, which ran from Monday 9th November 2020 to Monday 30th November 2020.
- 5.1.2 34 unique replies were received in response to the online survey, and there was some engagement with the improvements scheme through social media.
- 5.1.3 In general there is consensus that improvements to Birchley Island are required to mitigate the existing levels of congestion at this key junction. 12 survey comments expressed support for the scheme.
- 5.1.4 Where concerns were raised, these did not necessarily question the need for improvements at Birchley Island; this was widely acknowledged and accepted.
- 5.1.5 Several replies also acknowledged potential for the scheme to help with inspiring potential model shift in the area. Comments around driver behaviour and lane discipline at Birchley Island were also key themes in the engagement received.

Appendix 1: Survey

Sandwell Council

Birchley Island Improvements Scheme

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1. Do you have any comments on the proposed improvements to Birchley Island?

Enter your answer

2. To help us understand where you live in relation to the scheme, please give us the first part of your postcode e.g. B65, or B64

Enter your answer

