



ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Agenda Item No: 12

Report To: ASHFORD JOINT TRANSPORTATION BOARD

Date: 8TH DECEMBER 2009

Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Streets –Disability Workshop Update

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Summary:

This report reflects part of the ongoing monitoring of the Elwick Road shared space scheme.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: Town Centre

Recommendations Note the report
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Policy Overview: Central Government's Regional Planning Guidance RPG9 and Ashford's Future Study (Halcrow, 2002) sets the context for the growth of Ashford and the provision for an additional 31,000 homes and 28,000 jobs by 2031.

Masterplanning studies to guide the sustainable delivery of the projected growth in the town are reported further in the Greater Ashford Development Framework (Urban Initiatives, April 2005), Ashford Town Centre Development Framework (Urban Initiatives, August 2005) and the Transport Strategy for Ashford (KCC, November 2005).

The proposals to re-configure the Ring Road from one-way to two-way flow forms a fundamental part of the growth agenda for the town and accords with adopted and emerging policy for the town including Ashford Borough Council's previous consultation on the Town Centre Area Action Plan.

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Background

The Ashford shared space project forms one element of wider proposals agreed through consultation for the Greater Ashford Development Framework (GADF) process. The project aims to break down the impact of the old Ashford ring road; to improve connectivity, create new public realm and to facilitate the expansion of town centre development.

The entire Ashford ring road was converted to two-way flow in July 2007. Work was then commenced on the south west quadrant, between Church Road and New Street, to create a slow speed, pedestrian friendly, high quality public realm. This work was completed in November 2008. The general term describing this section is Ashford 'shared space'. Shared space is a philosophy of road design that promotes the 'mingling' of different road users rather than the more conventional 'separation'. Techniques are used to blur the boundaries of road space, which helps reduce speed and gives greater priority to pedestrians and cyclists. One of the techniques used is to remove conventional kerbs and crossings, relying on joint responsibility and 'civility' between drivers and other users.

Monitoring

Basic monitoring indicates that the scheme has been highly successful in reducing speeds and injury crashes. Speeds have been reduced to an average of 21.5mph and there have been no personal injury crashes in the first full year. Other monitoring works indicate that noise and emissions are also reduced and that pedestrians and cyclists now have more choice on how to use the shared space. A number of organisations are carrying out monitoring of the scheme and full results are not yet available. All results will be published and made available as soon as possible.

Inclusivity Concerns

There is one section of the community that feel disempowered by shared space and this is people with visual impairments. Disapproval of shared space has been vocalised by organisations such as Guide Dogs for the Blind on a national basis and has led to various petitions being raised against its use.

The main argument is that as the effectiveness of shared space usage depends upon eye contact between driver and pedestrian, those with sight impairments may experience a feeling of insecurity when crossing the carriageway. Those who use guide dogs also state that the dog finds difficulty with shared space when there is no kerb to stop at.

Access Workshop

A workshop was held in January 2009 to help understand issues arising from the scheme. People with a range of disabilities were invited to the workshop, and following a walk round of the scheme were able to air their concerns both in the overall sense and on specific points. A report of the proceedings is made available. (Ashford Ring Road Phase 1 Access Workshop Report January 2009).

The main points that emerged as being 'difficult or hazardous' for those with visual impairments were:

- Lack of kerbs in Elwick Square
- Inconsistency in application of traditional tactile 'clues' such as blister paving and guide path
- Lack of colour contrast in both paving and street furniture

'Positive' aspects of the scheme were:

- Smooth, clutter free surfaces
- Puffin crossing with tactile features

At present the 'Puffin' crossing provides an alternative method of crossing Elwick Road but it contradicts the principles of shared space and controlled crossings carry their own risk - 1 personal injury crash per two years.

Access Workshop (2)

As part of the intended on-going monitoring of shared space a second Access Workshop is planned for December 4th 2009.

It is expected that based upon the positive results from shared space schemes both at Ashford and elsewhere in the country further projects will be rolled out in due course. The intention of the second workshop is to focus in on the design of shared space as a general concept and to explore ways in which features that help those with visual impairments can be incorporated without losing the overall philosophy of shared space.

Attendees to this workshop will include representatives from various mobility organisations as well as designers and other practitioners.

Conclusion

The first year of monitoring the Ashford shared space scheme suggests that on balance it is working well, handling over 10,000 vehicles per day in a controlled and safe manner. However, there is a small but significant number of people who feel disempowered by the concept of shared space and this needs to be addressed through designs that can be applied to future schemes.

Ashford currently has the largest shared space scheme in the country and Kent County Council is uniquely placed to share the findings from Ashford to help local authorities both from within the county and more widely to devise their own schemes.

Recommendations

- Continue to monitor and evaluate the concept of shared space both in Ashford and elsewhere.

- Publish and disseminate the results of the Ashford monitoring as soon as possible
- Ensure that minority groups continue to be engaged in the design process