

# Planning Application 203535

## Molly Millars Lane/Finchampstead Road Roundabout

### GLRA Comment on the Application

#### 1. What benefits does the proposal offer? Does it solve the problem?

This northern part of Finchampstead Road, with narrow Victorian railway bridges, is a long term and historically increasing problem area for traffic. It imposes severe traffic flow restrictions through Wokingham town centre and its south central roads.

There has long been a strong demand for an urgent solution that can lessen the impact of this bottleneck. This proposal offers a modest improvement in traffic flow at peak times. It will help to lessen the impact of the constrictions. The proposed Western Gateway scheme could be constructed relatively quickly.

We accept the WBC conclusion that bridge reconstruction would involve unacceptable costs, closure of northern Finchampstead Road for a year or more and long and impractical interruptions to rail traffic. It would also take a very long time to deliver while the problems continue to grow.

Therefore, Policy CP10, which states that *"improvements to the railway bridges on the A321 Finchampstead Road ...are integral to the core strategy"* has been shown to be impractical.

**Although we conclude that this solution offers the best compromise that is deliverable at reasonable cost and relatively quickly, we do not believe that it is acceptably safe – see below.**

#### 2. Is this a lasting solution?

The traffic projections will have been based on pre-2020 volumes. The growth forecasts have been projected to include the general future increase in the population of the area and the new development in the South Wokingham SDL.

On that basis, the Transport Assessment<sup>1</sup> concluded that: *"the proposed Finchampstead Road/ Molly Millars Lane roundabout mitigation scheme would enable junction to accommodate the proposed growth of the town and surrounding area in the 2026 future year scenarios."*

That is only 5 years from now! The whole Western Gateway project would appear to provide only short term additional capacity. It offers merely an incremental improvement for just a few years. On that basis, this major investment does not represent good value for money.

However, Covid-19 and post-Brexit reductions in GDP introduce major discontinuities. They will reduce work related traffic significantly – and they will have a lasting effect.

Government sources<sup>2</sup> predict that employment may not reach its pre-2020 level until the fourth quarter of 2024. The post-Covid level of regular Working From Home (WFH)<sup>3</sup> is predicted to rise from 18% to 37%, with 22% of workers WFH full time, up from only 9% before. These two factors change dramatically the traffic forecast. This will extend the useful life of the Western Gateway scheme for some years.

<sup>1</sup> WMHP-TG-WG2-RP-HI-0002-P03 submitted after P.A. on 15.01.21

<sup>2</sup> The Office for Budget Responsibility, in its last Economic & Fiscal Outlook <https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-november-2020/>

<sup>3</sup> Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/working-post-pandemic> Sept 2020

Therefore, this solution could offer a good few years of breathing space. However, much is unknown at this time. A decision to go ahead should be delayed until the picture is clearer.

We believe that the suggested approach conforms to Policy CP4 in its guidance in Paragraph 4.28: *"Any assessment of the ability to deliver necessary improvements to infrastructure will need to demonstrate that both the enhancements and the proposal are viable and deliverable."*

However, it is only a tactical, short term solution. It is the last feasible improvement in this difficult area of Wokingham that offers additional road capacity. It is unlikely to be effective for the whole period of the next Local Plan to 2036.

Therefore, Wokingham BC must create a credible long term strategy. It must make serious investments in providing alternatives to individual vehicle peak hour journeys.

**Only a holistic approach that lowers the demand for car journeys at peak times will offer an acceptable traffic solution for the latter years of the new Local Plan.**

### 3. Safety Factors

Regrettably, with unwidened bridges, a continuous off road route for cyclists in Finchampstead Road is precluded by the narrowness of the aperture. This may have to be accepted.

However, the Transport Assessment<sup>4</sup> concludes also that: *"It is anticipated that the development would not cause a detrimental impact to the operation or safety of the local highway network."*

We do not agree.

For instance, a single controlled pedestrian crossing on the north arm of the roundabout is insufficient to fulfil all of the recommendations in the Safety Audit<sup>5</sup>.

**The proposal must meet all of the Safety Audit requirements.**

### 4. Is there a better solution? Should we build even more roads?

A number of alternative "solutions" to the Western Gateway exit to the SDR at Tesco have been suggested. One of the most common consists of a new road running south from the SDR close to and parallel to the Guildford Railway on its eastern side. Some propose a new junction with the Finchampstead Road at or near the roundabout by the Think Ford car dealership.

We remain unconvinced that any proposal that we have seen involving substantial additional roads would be viable and deliverable. They would also impose significant loss of rural amenity.

As we state above, Wokingham BC must seek ways to reduce the number of journeys through the complex of southern town centre roads. It needs to adopt and invest in new approaches that lower the demand for vehicular peak volume. This will be vital in the later years of the next Local Plan.

### 5. Summary

**The solution in P.A. 203535 offers a practical compromise between improved traffic flow, deliverability and cost – based on growth projections from pre-2020 data.**

**The discontinuity in 2020 changes the outlook dramatically. We do not yet know by how much. The scheme should be put on hold until traffic volumes stabilise.**

**A holistic strategic approach to reducing individual peak hour journeys must be sought to provide for smooth traffic flow for all users in the last decade to 2036.**

**However, this proposal does not meet all of the recommendations in the Safety Audit. Until the application conforms to these, we reject it.**

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<sup>4</sup> WMHP-TG-WG2-RP-HI-0002-P03 submitted after P.A. on 15.01.21

<sup>5</sup> WIE17531-100-R-2-2-3-RSA1 Road Safety Audit Stage 1 (Molly Millars Revised)