

Buckinghamshire *OSC*

## Report

---

|                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Date</b>                          | <b>14 December 2005</b>              |
| <b>Title</b>                         | <b>Tackling Congestion</b>           |
| <b>Author:</b>                       | <b>Congestion Task Group</b>         |
| <b>Contact Officer:</b>              | <b>Darl Sweetland (01296) 382864</b> |
| <b>Electoral Divisions Affected:</b> | <b>All</b>                           |
| <b>Portfolio Area:</b>               | <b>Transportation</b>                |

**Summary**

1. This report summarises the Findings of the Congestion Task Group from the 'Tackling Congestion' review. The recommendations agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Community and Environmental Services are set out in the Cabinet Member report.

**Task Group scope and work**

2. The amended terms of reference of the Congestion Task Group were agreed by the OSC on 23 November. ***The key question for the review was:***

Does the draft LTP approach to tackling congestion on Buckinghamshire's roads address the current and potential future problems of residents and other road users and use available resources in both tried and tested and innovative road management solutions?

3. Working with transport officers the Task Group identified three congestion locations to be considered. Members considered Oxford Road, Aylesbury with Tony Blackmore, Strategic Traffic Management Team Leader and the A355/ A40 at Beaconsfield and London Road, High Wycombe with Gary Bartlett, Strategic Transport Service Manager. Members visited Reading Borough Council to speak with Simon Beasley, Urban Traffic Control Manager about their operational UTMC system. Members completed their work through a discussion with Keith Shaw, Traffic Manager – the county's 'congestion czar', before outlining the draft findings with Val Letheren, Cabinet Member for Transportation and Marcus Rogers, Policy & Performance Manager who is leading LTP development. The Task Group is grateful for the time and knowledge provided by contributors to the review.

**Evidence & Findings**

- **Congestion in Buckinghamshire**

4. Members found that only a few locations in the County had persistent congestion and none where gridlock was commonplace. Measurements by Transport officers at one problematic location in Aylesbury suggests that the public may have an incorrect perception of the time it takes to get through congested junctions. The Task Group therefore proposes recommendation (i) to inform and involve road users. Most congestion sites are caused by badly designed junctions. Congestion isn't necessarily on the roads with most traffic and this shows

that additional road capacity can be achieved through better design, highway management and public information.

5. The situation in Beaconsfield illustrates a number of congestion issues. Firstly, congestion is relative as delays are rarely more than a few minutes. Secondly, the engineering solutions may not be feasible because land acquisition increases the costs exponentially. This poses the question of whether land should be released for housing or industry so that developer funding can be used to build new roads to bypass congestion hotspots. Lastly, although problems may be manageable now growth will mean that the County faces genuine congestion with knock on implications for longer commuting times, business transport costs and health and environmental impacts.

- **Local Transport Plan approach**

6. The Task Group considered the draft LTP and in particular [Section B- Tackling Congestion](#). Members came to the view that the LTP was an aspirational document but lacked detail on what action was going to be taken and when. The Task Group acknowledges that the LTP is not a bidding document and that a thematic approach is supported by Government. However, Members considered that the previous approach in the LTP of having an agreed list of schemes and timescales was clearer for Members and more easily understood by the public.

7. Members consider that more heavily traffic junctions on urban corridors should be controlled by traffic lights as opposed to roundabouts because lights are safer for cyclists and other vulnerable road users. In common with a number of public submissions the Task Group consider that junctions with traffic lights should have traffic sensor controls and consideration should be given at locations with light non- peak traffic to switching lights off. Members support the continued prioritisation of traffic on 'A' roads over other traffic joining from side roads as this assists the free flow of goods vehicles and other longer distance traffic.

- **Prioritisation of work**

8. Members support the principle that all required work on each problem junction on a length of road – or 'corridor'- needs to be undertaken in a phased programme so that the problem isn't just moved to a new bottleneck junction. Experience has shown that public and member expectations should not be raised by unrealistic promises to resolve particular congestion hot spots unless there is a real prospect that schemes would receive funding.

- **Growth and future congestion**

9. The Task Group and officers consider that congestion will be an increasing problem not just in growth locations but on inter urban routes as growth plans currently rest in part on an increase in commuting to the Thames valley. Members considered the future impact of congestion and funding need should be assessed now and action planned for the next 10 years to tackle problem sites before they become critical. Members are supportive of the work of the Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning in putting the growth and infrastructure case at regional level. However it was apparent from discussions with Transport officers that Buckinghamshire is low down the SEERA/ Department for Transport list because there is no short- term prospect of a multi modal study to look at the wider road, rail, and public transport solutions.

10. In putting forward recommendation (ii) the Task Group considered that the Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning would be greatly disadvantaged in negotiations if he did not have a detailed and costed list of anticipated junction improvement works that will be needed to cope with congestion resulting from growth. Members were pleased to learn that a Transport officer will now sit on the Strategic Planning PAG to advise on transport infrastructure issues.

- **Urban Traffic Control (UTC)**

11. The County Council is later than many other highway authorities in bringing in UTC in urban centres to link together traffic lights to improve traffic flows. The Task Group understands that this is partly due to the more rural nature of much of the County but is also partly because past action to manage traffic in High Wycombe has not been well received. Other authorities are now looking at the next generation, called urban traffic management control (UTMC), which will enable real time management of flows and can provide information to motorists to reduce or spread demand for road space. UTMC is working well in Reading where the cost has been £3.2M and has been partly funded by Government. Recommendation (iii) is therefore proposed to ensure that the Council can make an informed decision on when and whether to proceed with UTC/ UTMC.

12. Officers confirmed that UTC would be needed in the next five years and on current estimates would be likely to cost more than £5M. For High Wycombe and Aylesbury the question is whether to introduce simple UTC or look to phase in UTMC during the second LTP period. There is a consensus amongst officers from different authorities that UTC and UTMC costs are falling as more and more authorities introduce systems. The systems are now proven and regulations on compatibility have further reduced the technological risk.

13. Members expressed concern that insufficient staff resources were being used to consider UTC (and progression towards UTMC). There was a concern – based on member's knowledge of the service - that the continuing changes in the Transport service structure and loss of staff is compromising the service's ability to plan and deliver.

14. Transportation officers identified that UTC is needed in significant growth locations particularly Aylesbury. The experience elsewhere is that developers will pay for UTC on their housing sites but this doesn't cover funding of the central control or revenue costs. Although not a formal recommendation members believe that the service needs to ensure that a consistent approach is put in place to securing funding and reduce costs which could fall on Council taxpayers.

- **LTP, UTMC and political articulation**

15. The LTP has been framed to enable UTC/ UTMC to be introduced in the next five years. However this is not explicitly stated and has not been worked up in detail for political consideration. Members are supportive in principle of the need for UTMC but considered that this strategy should be articulated for all Council Members with scenarios of the future cost implications. Recommendations (iii) and (iv) are seen as imperative to ensure that all Members are involved a future decision on whether or not to invest in UTC and UTMC. The timing of that consideration by Council is important because of the need to identify resources in the medium term plan. The big cost of UTMC is connecting up systems with control. The costs can be offset if Council facilities are linked into and use a communications network that serves UTMC. Members would urge the Cabinet Members for Transportation and Resources to consider in broad terms the costs and benefits of a dedicated communications network.

- **Road charging**

16. Members support the Council's preliminary position that road charging would not work in isolation in a rural County such as Buckinghamshire and that any scheme would have to be rolled out on a national basis.

- **Other transport infrastructure**

17. Transport officers advised the Task Group that engineering measures to help people to use non- car options such as cycle lanes depend on the existing road layout and condition. Members supported the move towards a more integrated approach to road maintenance in the County that enabled - or at the least did not hinder - the future introduction of cycle lanes and other measures.

• **Public Information and Choice**

18. The visit to Reading confirmed the view of Members that if motorists know peak times for delays at points on their journey then they can better plan their journey and this will in turn reduce peak congestion. When looking at the Reading pilot other Councils are advised to select key locations to manage and start small to ensure public support. The Task Group was advised, for example, that Dorset is working with Bournemouth to manage congestion by first providing information to the public on the car park space availability. Members supported this low cost/ quick win approach that can be taken through the LTP.