

Ash Road Bridge – Appendix 2 Document to Full Council Report (Part 1)

Appendix Title: **Scheme Objectives and Benefits**
Subject: Road Bridge and Footbridge
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1. Strategic Background:

1.1 The Ash Road Bridge ('ARB') Scheme comprises a long term infrastructure solution to the current and future issues posed by the Ash level crossing, housing growth and enhanced rail use of the North Downs Line.

1.2 The ARB Scheme forms Requirement 9 of Policy A31 of the 'Guildford Borough Local Plan: strategy and sites 2015-2034', adopted in April 2019 ('GBLP'). Policy A31 allocates land within Ash and Tongham, including land for the ARB Scheme, for approximately 1750 homes. Requirement 9 of Policy A31 is as follows:

"Land and provision of a new road bridge which will form part of the A323 Guildford Road, with an associated footbridge, to enable the closure of the level crossing on the A323 Guildford Road, adjacent to Ash railway station."

1.3 Providing the range of housing needed, including affordable homes, through the GBLP and making travel in Guildford and across the borough easier are strategic priorities of the 'Guildford Borough Council Corporate Plan 2018-2023'.

1.4 It is also the Office of Road and Rail (ORR) - and consequently Network Rail - policy to remove risk to the rail network, where practicable, through the elimination of level crossings in favour of bridges, underpasses or diversions. The ORR¹ (2011) state:

"Level crossings account for nearly half of the catastrophic train accident risk on Britain's railways and risk control should, where practicable, be achieved through the elimination of level crossings in favour of bridges, underpasses or diversions."

2. Problems and Opportunities:

2.1 The key issues that have driven the requirement for the scheme:

- (a) Ash level crossing is classified as a medium-high risk level crossing and is within the top 20% of riskiest crossings on the Wessex Route.
- (b) Existing barrier downtime averages between 20 to 25 minutes an hour creating delay and congestion on the A323.
- (c) Misuse of the crossing is high with 34 incidents at the Ash level crossing between 1st January 2014 and 31st December 2020. There are multiple incidents that also go unrecorded as reported by the signalling team and Station Staff at Ash which result from delays.

¹ https://www.orr.gov.uk/sites/default/files/om/level_crossings_guidance.pdf

- (d) Planned increases in rail frequencies (an increase from 2 to 3 trains per hour on the Gatwick to Reading Line) will result in longer barrier downtimes.
- (e) Demand and consequently queuing at the Ash level crossing by all user types is predicted to increase as a result of background population growth and committed and planned housing in the area.
- (f) The use of unsuitable local roads occurs as motorists seek to avoid delay at the Ash level crossing.

2.2 Through the GBLP the opportunity has arisen to provide a collaborative long term infrastructure solution to the constraints posed by the Ash level crossing in regards to safety, movement and congestion, which has blighted the operation of both the highway and rail network in this area for a number of years.

2.3 The scheme is an opportunity to address existing transport issues; to mitigate the impacts of committed development; and accommodate remaining planned growth in the Ash and Tongham area.

2.4 It also offers the opportunity to deliver broader economic and social outcomes through supporting the local economy (through job creation and additional high level skills qualifications), increasing affordable housing stock and increasing expenditure and contributions to public finances.

3. Requirement for the Scheme:

3.1 The need for an alternative means of crossing over the railway at Ash was identified and examined through the GBLP and supported by Guildford Borough Council, Surrey County Council and Network Rail, as well as the Planning Inspector.

3.2 The ARB Scheme was proposed to address the existing capacity and safety constraint of Ash level crossing and to mitigate the impact of housing already committed and proposed by GBC local plan policy A31.

3.3 The principle of ARB Scheme is therefore established by the adopted local plan, and has also subsequently been endorsed by inspectors for two recent planning appeals in the area.

3.4 Stage 1 (road bridge) is the most complex and cost intensive element of the project. Without the delivery of the road bridge and the diversion of motor vehicles away from the Ash level crossing, the necessary land and space for construction of the footbridge and subsequently closure of the Ash level crossing will not be available.

3.5 Both the availability of land (available to April 2024) and Homes England funding for the road bridge (available to March 2023) constrains the programme for delivery and therefore it is essential that action is taken now to secure the delivery of the road bridge, and the required conditions for construction of the footbridge and closure of the Ash level crossing.

3.6 Without the progression of the road bridge, the opportunity to provide an alternative crossing across the North Downs Line close to the location of the A323 may be lost. Furthermore, cumulative traffic impacts associated with committed development in the Ash and Tongham area will go unmitigated at the Ash level crossing and on local roads where 'rat-running' occurs to avoid the crossing.



- 3.7 Network Rail has confirmed that Ash level crossing has the highest level of protection in place, therefore meaning that no further improvements are feasible to reduce risk or improve performance at this location. In their response to GBLP, Network Rail also highlighted that with planned growth in traffic associated with housing they considered that the level crossing will become prohibitively unsafe.
- 3.8 With the planned increases in rail frequencies already underway and committed housing being built, user delay at the Ash level crossing and consequently risk for pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles, will increase. Without the ARB Scheme, Ash level crossing will remain a constraint for years to come and the opportunity to provide an alternative crossing will be lost.

4. Scheme Objectives

4.1 The objectives of the ARB Scheme are as follows:

1. To support the growth aspirations of the Guildford Borough Local Plan and in particular Policy A31 relating to the delivery of housing and employment
 - Manage the impact of both committed and potential future housing development.
 - Deliver access and/or capacity to support Local Plan housing development
 - Improved journey reliability benefiting the local economy and employment
2. To alleviate congestion and delay associated with the Ash level crossing
 - Relieve a key congestion hotspot on the A323 and in Ash
 - Reduce delays from the Ash level crossing for the local community
 - Deliver journey time savings for all users travelling to, from and through Ash
 - Contribute to improved air quality on the A323
3. To better manage the routing of vehicles through Ash
 - Remove delay and queuing at the Ash level crossing which encourages rat-running
 - Reduce the use of inappropriate residential and rural roads to avoid the level crossing
4. To improve safety for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists crossing the North Downs Line and using Ash Station
 - Mitigate the increased risks to users at the Ash level crossing resulting from the increase in train services on the line; and a predicted increase in vehicular traffic in the locality.
 - Facilitate safe and suitable access across the North Downs railway line for all users.
 - Reduce volumes of traffic at Ash Station.
 - Improved access and platform interchange for Ash Station users.
5. To improve connectivity across the North Downs Line and through Ash
 - Improve local connectivity and access by removing the 'barrier' effect caused by the North Downs Line and Ash level crossing.
 - Make Ash more resilient in the event of an incident at Ash Station or at the Ash level crossing.
 - Facilitation of improved public transport services through increased reliability in journey times.

5. Strategic Benefits / Outcomes

5.1 Delivery of the ARB Scheme is expected to deliver a range of strategic benefits and positive outcomes. These are summarised against the scheme objectives in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Benefits / Outcomes of ARB Scheme

Objective	Benefits associated with Road Bridge
1	<p>To support the growth aspirations of the Guildford Borough Local Plan and in particular Policy A31 relating to the delivery of housing and employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mitigates impacts from increased housing committed and proposed in the area under Policy A30 and 31 of Guildford's Adopted Local Plan (Reg 22) Unlocks the development potential of land allocated in Policy A31 (estimated at a minimum of 698 homes). Additional local expenditure from the new housing units is likely to have a beneficial, long-term, permanent effect on the borough economy New housing units will contribute to local public finances through tax revenues generated by developers and residents. The ARB Scheme will create and safeguard construction jobs through construction of the project and delivery of new housing. Creation of indirect jobs associated with the delivery of new housing. Delivery of additional high level qualifications through construction of the Scheme and delivery of new housing.
2	<p>To alleviate congestion and delay associated with the Ash level crossing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The removal of an existing traffic congestion and delay hotspot for road users (closures 8 times p/hour, or 150 p/day). Mitigation of impacts for road users associated with additional passenger train services on the line and longer trains. Mitigation of transport impacts associated with development traffic already committed and being delivered in the vicinity of the proposed development, and the remaining homes associated with Policy A31 of the GBLP. The reduction in congestion and rat running will also have air quality benefits for local residents, particularly around the Ash level crossing where there will be a reduction in queuing and idling traffic.
3	<p>To better manage the routing of vehicles through Ash</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The road bridge and associated traffic management will help limit the level of traffic that uses unsuitable routes along residential roads and narrow lanes to avoid the level crossing. The ARB scheme mitigates the risk of further increases in rat-running associated with growth in background traffic, committed development and barrier closures
4	<p>To improve safety for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists crossing the North Downs Line and using Ash Station</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete removal of the safety hazard posed by the present level crossing, categorised by NR as a medium-high risk Reduction in traffic around Ash Station, which will improve the station realm environment and conditions for station passengers and non-motorised users. The removal of interaction effects with upstream junctions and a reduction in risks taken by motorists to avoid delay. Provision of two new pedestrian and cycle connections across the North Downs Line (road bridge and footbridge) linked to the NMU facilities within the various residential developments which come forward on sites adjacent to the road bridge.
5	<p>To improve connectivity across the North Downs Line and through Ash</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved journey time reliability for those using the A323 including buses Relief from severance for residents on the A323 Guildford Road between Foreman Road and Ash Hill Road as a result of a reduction of traffic and HGVs on this link

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access improvements over the North Downs Lines which coupled with wider GBLP measures for Ash will improve connectivity between Aldershot, Farnborough and west of Guildford thereby supporting economic activity.• Support to the Local Enterprise Partnership's 'Unlocking Guildford' project in creating accessibility and delivering infrastructure improvements to improve capacity of Guildford to generate wealth and high quality jobs.
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5.2 In addition to the benefits listed above, Stage 1 of the scheme offers positive opportunities to support Guildford's climate change emergency through the following:

- The creation of a water sensitive site;
- The creation of green corridors and high quality biodiversity and habitat creation;
- The implementation of design measures to address future forecast climate change impacts; and
- The protection and formalisation of functional floodplain to the north of the North Downs Line.