

TRANSPORT & ACCESSIBILITY DRAFT

The Transport Focus Group has taken a strategic approach to the transport problems that exist in the town and tried to turn them into opportunities.

In order to attain the overall Vision for the future of the town, the Transport Group has had to consider the following:

- Exclusion or restriction of traffic in the town centre
- Enforcement of parking regulations
- Investigation of a relief road to relieve the traffic on Christchurch Road
- Exclusion or further restriction of parking in the High Street
- Provision of strategic alternative parking for vehicles not using the town centre (e.g. car-sharing to other destinations, parking for National Express users)
- Parking and safety around schools
- Relocation of the bus depot
- Improvement of the entries to the town
- Noise abatement on the A31 and traffic flow (mainly Westward)
- Improvement of traffic flow and safety on the A31, including the exits from the town
- Improvements to public transport
- Improvement of accessibility to public and commercial buildings and the heritage area of the town centre (inc. shops, dropped kerbs etc. where needed)
- Access to and from possible future industrial sites
- Public information for buses (possibly interactive)
- Signage to Town Centre from car parks and trunk roads

Ringwood is surrounded by a wide, primarily rural, geographical area. Many people can access the town's facilities on foot or bicycle. Most people access the town by private car and, having invested in their car, are likely to continue to do so until high taxation/fuel costs force all but the wealthy to abandon their car; or high parking charges force people not to use their car or go elsewhere; or a regular, frequent, convenient, inexpensive, 24/7, integrated public transport network is provided (see above).

The viability of the town is reliant on people spending in the shops, businesses and amenities. It is submitted that most of the money spent in the town is not earned in the town. Most is earned in undertakings within a 20 mile radius. A valuable proportion is earned outside this radius, even overseas, or generated from pensions.

Global warming is likely to force the use of "cleaner" vehicles but may not influence the number/demand for private cars etc. Congestion may therefore continue and ever more pressure may be exerted on employers to prohibit parking at the workplace. There is then the issue of how to get to and from work. As mentioned above, the likelihood of public transport providing a satisfactory solution to the problem is remote. It is acknowledged that more people may "work at home" but paradoxically, more people may have to travel further from home to find work.

CONGESTION IN THE TOWN

Ringwood has a charming and historic town centre and one of its most attractive aspects is its narrow High Street winding to the Market Place with its mix of imposing and more modest buildings. Although there are double yellow lines along the High Street, people park illegally in order to run quick errands, such as to the cash point. Blue badge holders also park legally but

there is a possibility of abuse of this privilege. The new regulations permitting authorised personnel (e.g. Traffic wardens and police) to inspect Blue badges should reduce any misuse. Parking on these double yellow lines creates considerable congestion in the Town throughout the day and helps to create queues of traffic in Christchurch Road at rush hour. 23% of respondents to the Love It, Hate It, I Wish survey, spontaneously reported this as the number one 'hate.' Although Ringwood has a pleasant shopping environment, this can be compromised by traffic congestion and this needs to be addressed.

The location of the bus depot in West Street adds to the problem. Large buses have to go up and down the High Street to park in the depot and to leave it. It is difficult to pass oncoming traffic in the narrow street, especially on Market Day when the street remains open and traffic passes through the market. The ambience of the town centre would be greatly enhanced if the bus depot were relocated. It would help create opportunities for a 'café society' that so many survey respondents asked for.

Elsewhere in the town traffic is heavy. Christchurch Road has a constant flow of traffic along it both day and night. It is difficult to cross at any time and particularly difficult to exit onto at rush hours. It is well used by heavy vehicles, including large lorries. This creates potential dangers for pedestrians on the narrow pavements, who run the risk of being hit by their wing mirrors. It is recommended that a traffic study is done in this area, to include the possibility of building a relief road from the A31. This would reduce the number of heavy vehicles using the town centre and other unsuitable roads in residential areas, such as Eastfield Lane and Hightown Road.

Reducing the speed and volume of the traffic using the town centre is seen as a priority by the public. Speeding is a problem in some areas, eg Southampton Road, Eastfield Land and Speed Indicator Devices, i.e. signs that flash the actual speed of the oncoming vehicle, can be effective when in position, but they are only temporary. Sleeping policemen and pinch points are additional hazards. There are several proposals that need examination, including:

- possible pedestrianisation of all or part of the town centre, or
- the creation a one-way system, and/or
- the restriction of loading and unloading times
- building a relief road from the A 31 to the Christchurch Road

A31 AND STRATEGIC ROAD NETWORK

Ringwood is sited superbly for road communications. It is a hub town at a north/south/east/west crossing point using the A 31 and the A338. The A31 trunk road provides fast and easy access to: Southampton, Winchester, Bournemouth and the West Country; London via the M27 and M3; Portsmouth and the south east via the M27; the North through its link with the A34; northern Europe through the motorway network and the cross channel ferries from Poole. The A338 goes north to Salisbury and south to Christchurch, with important links to the trading and industrial estates. These road connections mean that Ringwood occupies a strategic position on the border between Dorset and Hampshire and is a sought-after location for both businesses and employees in the high-value business sector. At present there is an emphasis on Climate Change and the need to re-assess the way we live and work. Ringwood's strategic position provides opportunities for businesses that offer high value and professional employment to set up in the region and create more local employment opportunities.

However, as a result of being a major crossroads, Ringwood draws in north/south traffic to Christchurch but does not have the road infrastructure to support it. As a result, heavy vehicles are using inadequate roads such as Eastfield Lane and Christchurch Road into the town centre inappropriately.

The A31 also brings some problems to the town in terms of noise and air pollution. This is a very high priority on most surveys. The A 31 runs through the middle of the town, with the old town and shopping centre to the south and the large residential area of Poulner to the north. There are good foot and cycle path links from Poulner into the Town. The noise pollution caused by speeding traffic on the A31 is a serious problem and 16% of respondents in the Love It, Hate It Survey put it as one of their three top 'hates.' Speed enforcement within the Forest is important to reduce accidents involving ponies/cattle.

The Route Management Strategy, as decided by the Highways Agency (2002/3) after public consultation, states that the 'A31 from Wimborne to the M27 is of high strategic, regional and local importance.

'The overall strategy is to implement a planned series of improvement works aimed principally at improving safety, reducing congestion and improving accessibility whilst minimising environmental impacts.

'The strategy recognises the importance of the New Forest and the need to minimise the impact of the road on the Forest.

The Highways Agency Route Management Strategy 'recognises that the problem of noise was a concern at various locations, notably within various communities throughout the route, and through the New Forest.'

'As a result, it has been decided to: "Carry out noise mitigation measures in qualifying areas and use noise reducing surfaces where noise is a particular concern (including the New Forest) whenever a road needs to be resurfaced"

'This wording reflects Government Policy on using quiet surfacing on new roads and road improvements, and in noise sensitive areas as part of routine maintenance.'

Although the A 31 is the vital lifeline for Ringwood's continuing success and prosperity, it suffers from congestion at peak times of day and at weekends and holiday periods. The A 31 has been identified by Hampshire County Council as being particularly vulnerable to increased traffic with 40,000 – 67,000 new homes being planned close by over the border in Dorset under the South West Regional Spatial Strategy. Development and growth at Bournemouth Airport will mean increased passenger numbers and a new business park, and the impact of the 2012 Olympic Games will result in increased traffic going to Weymouth, which will also need to be taken into consideration.

Whilst highly significant, these issues will have few benefits for the Town itself other than passing trade. In practice it will make exiting from the town even more difficult and unless radical changes are made, especially to the westbound exit, which is complicated by the position of the filling station, there will be very severe congestion on the A 31 and even more pollution and waste in terms of fuel, energy and time. The Local Plan highlights this concern and these issues need to be tackled by the Highways Agency

There are already serious concerns regarding difficult and dangerous exit routes to the A 31 and these are borne out by the road accident statistics especially near the Fish Inn, which alone merit improvements to aid traffic flow. Until then some have suggested introducing variable speed sensors at busy periods from Poulner Hill to the existing 50 mph limit to the West which could ease present congestion and improve safety. These would have the advantage of not restricting traffic unnecessarily at less busy times. However, it may be that such a system would prove to be prohibitively expensive to install and it may be more appropriate to reduce the speed limit. A 50mph limit from Poulner Hill west to the existing 50mph at St Leonards would improve road safety on this difficult stretch of the A31 and reduce noise pollution. Speeding vehicles at quiet times, especially at night, create a serious disturbance for residents living near the road.

Much of the congestion is caused by the fact that the western exit from the town is too short. There are strong links between this exit, improvements to the town centre, the West Street exit, the access and exit from the A31 service station and the westbound exit to Matchams and Verwood. Some have suggested that the West Street exit be stopped and the Matchams/Verwood westbound exit be abandoned in favour of access via the elevated Spur Road roundabout and the eastbound exit.

The north/south network should not be overlooked, especially to the south. The Christchurch Road is now often congested with large vehicles serving the trading and industrial estates and it is submitted that a relief road from the A 31 at Poulner through Hightown to the Christchurch Road should be investigated. It is appreciated that land is at a premium and there is conflict regarding housing and employment land use. Whatever the outcome, the development will need servicing and the present road system is wholly inadequate.

There is often confusion at peak times on the Eastbound A 31 at the A 338/A 31/Ringwood split. An illuminated gantry over this junction approach would assist at night.

It is recommended that a study should be done by the Transport Research Laboratory to investigate the feasibility and possibility of the proposals outlined above.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Ringwood is very well served by National Express Coaches which provide services all over the country and efficient services to the airports of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stanstead. These are very well used. They do not, however, provide a service to either Bournemouth or Southampton Airports and there is no parking available for those who use the coaches.

Local bus services are used mainly by the elderly with their free bus passes. The available public transport is described as expensive and unreliable. The inadequate services disadvantage people who do not have their own transport. This affects access both to employment elsewhere and to amenities, such as places of entertainment, especially at night. The young are particularly disadvantaged in these respects.

Bus services are not integrated with train timetables. There is no cross-Forest bus service. It is recognised that the area cannot be viewed in the same way as London or other large conurbations. The scarcity and spread of habitation around Ringwood will not attract sufficient volumes to enable bus services to operate economically at intervals and times to make them attractive without crippling public subsidy. There could, however, be opportunities to allow private operators to run mini bus services at off-peak times and to smaller communities (this may need changes to legislation – see also strategic parking).

MAINTENANCE OF ROADS AND PAVEMENTS

The alleged poor condition of some roads and pavements has been highlighted by many respondents. Some of the pavements within the town centre are narrow and, in some places, uneven. This makes them difficult for wheelians (wheelchair, mobility scooter users and pushchair users) and the less able to negotiate. To achieve the Vision, the pavements will have to be upgraded and kept in good repair. The creation of walkways, across the road and raised to the level of the pavement where pedestrians would have right of way, would be desirable. These could be placed at regular intervals along the narrow stretch of the High Street and Southampton Road.

PARKING

Ringwood generally has good short stay parking provision with car parks conveniently situated in the middle of the town. However, there is a shortage of long stay places for those working in the town. There is also a significant problem with the spaces that are available. Many are taken early in the day by people working in Bournemouth who park and then take a minibus provided into Bournemouth. Many people also park along the verges on the A338 to avoid the car parking charges. A shuttle bus is provided by one employer based in Bournemouth (Britannia Parking). NFDC advocate "on street parking" which causes unnecessary congestion, eg. to the library and High Street Bank car parks, which are served by narrow roads. There is clearly a need for more long stay parking and this may well provide a business opportunity. Ways of providing strategic parking provision within the town need to be explored. The Transport Focus Group has adopted an holistic approach and decided that it would not move any problems to another location to become someone else's problem.

It is suggested that car park users fall into one or more groups, depending on circumstances. Each has issues that must be addressed.

The first group is shoppers, who come from the town, the hinterland and further afield. At present there appears to be sufficient surface provision with many survey respondents remarking on the 'excellent' parking in Ringwood. However, it is anticipated that there will be increased demand for car parking spaces as a result of even additional minimal housing as indicated in the Local Plan, better and more shops, potential enhancement of the High Street/Market Place and ad hoc visits to the town as a result of increased traffic on the A31 as already outlined above. The increased traffic to the Olympic Games at Weymouth may offer particular opportunities to traders and the issue is that if people cannot park they are likely to go elsewhere.

The second group is those working in the town. More shops and businesses will lead to greater demand and those who do not need their car after arriving at work may be forced away from the car park. If those requiring their car for business cannot park, the business may move elsewhere and some businesses have indicated that this is already a problem with parking at capacity already.

The third group is those driving to Ringwood as a convenient place to park in order to connect with other transport, i.e. public network either for work or leisure, and/or private such as car share or company transport. Both of these include bus and coach services to airport/ports/railway stations and long distance services. There is currently no provision and demand is only set to increase. There is conflict with other parking requirements; insufficient time is allowed in present car parks; there is a possible security issue; there is a possible cost implication; unsatisfactory planning

arrangements allow local authorities to make unilateral decisions to ban parking with no consideration of the effects elsewhere. Those in this group may have no connection with Ringwood but are doing the right thing in terms of traffic congestion and pollution and should be encouraged. In practice, none of the three County Councils, three Unitary Councils and five District Councils within a 20 mile radius has the duty, authority or budget to consider the strategic view. All would say there is no advantage to them individually.

It is submitted that the strategic view must be taken and if the location of a facility is within one administrative area but serves many, then it should be adopted. If funding cannot or will not be provided, then Central Government should step in.

The existing provision could be sufficient if those in the second and third groups could be accommodated elsewhere. As Ringwood is ideally situated on the crossing of two major highways, A 31 and A 338, a strategic car park relatively close to the town would have significant benefits. People would be encouraged to leave their vehicle at the site and use other transport to get to work allowing anyone to operate services to a multiplicity of destinations, car sharing facilities, long term parking and security. The car park should be incorporated into existing bus/coach service routes. The position is critical as it must be convenient but not cause disturbance to neighbours and not be obtrusive.

ACCESSIBILITY

At present many of the shops and restaurants are not accessible to wheelians. As part of the vision, in five years time, all shops and public buildings should be accessible for those with special needs.

SIGNAGE

Poor and cluttered signage both within the town and on the approaches to the town has been identified as a problem in the survey. Although the town centre is not large, the lack of cohesive signage makes it difficult for visitors to find their way around. An improved pedestrian signing scheme has been agreed and feasibility work will be carried out during the summer, prior to implementation. The Signage Project Group is already working towards producing a number of maps which will belong to the town. This will include the provision of 'multi purpose' maps to enable disabled people to find the best route around the town. The Group will also be addressing signage from the A 31 and A 338.

CYCLEWAYS

Many people said they would like increased access to the New Forest by bicycle on safe routes. There would be great benefit in extending the Castleman Trailway from Poole, through the town and on to Brockenhurst, and beyond and access schemes are being pursued. A cycleway from Ringwood to Fordingbridge would also prove to be very popular.

Ringwood is generally easily accessible by bicycle but some roads are difficult for cyclists because of volume of traffic and the fact that they are generally not wide enough for two cycle lanes and two way traffic. A Working Party dealing with safe walking and cycling routes into the town has been in effect from some time and many of its recommendations have been delivered. Some communities have joint pavements and cycle routes and this may be something to consider in the future. At present, cycle ways out of the town tend to disappear after a short distance.

LIST OF PROJECTS TO FULFILL THE VISION

- 1. Noise abatement on the A31**
- 2. Investigation into feasibility of relief road from A31 to Christchurch Road**
- 3. Investigate traffic flow and congestion on the A31 and seek ways to mitigate the problems**
- 4. Full investigations of exits from the town onto the A31**
- 5. Investigation of traffic management in the Town Centre, including the possibility of pedestrianisation and of moving the bus depot**
- 6. Investigate and solve parking problems in the town centre, especially in the High Street**
- 7. Enforcement of no-parking zones**
- 8. Provision of strategic car park to solve long stay car parking problems, both for those who work in Bournemouth and those who use National Express Coaches**
- 9. Provision of clear, uncluttered signage, both within the town and outside the town.**
- 10. Investigate ways of enforcing speed limits**
- 11. Completion of the Castleman Trailway**
- 12. Cycleway from Ringwood to Fordingbridge**
- 13. More accessibility by bicycle to the New Forest**
- 14. Improvement of road, pavement and footpath maintenance in the town**
- 15. Improvement of accessibility to all shops, restaurants, public buildings and open spaces**
- 16. Investigation into improvement to public transport, including links with the railway station and airport at Southampton Airport Parkway, and especially with regard to young people**
- 17. Provision of taxi and bus shelters where needed**
- 18. Accessibility map of the town centre**