

Wards affected:

Brixworth

Strategy Group – 9th January 2020

Feasibility of Improvements at Kelmarsh Tunnel

Economic, Regeneration & Employment Issues

1. Purpose of Report

To seek agreement to undertake feasibility work at Kelmarsh tunnel on the Brampton Valley Way in terms of establishing what improvements could be made either within the tunnel or along an alternative route that would benefit users.

2. Advice

That it be RECOMMENDED:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Feasibility work be undertaken to determine if improvements could be provided on the Brampton Valley Way at the Kelmarsh Tunnel either within it or along an alternative route at an economical cost that would benefit the users.2. A revenue budget of £50,000 be established in 2020/21 to fund the feasibility work.
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3. Introduction

The Brampton Valley Way (BVW) connects Market Harborough and Northampton via a high-quality traffic-free cycling and walking path which is part of the National Cycle Route (Route 6). The route follows one of the longest dismantled railway paths (16.8 miles/27km) in the country and was opened for recreational use in 1993. At its northern end the route passes through tunnels at Great Oxendon (422 metres long) and Kelmarsh (294 metres long). There are a pair of tunnels at each location, but only one contains the BVW. Currently there is no lighting within the tunnels and this can be unnerving for users of the route. Although it is possible to leave the BVW temporarily and use alternative routes over the top of the tunnels, the diversionary route is less direct and suitable.

The route is an important recreational and leisure amenity (linear country park) to District residents in the area and the wider population of the District, Northampton, southern Leicestershire and visitors to the area. It is also a safe off road sustainable transport route that can be used for access to employment locations along it.

The provision of improvements to an appropriate level within the tunnels or along alternative routes would increase the serviceability of the route and the confidence of BVW users thus making the route more attractive to users.

4. Information

4.1 Types of potential improvement

An example of a potential improvement could be to install lighting within the tunnels. Lighting has been successfully installed in tunnels on a walking and cycling route is the Monsal Trail in the Derbyshire Peak District which makes use of the line of a disused railway track between Buxton and Bakewell. Four of the longer tunnels are lit during daylight hours, dawn to dusk, to make them safe to use. They are operated by a light sensor, so in winter when the hours of daylight are less, the lights in the tunnels will switch off earlier in the day. If there is a power failure there is a two hour emergency back up in place. The lights provide the users with the confidence to use the route.

In order to establish whether lighting could be installed and whether it would be worthwhile to do so, it would be necessary to undertake feasibility work in terms of ecological surveys as bats are known to use the tunnels, design of a system that would be affordable to install and would have minimal operational and maintenance costs (including the provision of power supplies, whether local or grid-connected) and an assessment of the benefits to users of the BVW.

4.2 Proposed approach

It is proposed that the tunnel at Kelmarsh be used as the subject of the feasibility work as a first stage. It would be necessary to employ specialist consultants to undertake this work. Should it be found feasible and worthwhile, it would then be proposed to submit subsequent proposals to undertake feasibility work in the Oxendon tunnel and then subsequently, if found feasible, for the costs of installation and maintenance in both tunnels.

Options for other improvements such as improving the surface of the path, improving the drainage within the tunnel or providing an improved alternative route over the tunnels could also benefit users and would also be considered.

Although some preparatory work such as discussions with Western Power Distribution and procurement of consultants could be undertaken in 2019/20, it will not be possible to undertake ecological surveys (mainly for the presence of bats) until April 2020 at the earliest when they emerge from hibernation and commence foraging and feeding or for consultants to have time to undertake the study this financial year. Hence a budget of £50k is proposed for 2020/21 to fund the feasibility work including any necessary survey work.

If possible, key potential obstacles would be addressed before the bulk of the monies were committed. These could include, for example, costs of connecting lighting to the electricity grid or of alternative power sources, or the willingness of affected landowners to co-operate.

4.3 Stakeholders

Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) owns, operates and maintains the BVW so it would be necessary to obtain the support and permission of NCC, not only for

the feasibility work, but also for any subsequent installation and maintenance. It will also be necessary to obtain the support of the parish councils and local communities, including any local land owners that may be amenable to providing an improved alternative route. Before any future scheme was implemented it would be necessary to formalise an agreement with partners such as NCC, parish councils and land owners on responsibilities for funding future operational and maintenance costs. The Wildlife Trust and Northants Bat Group would need to be consulted.

4.4 Risks and Opportunities

The project presents a number of risks and opportunities as follows:

Risks

1. The costs of the necessary work identified in the feasibility study may exceed the value of the benefits or the ability of the Council (or its successor) to fund. This would make the costs of the feasibility study abortive.
2. NCC may not be supportive of the feasibility work. Initial contact has been made with NCC to discuss the concept and, at present, NCC appears supportive.
3. Users of the BVW are not supportive of the feasibility work. This seems a low risk as it would increase the confidence of BVW users to travel through or over the tunnel, thus making the route more attractive to users.
4. Ecological issues are identified which cannot be adequately mitigated and make lighting (or other improvement) unfeasible (either practically or in terms of cost) resulting in abortive costs.
5. The feasibility work (including costs) concludes that it is not worthwhile undertaking some or all of the improvement options resulting in abortive costs.
6. It is not possible to provide an adequate power supply making lighting unfeasible (partial abortive cost).
7. Landowners may not be amenable to accommodating improved alternative routes over the tunnel.
8. The lighting itself may not be required if the tunnel is used for rail in the future, as part of re-opening the Northampton to Market Harborough line.

Opportunities

1. Should it prove feasible and worthwhile to install improvements, then there is the potential to increase user numbers along the route, particularly if subsequently improvements can be applied to both of the tunnels.
2. There is the possibility of seeking funding from external sources to install improvements that are feasible, worthwhile and supported by stakeholders and users using the feasibility reports as evidence to support applications.
3. Lighting, if installed, is likely to result in the loss of bats from the tunnel if any are present and therefore make re-opening of the railway line, if this is pursued, somewhat simpler.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial – As set out above, there is a risk that if some or all of the improvements prove not to be feasible or worthwhile there could be abortive costs.

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If feasible, the Council would need to make a separate decision on whether to pursue feasibility at the Oxenden tunnel and then subsequently invest capital and potentially revenue funds to operate and maintain the improvements.

5.2 Personnel – It is proposed that existing Council staff will manage the project, but specialist consultants would be employed to undertake surveys and design the improvements.

5.3 Legal/Constitutional – Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 provides the Council with the general power to act for the well-being of its area and conveys a general power of competence upon local authorities to do anything that individuals generally may do, subject to any specific restrictions which may apply. Section 111 of the Local Government Act provides powers to do things ancillary or incidental to any other power of the Council.

The feasibility work might identify the need for easements/wayleaves for power supplies. The feasibility work might identify the need for new rights of way to be established or existing routes diverted for alternative routes over the tunnel.

5.4 Environmental – Disused tunnels, particularly in rural locations are known to be bat roosts and/or navigation routes. Due to the relatively constant environmental conditions, there may be other ecological matters to consider. It will be necessary for appropriate surveys to be undertaken, the outcomes of which would inform the feasibility work. Any likely adverse effect on bats or other wildlife would need to be a consideration in decisions about actions the Council might take after the feasibility study. It might also be the case that no lighting scheme is possible because of the regulatory regime and the likely adverse impacts.

5.5 Policy – The proposed actions would support Corporate Strategic Plan Objective 1 (Improve our Business Economy, Learning and Skills), Priority B2 (Maximise economic opportunities in the rural area), Measure B2.1 (Number of interventions made to develop tourism in the District), Measure B2.3 (Rural Transport and Economic Strategy 2015 – 2020. Number of actions undertaken from action plan), Objective 3 (Promote Healthy, Safe and Strong Communities and Individuals), Priority H2 (Encourage a safe and healthy lifestyle) and Measure H2.1 (Sport and Physical activity facilitated by the Council (total number of attendees taking part in physical activity in 000's))

Policy ST1 of the Settlements and Countryside Local Plan (Submission Version) - C – Opportunities to make optimum use of waterways and disused railway lines as sustainable transport routes will be supported.

5.6 ICT – The feasibility work might identify IT systems that enable cost effective remote monitoring of the any (particularly any proposed lighting system) to assist with operation and maintenance.

5.7 Crime and Disorder – The proposal should increase safety of users of the BVW. For example, lighting within the tunnel would improve inter-visibility. It should encourage greater usage of the route, thus improving natural surveillance. Any improvements, particularly lighting, installed would be vulnerable to vandalism so it would be necessary for them to be sufficiently robust to withstand this. This may

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be challenging. No other crime or disorder issues appear material at this stage, but the issue would be kept in view as detailed design proceeded.

5.8 Human Rights – The proposal would not adversely affect any of the Convention rights.

5.9 Equalities – the proposal would not directly discriminate on grounds of any of the protected characteristics. Where possible and reasonably practicable, the design of improvements would support access by all, although the existing design and condition of the BVW may already be restricting this to some degree.

5.10 Health and well-being – The study could result in further actions which would encourage use of the Brampton Valley Way. This should have positive impacts on users' health and well-being.

6. Conclusions

The proposed feasibility work is necessary to enable further investment decisions to be made.

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Background papers:
None

Previous minutes:
None

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