BLUE HOUSE WORKING GROUP

Position Statement

A draft Position Statement was issued to the Working Group for its meeting on 19th June 2017. Following discussion at that meeting, subsequent representations from some members of the group, discussion with Newcastle City Council officers and members, and a further Working Group meeting on 6th November 2017, I have revised the statement as follows.

This Position Statement seeks to provide, as far as is possible, a summary of the collective views of the Working Group in relation to the agreed criteria for assessing different options for change at the Blue House junction and along Jesmond Dene Road to the junction with Matthew Bank.

Following an introductory overview, I have prepared a table that lists each of the assessment criteria (in bold) along with a brief description of the key considerations (in italics). Under each heading I have then attempted, as independent facilitator of the Working Group, to show how the group's work has shaped my recommendation to Newcastle City Council concerning revised proposals for the study area that should be developed as necessary and taken forward to full public consultation in due course. This is in keeping with my role, as set out in the Working Group's Terms of Reference, 'to make a recommendation to the council, based on the work of the group'.

It is not, of course, expected that all group members will agree with every statement in the table below; it being my role to fairly represent a range of views on different matters while coming to a recommendation that must necessarily be quite definite, and also to take into account some wider considerations beyond the specific remit of the organisations represented by group members.

John Dales, December 2017

Overview

At the outset, I consider that it is important to note that most members of the Working Group would wish the Blue House junction to remain as small as possible, and for any change to involve the minimum possible additional land-take or tree loss. This is not the product of wishful thinking: there is a genuine and understandable concern amongst group members that the official predictions of traffic growth through Blue House in the years to 2031 are not reliable as the chief determinant of any re-design of the junction (or other highways in the study area).

As an experienced transport planner, I have much sympathy with this view. The case for major expenditure on highways infrastructure, and any associated destruction of the natural or built environment, should be subject to robust scrutiny. Although the traffic growth figures used as the basis for the 2016 consultation proposal for Blue House were derived from official Department for Transport forecasts, they are nevertheless open to serious questioning. Previous such forecasts have proven highly inaccurate. Indeed, the known problems with traditional forecasting methods has led to the establishment of a national Travel Demand Commission, of which I am a member. The work of the Commission is ongoing, and its report is due in the spring of 2018.

However, to question the growth assumptions is not the same thing as to say there is no case for change at Blue House. I consider that there is such a case, for the following reasons.

- There is a serious road safety problem at the existing junction that needs to be addressed. This problem is partly related to excessive traffic speeds, which in turn are partly associated with sub-standard junction geometry. This latter factor is also responsible for poor inter-visibility (the ability of a driver to clearly see other vehicles approaching), which also contributes to collisions.
- There is a need for greatly improved provision for both walking and cycling through the junction. This is not just a policy priority, it is a necessity if more people are to walk and cycle, thereby helping to reduce traffic growth.

- There is also a need to improve bus priority through the junction. As with walking and cycling, this in order that travel by bus can become a more attractive alternative to travel by car, thereby helping to reduce traffic growth.
- The changes necessary to improve road safety and create better conditions for walking, cycling and bus travel through the junction will all have the effect of reducing capacity for general traffic.
- There will be some traffic growth in the period to 2031, even if not by the amount previously predicted. Although the City Council has the right policies in place, it does not currently have the necessary funding to invest as it would wish in walking, cycling and public transport, or the planning powers to ensure that new development only takes place where there are good alternatives to car travel.

As will be described later, traffic levels at Blue House in 2016 were roughly 10% lower than they were in 2008 – which is when the City Council began to develop proposals for change in the area. This work ultimately resulted in public consultation on proposals for a traffic signal controlled junction that were approved by the Council's then Executive in 2009, but not pursued at the time.

The predictions on which the 2016 consultation proposal was based were that traffic levels in 2031 would be around 10% greater than in 2008 (i.e. around 20% greater than in 2016). As regards 'design flows' for Blue House (the assumed traffic levels that changes to the junction should be based on), the Working Group has, to date, generally agreed that it is reasonable to allow for a level of growth that is equivalent to returning to 2008 traffic levels (i.e. +10% on 2016 levels).

There may be a temptation to think that this means no material change at the junction is needed. This would be on the grounds that, if it junction coped OK with 2008 flows, it will cope OK with 2016+10% flows. However, this would be a mistake. The junction was not 'coping OK' with 2008 flows, which is why the City Council began exploring changes at that time. Long-term residents of the area will recognise that there have been queues and negative impacts associated with delays at this junction for several years.

More importantly, however, I do not consider it reasonable to assume that future traffic growth will be substantially lower than predicted unless the quality of provision for alternative modes of transport – walking, cycling and buses – is not greatly improved. Many car-borne trips through the junction at present are of short or medium distance*, and there is real scope for a good proportion of these to be undertaken in other ways. However, for this potential to be realised, those who currently use cars for such trips must be convinced that the walking and cycling alternatives have been made appreciably more attractive than they are, or are perceived to be, at present.

Changes to the junction layout are also necessary to address its very poor road safety record. Although the City Council is actively considering reductions in the speed limits on all approaches to the junction, and through the junction itself, UK experience is that simply putting different signs up has only a marginal effect on traffic speeds if the design of the highway is itself unchanged. The current geometry enables higher peak traffic flows to pass through the junction than would be the case with a safer layout.

In short, the current layout buys greater traffic capacity at the expense of road safety.

While the changes at Blue House necessary to promote walking, cycling, bus travel and better road safety will all take capacity away from general traffic, the measures to promote the use of non-car modes of travel will reduce the amount of general traffic that the junction needs to accommodate.

The key questions that the Working Group has been considering are about the nature and scale of the changes that are necessary at Blue House. There is no simple, purely objective answer to these questions; a balance has to be struck concerning numerous criteria, in relation to which there are a range of aims, needs and aspirations. The table on the following pages seeks to summarise the deliberations of the Working Group in relation to the assessment criteria that were established early in the process.

* By 'short' I mean trips of up to around 1½ miles long, or around up to 20-30 minutes on foot or 5-10 minutes on a bicycle. By 'medium' I mean trips of up to around 5 miles long, or around up to 30 minutes on a bicycle or by a combination of bus and foot.

Compliance with adopted NCC policies

The principal source document in relation to policy considerations applying to the study area is 'Planning for the Future: Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010-2030' which was adopted in March 2015. Relevant topic areas include transport, environment, housing, economic development, health. A collection of key extracts is provided as an appendix to this statement.

The Working Group is strongly supportive of the Council's transport policy commitments to:

- achieve a shift to more sustainable modes of travel including promoting alternative travel choices particularly along congested travel corridors;
- reduce carbon emissions from transport; and
- improve the efficiency of transport networks to manage demand, address capacity issues and get more from existing infrastructure.

While agreeing that some general motor traffic is necessary for economic vitality and growth, the group considers that priority should be given to sustainable modes of transport, in accordance with the Council's stated modal hierarchy:

Walking → Cycling → Public Transport (including taxis) → Freight → Car Traffic

Summarising, the group agrees with the following statement, adapted from paragraph 11.1 of Planning for the Future: "A sustainable, balanced transport system which promotes walking and cycling *and public transport*, while still acknowledging the need to cater for the private car, will help to reduce levels of traffic, congestion and pollution." (Words in italics are not in the original paragraph 11.1.)

However, the Working Group is not simply supportive of stated transport policy. It strongly urges the City Council actively to pursue this approach, and with greater boldness and vigour than appears to have been the case in bringing forward the initial (2016) proposals for change at Blue House. Also taking into account a range of other, related City Council policy commitments, the group calls on the Council, going forward, to prioritise transport investment according to the adopted modal hierarchy; and robustly to resist new development that (a) is not 'located where the use of sustainable transport modes can be maximised', (b) does not 'minimise car trips and promote/enhance public transport', and (c) does not sufficiently 'mitigate the effects of that development on the existing transport networks' (quotes from section 3 of Policy CS13 of Planning for the Future).

In short, the Working Group considers that the traffic growth forecasts upon which the Council's 2016 design proposals for Blue House were based do not adequately reflect relevant Council policy. Putting aside its legitimate concerns about the reliability of the forecasts, the group understands Council policy as being to limit growth in general vehicular traffic, not accommodate it. The group therefore challenges the Council to enact its policies, and to invest, so as to enable active and sustainable transport modes (walking, cycling and public transport) to accommodate a far greater proportion of existing and future travel demand than is currently envisaged by the forecast future traffic flows at Blue House.

Provision for walking

The proposals should enhance provision for walking, especially between residential areas to the north and south of Blue House/Jesmond Dene Road There is a real opportunity to make walking much more attractive for short local trips currently undertaken by car, i.e. those of up to 1-1½ miles/20-30 minutes. (Gosforth High Street to Acorn Road; southern Gosforth to West Jesmond Primary School; and Moorfield to the Civic Centre all fall into this category.) Walking for leisure and walking/running for fitness, associated with the Town Moor, should also be better enabled.

Crossing provision for walking at the Blue House roundabout and across Jesmond Dene Road is currently very poor, with the signalised crossing between Highbury and Little Moor/Ilford Road being the only one to offer any formal priority to pedestrians. At the roundabout, in particular, it is unacceptable that people on foot have to negotiate their own way across the numerous lanes of often fast-moving motor traffic.

The Working Group wishes to see signalised pedestrian crossings at the roundabout that conform as far as possible to the desire lines between footways on either side. While Zebra crossings have also been proposed, there would be serious road safety concerns about these in such a location; and they would also be likely to have a highly detrimental effect on traffic capacity at peak times.

To date, the Working Group has considered that the minimum crossing provision for walking at the revised junction should be signalised facilities across the east (Jesmond Dene Road) and north arms. A crossing on the west arm is also strongly desired, and one on the south arm would be preferable.

Single-stage crossings would be preferable in general terms, but may have a disproportionate impact on general traffic capacity. To strike an appropriate balance, single-stage crossings might need to be located away from the main walking desire lines and could lead to there being long periods between successive pedestrian green signals. The decision about whether there should be single- or two-stage crossings, and how many arms should have them, should be subject to further detailed assessment.

The Working Group also supports the introduction of a new signalised pedestrian crossing over Osborne Road at its junction with Jesmond Dene Road, and the replacement of the existing two-stage crossing of Jesmond Dene Road, at its junction with Moorfield, with a single-stage facility.

Provision for cycling

The proposals should enhance provision for cycling generally, supporting local trips between homes and other destinations in Jesmond, High West Jesmond and Gosforth and more strategic trips on the Great North Cycleway. The opportunity is to make cycling much more attractive for short- to medium-distance trips (i.e. those of up to around 5 miles/20-30 minutes) currently undertaken by motorised transport.

The opportunity should be taken to provide facilities that enable cycling by people of all ages ('8 to 80'). At present, only the signalised facility at Highbury/Little Moor/Ilford Road provides a subjectively safe crossing, while people on bikes at the Blue House junction have the choice between cycling in busy traffic or crossing the north and east arms via traffic islands, with no priority, that are intended for people on foot. The (minimum two) new signalised crossings proposed at the main junction for pedestrians (see above) should be designed so as also to enable safe and convenient crossing by people on cycles of all types, and to be laid out in order to minimise any conflicts with people on foot. If two-stage crossings are considered necessary, sequencing of the stages should support the peak direction of cycling (i.e. north to south in the morning and south to north in the evening).

Although shared walking-cycling paths exist on the Great North Road and Jesmond Dene Road arms, these aren't sufficiently wide for people walking and cycling to share comfortably; especially if, as is the intention, more people use them in both ways. The Working Group therefore calls for new paths within Little Moor and in the moor land east of the Great North Road and south of Jesmond Dene Road. It was initially considered that these paths could run within the avenues formed by two lines of trees, but this has been discounted on the grounds of potential damage to tree roots and of challenging cross-falls. Therefore, the new paths should be to the moor-side of the tree lines, which in most cases means they will also be at a lower level than the existing shared paths alongside the main carriageways.

These paths will be quieter and more protected than if they were closer to the carriageway, but in this position it is clear that they will naturally be used both by people walking (e.g. for leisure) as well as people on bikes. They should therefore be wide enough to ensure people walking and cycling are not put into conflict with one another. The materials used should provide a smooth running surface, should be permeable to assist drainage (e.g. materials like 'KBI Flex' and 'SUDScape'), and should have a visual character appropriate to the Town Moor setting.

It is accepted that, due to the Metro bridge and private property boundaries, there is currently no space for a cycle path on Jesmond Dene Road between its junctions with Ilford Road and Moorfield. Therefore, physical changes and appropriate traffic management measures should be used to create safe cycling conditions between these two junctions via Ilford Road and the east end of Moorfield.

Generally, new cycle facilities in the Blue House area should form part of a coherent city-wide network.

Provision for buses

The proposals should enable the provision of efficient and reliable bus services that will provide good local links and be considered an attractive alternative to car travel for a wide range of medium- to long-distance trips that are currently undertaken through this part of Newcastle by car.

Key to making bus services more attractive as alternatives to private cars will be enhancements to journey time reliability, as well as overall journey speed. To improve bus priority, the Working Group calls for the existing bus lanes on the Great North Road to be extended further towards the roundabout, on both the northern and southern approaches. Although it is recognised that better bus priority may have an effect on general traffic capacity and/or queue lengths at peak periods, promoting bus travel, even if to some detriment to general traffic flow, is both consistent with the Council's adopted modal hierarchy and necessary if mode shift away from cars is to be enabled.

In addition, while noting the Council's limited present powers in relation to setting bus routes, the Working Group urges the Council to use its partnership with bus operators and with Nexus, and such powers as it does have, to fully explore the introduction of bus services running east-west through the Blue House roundabout, along Grandstand Road and Jesmond Dene Road. This is consistent with the Council's idea of a 'Northern Access Corridor' between Cowgate and Haddrick's Mill via Blue House. The Working Group also urges the Council to further promote the use of bus services through the provision of better real-time service information, integrated ticketing, more attractive fares, and new or improved park-and-ride facilities.

Provision for general motor traffic

The effect of proposals on general traffic delay and queuing should be assessed, using different traffic growth assumptions, and allowing for the effects of measures to increase levels of walking, cycling and bus travel. Traffic capacity calculations should not be the dominant influence on junction design.

The Working Group notes that peak traffic levels at Blue House in 2015/16 were broadly 10% lower than in 2008, and broadly 20% lower than the predicted peak traffic levels in 2031 (the future year for traffic modelling purposes). In other words, current levels could grow quite significantly without exceeding the peak traffic flow that the junction has handled in the past. Thus, if actual 2031 peak hour car trips through Blue House were lower than the predicted figures by around 400 vehicles, say through transfer to other modes (walking, cycling, buses), no motor traffic growth relative to 2008 would arise.

As stated in connection with the policy criterion, the group recognises the need to cater for general traffic, but is both unconvinced that the current, nationally set, predictions of future growth will come to pass and keen that the Council should invest in measures (promoting walking, cycling and bus travel) to help ensure that they don't. Therefore, while modelling should be used to predict traffic delays and queuing likely to arise from different demand scenarios, the Working Group considers that the preferred junction design should be informed by these outputs, but not defined by them. The group believes that the Council can and should influence future traffic growth, not just predict it and provide for it.

The Working Group also considers that the junction design should not be predicated on peak hour flows, which risks creating a larger junction (with more attendant land-take and tree destruction) than is necessary. The capacity of such a junction would be under-used for the majority of the time, or might induce/attract new traffic to the study area and reduce the comparative advantage of more active and sustainable forms of transport. If peak period queuing were to increase, many drivers would have the option to change their travel mode, given the enhanced sustainable and active travel infrastructure recommended by the group, or to travel at a slightly different time ('peak spreading').

Another aspect of the differences between peak and off-peak demand is that a signalised junction would be likely to lead to unnecessary traffic delays in off-peak periods. For this reason, the Working Group has a general preference for the Blue House junction to remain a roundabout (i.e. a priority junction, albeit with associated signalised pedestrian/cycle crossings).

The group also requests the Council to demonstrate that any measures to reduce queuing at Blue House and on Jesmond Dene Road will not simply result in longer queues at other junctions downstream.

Knock-on effects

The proposals should not increase traffic flow/rat-running on residential streets. The effect of proposals on access by residents to Jesmond, High West Jesmond and Gosforth should be considered.

As necessary, the Council should manage traffic to ensure that traffic passing through the study area stays on the appropriate roads (i.e. the Great North Road, Jesmond Dene Road and Grandstand Road) and does not find it more convenient to use local residential streets instead. It is recognised that the measures used to do this could make residents' access by car less convenient than at present, and that getting the balance right could be challenging. The Working Group therefore recommends that local people should be consulted, in due course, about the need for and nature of any such measures.

Road safety

The proposals should improve safety for all users, especially the most vulnerable, reducing the number and rate of collisions and the severity of injuries. The proposals should not only be safer in objective terms, but be felt safer, especially by people on foot and on bicycles.

The Working Group notes that the Blue House junction has, since at least 2010, been consistently ranked as one of Newcastle's worst collision hotspots (2nd in August 2016 and never lower than 4th in annual records back to 2010). The group therefore accepts the need for changes at the junction to deal with the problems identified, with high vehicle speeds and sub-standard junction geometry being understood as key causal factors.

Arising from some of the traffic modelling work, the group understands that the sub-standard junction geometry (including narrow lanes, poor horizontal deflection on approaches, and poor inter-visibility at some give-way lines) helps the junction achieve a higher traffic throughput than would be the case with a safer layout. There is, therefore, the recognition that making the layout safer may have an adverse effect on queuing even if there were no traffic growth. As for vehicle speeds, the Working Group urges the Council to implement, as soon as possible, the proposed changes to speed limits that were presented to it on 28th November 2016.

Land take/tree loss

The proposals should minimise the loss of any land currently under planting (e.g. trees, grass, flower beds) and incur minimal loss of trees. Any trees lost should be replaced, with there being, as an absolute minimum, no overall net loss of trees.

It is clear that the substantial loss of Town Moor land and existing trees associated with the July 2016 consultation proposal was one of the primary reasons for that proposal having met with such opposition.

While recognising that some loss of existing trees and other land under planting may be justified in achieving a design that satisfies other criteria, the Working Group is agreed that the junction should retain broadly the same footprint as at present and that any loss of trees or Moor land to an enlarged junction should be kept to the minimum possible. The group is also prepared to consider the loss of the Blue House itself, should the land on which it stands be considered necessary, on balance, to enable the best junction design to come forward. It is noted that the owners of the house have themselves raised no in-principle objection to the idea; and it is believed that the house is no longer occupied.

In considering the potential loss of existing trees, the Working Group notes the tree survey presented to it on 14th November 2016 and recognises both that some trees are in such a poor condition that their removal has been recommended by arboriculturalists, and that the quality and age of existing trees varies greatly. These factors should be taken into account when considering any potential loss of existing trees.

The group requires that any existing trees lost should be replaced with at least as many trees, of sufficient quality, and that the pattern of two parallel lines of trees framing the junction should be maintained and, where possible, strengthened.

Air quality

The proposals should improve local air quality, leading to a reduction in levels of CO_2, particulates, and other harmful products of motor traffic.

While improvements in vehicle fuels and technologies should help alleviate air quality problems over the long term, the Working Group's concern is the existing and ongoing air pollution arising from overall traffic levels and queuing patterns. While minimising the number of motor vehicles passing through the Blue House junction should be a clear policy goal, the group recognises that there may be negative effects on local air quality, at least in the short term, due to increased peak period queuing resulting from (a) constraining junction capacity (i.e. from keeping it as small as possible), and (b) introducing better bus priority measures and new crossing facilities for walking and cycling.

Therefore, the Working Group urges the Council to lobby central Government and work with its other partners, including funding authorities, to enable it to re-focus its transport investment priorities and fully pursue its land use planning policies, to create a city that is more walkable and has much better and more attractive cycling and public transport networks.

Noise pollution

The proposals should minimise noise pollution.

While improvements in vehicle technologies may also help to reduce vehicle noise over the long term, the Working Group's concern is the existing and ongoing noise pollution in the study area that relates principally to traffic levels and speeds. The group therefore urges the Council to adopt a clear goal of minimising the number of motor vehicles passing through the Blue House, and also to implement its proposals to reduce local speed limits. The redesign of the Blue House junction should also contribute to slower speeds. Carriageway surface materials should minimise vehicle noise as far as possible.

Light pollution

The proposals should minimise light pollution, affecting both local residents and local wildlife.

Light pollution is caused both by motor traffic and by street/path lighting and traffic signals. The Working Group therefore calls again for a package of measures that minimises the number of motor vehicles passing through the Blue House junction, and also requires the Council to explore, and report on, the effects of different lighting and signalisation options on local residential amenity and local wildlife populations, while also taking road and community safety (personal security) into account. This should include any lighting associated with the proposed new walking and cycling paths.

Visual intrusion

The proposals should minimise any negative effects on the visual amenity and character of the Town Moor/Duke's Moor/Little Moor.

This criterion relates to several of those preceding, covering issues of traffic volumes, method of traffic control, land take, tree loss and light pollution. The Working Group is very keen that all highway-related proposals should have as light a touch as possible on the visual amenity of the Town Moor. This includes the materials used for the new walking and cycling paths.

Town Moor amenity

The proposals should enhance the amenity value of the Town Moor/Duke's Moor/Little Moor, improving access, especially by local people, supporting biodiversity, and helping to mitigate flooding.

Changes at the Blue House junction and along Jesmond Dene Road have the potential to greatly enhance the amenity value of the unique resource that is the Town Moor. The Working Group urges the Council to use this opportunity to enable more people to enjoy this wonderful greenspace, and to preserve its historic uses, protect its flora and fauna, and help mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. In particular, the works to introduce new walking and cycling paths should be used as an opportunity to address known flooding problems, notably with the Little Moor.