

BLUE HOUSE WORKING GROUP

Recommendations

This paper contains my recommendations arising from the work of the Blue House Working Group, from its inception in September 2016 to date. This is in keeping with my role, as independent facilitator of the group, 'to make a recommendation to the council, based on the work of the group' (see the Working Group's Terms of Reference).

My recommendations follow from my accompanying Position Statement, which seeks to provide, as far as is possible, a summary of the collective views of the Working Group in relation to agreed criteria for assessing different options for change at the Blue House junction and along Jesmond Dene Road as far as Matthew Bank. In making recommendations that are necessarily quite definite, it is my role to do justice to a range of views on different matters relating to a complex challenge, and also to take account of some considerations outside the specific remit of the organisations represented by group members.

The recommendations are presented under three headings.

1. Recommendations for change at Blue House and Jesmond Dene Road (west of Matthew Bank)

The case for change at Blue House is based on the consideration of the following five key issues:

- a) the need to resolve a known road safety problem;
- b) the need to improve conditions for walking, to make it a more attractive option for local trips;
- c) the need to improve conditions for cycling, to make it a more attractive option for local and other trips;
- d) the need to improve the attractiveness of bus travel as an alternative to travel by car; and
- e) the need to address the consequences of the predicted growth in car travel through the junction.

Concerning the historic road safety record, a), there is a clearly-evidenced problem that the Council needs to address as part of its duties as local highway authority.

Considerations b), c) and d) all relate to the Council's stated policies to:

- make Gateshead and Newcastle accessible to all;
- achieve a shift to more sustainable modes of travel including promoting alternative travel choices particularly along congested travel corridors;
- reduce carbon emissions from transport;
- enhance and protect the transport network to facilitate economic growth; and
- improve the efficiency of our transport networks to manage demand, address capacity issues and get more from our existing infrastructure.

Specifically, Policy CS13 (Transport) has as its headline action the promotion of 'sustainable travel choices'.

In order to fulfil this key policy commitment, action to enable more walking, cycling and bus travel is needed now. By contrast, action to address the consequences of growth in car travel, specifically in relation to predicted future congestion, is not needed urgently. Indeed, it may not be needed at all (see below).

Total traffic flows through the Blue House junction were around 10% lower in 2016 than in 2008. The 2016 proposal for Blue House was based on predicted traffic growth of 20% by 2031, compared with 2016. This prediction was based on central traffic forecasts from the Department for Transport, and are not the Council's own. Based on the historic inaccuracy of comparable forecasts, there are very reasonable doubts about the reliability of such growth predictions. Further uncertainty about future growth in car travel arises from the emergence of new forms of transport (i.e. shared, autonomous and connected vehicles) and the trend towards people consuming 'Mobility as a Service' and relying less on their personal vehicle. Moreover, the Council has the opportunity to influence future traffic growth by investing in the alternatives: namely walking, cycling and public transport.

All this points towards the conclusion that, at Blue House, investment in a), b), c) and d) is needed in the short term, and that the success of this investment will have a significant effect on how much growth in car travel there will be in future. In short, as regards traffic growth, the future is unwritten; and it both can and should be shaped by a range of actions taken over the coming years.

For this reason, at and around the Blue House junction, I recommend that the City Council takes forward, *as soon as possible*, works to:

- remodel the roundabout to improve road safety;
- implement new paths and crossings to facilitate safer and more convenient walking and cycling; and
- extend bus lanes on the Great North Road to increase bus priority.

These works should be undertaken according to a design that enables further capacity increases at the roundabout, *should these be deemed necessary in due course*.

Should an increase in traffic capacity be considered necessary in the future, my recommendation is that this should take the form of expanding the existing roundabout by using the land where the Blue House itself currently sits, so as to minimise the loss of trees and other Moor land.

The accompanying Drawings A and B set out the scope of change proposed at the Blue House junction in the immediate future (A) and how this could be built upon in the future to increase traffic capacity (B). These layouts have arisen from an iterative design process involving scrutiny by the Working Group and traffic modelling to understand capacity issues. Further modelling work is now needed to develop a detailed design and ensure that change at Blue House does as much as possible to improve road safety and enable walking, cycling and bus travel, while providing sufficient capacity for general traffic.

The Working Group is particularly keen that further modelling work should explore: (a) the opportunity for implementing the proposed new, signalised walking/cycling crossings as single-stage facilities; (b) the opportunity for a crossing on the south arm of the roundabout; and (c) the effect on traffic queuing of the narrowing of the northbound approach arm shown on Drawing A.

The accompanying Drawing C sets out the recommended changes for Jesmond Dene Road as far as the junction with Matthew Bank. The layout allows vehicles to make all turns at the Osborne Road junction, and includes a new signalised pedestrian crossing facility across the Osborne Road arm. To provide a better level of service for people walking, the signalised junction with Moorfield should be modified and a new, signalised walking/cycling crossing should be installed just west of the Friday Fields path. Protected tracks and other measures to enable cycling are also recommended.

2. Recommendations for supporting actions by Newcastle City Council and its partners

Clearly, the implementation of the Council's transport policies, to achieve a shift to more sustainable modes of travel and reduce carbon emissions, will require changes on a much greater scale than physical changes at Blue House alone can achieve. To this end, arising from the deliberations of the Working Group, I recommend that the Council pursues the following actions, which will have a positive effect on travel choices both in the Blue House area and in the city generally.

- Work with its partner authorities and agencies to lobby central Government to review the basis on which it appraises and allocates funding for transport measures; and specifically to provide more funding for measures that will limit traffic growth, rather than accommodate it.
- Work with its partner authorities and agencies to improve the real and perceived quality of existing public transport services; including integrated ticketing, easy access to real-time information, possible changes to zone boundaries, new Metro vehicles, less-polluting buses, and better stop/station facilities.
- Work with its partner authorities and agencies to deliver new public transport services; including extensions to the Metro system, new bus services, and possible park-and-ride facilities.
- Identify a city-wide network of high quality cycling routes and adopt a funded programme of action to build this network over the next 10 years.
- Through dialogue with other providers, develop and consult on proposals to introduce measures to discourage unnecessary car travel through parking restraint. This should include the exploration of introducing a Workplace Parking Levy, building on Nottingham's positive experience with this measure.

In relation to the specific case of change at Blue House, I recommend that the Council:

- engages with the Local Enterprise Partnership as soon as possible, to secure its endorsement for the recommended approach;

- sets out a programme for the delivery of the recommended changes;
- implements its proposals to reduce speed limits in the area as soon as possible;
- undertakes work to explore the need for, and likely impact of, new measures to discourage 'rat-running' on streets in the wider area around the Blue House junction; and
- provides support to the Working Group in connection with my recommendations below.

3. Recommendations for the Blue House Working Group and the members of the groups it represents

I recommend that the members of the Working Group, together with members of the groups they represent, become pro-actively involved in promoting my recommended approach to change at Blue House, which has arisen from their contributions to date. In so far as my recommendations seek to achieve the Working Group's clear wish to minimise the loss of trees and Moor land, and to avoid the loss of the Blue House building if possible, it is clear that this will require future traffic growth to be substantially lower than predicted. It is also clear that there is significant scope for short local journeys currently undertaken by car to be undertaken on foot, by cycle or bus.

Arising from this, the role of the Working Group members in obtaining the active support of the people they represent, both for the recommended approach and for changing their current travel habits, is likely to be crucial in limiting future traffic growth and, thereby, in preserving the Blue House building and in protecting the trees and Moor land adjacent to the roundabout and connecting roads.

I further recommend that the remit of the Working Group be modified, and its membership augmented, to enable it to monitor design development and to consider complementary measures that may be needed in the wider area to ensure, as far as possible, that residential streets are not used by through traffic and that they become increasingly attractive for walking and cycling. The role of the group going forward could be similar to that of the local reference groups that have overseen the 'Streets for People' initiatives in Jesmond, Heaton & Ouseburn, and Arthur's Hill & Fenham.

John Dales, December 2017