

Department for Regional Development - TransportNI

YORK STREET INTERCHANGE

Public Inquiry

November 2015

Proof of Evidence:

**Background to Scheme and Statutory Procedures
(Summary)**

by

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1. INTRODUCTION**1.1 Personal Details**

My name is Roy Spiers. I am the Strategic Road Improvement Manager for Eastern Division of TransportNI. I have a BSc Honours Degree in Civil Engineering, I am a Chartered Engineer and a Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers. I hold a certificate of Project Sponsorship awarded by the Civil Service College and a Diploma in Management Practice from the University of Ulster. I have over 40 years' experience in various aspects of road design and maintenance with TransportNI (formerly Roads Service) and have led the Strategic Road Improvement Team in Eastern Division in the design and delivery of strategic road schemes for the past 13 years with responsibility for the development and implementation of a number of major road schemes.

1.2 Project Role

I am the Project Sponsor for the York Street Interchange with responsibility for development and delivery of the Proposed Scheme.

I have been involved with this strategic road improvement since its inception in 2005 and have managed its design development, consultations and progression through the statutory processes in accordance with the relevant procedures and business targets

I manage the consultancy team from URS who provide the technical expertise in the design of the project. URS, now part of AECOM, is one of the world's leading engineering consultancy firms. For the purposes of this Proof of Evidence, references to URS include reference to its former legacy companies, including Scott Wilson.

My role at this Public Inquiry is principally to provide evidence on the background of the Proposed Scheme, the policy context in which it is being progressed and the statutory procedures.

2. THE EXISTING SITUATION

The existing York Street junction is located on the Eastern Seaboard Corridor which is a part of the North Sea - Mediterranean Corridor, a Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) route which runs down the eastern side of Ireland linking the ports of Belfast, Dublin and Cork. The TEN-T network is illustrated in Figure 1.

The existing junction links together the three busiest roads in Northern Ireland and provides access to the Port of Belfast from the Strategic Road Network and is the main access to Belfast from the north.

The current arrangement consists of a signalised gyratory “box” system with traffic signals at each corner, serving over 100,000 traffic movements per day. It is a source of traffic congestion and requires careful traffic management, particularly in peak periods, to ensure that the gyratory system does not become blocked as this would result in significant traffic delays.

The existing junction is therefore considered a “bottleneck” on the Strategic Road Network in accordance with the definition established by the Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012, i.e.:

“...where localised restrictions cause undue congestion and thereby delay for freight, public transport and cars.”

York Street also provides a pedestrian route linking the railway station at York Street and the residential area of North Belfast to the City Centre. This can be a particularly difficult and intimidating route for pedestrians as they have to cross six lanes of traffic at two locations on their route into the city. There are no cycling facilities at present through the junction.

The traffic route from the M2 to the Westlink is particularly affected by delays as these vehicles are required to pass through three sets of traffic signals to make this connection.

Local traffic movements on the adjacent streets are also difficult as drivers seek alternative access and egress to and from the City Centre.

The area is bounded by a local residential area in Little Georges Street on the northern side of the Westlink and by the lands owned by the Harbour Commissioners along Corporation Street. The planned opening of the University of Ulster development in 2017 along with other planned proposals has been considered on the basis of information made available as part of their respective planning applications.

3. BACKGROUND AND POLICY / STRATEGIES

The programme to improve transport links in Northern Ireland has been developed and is based on a series of key documents which include:

- The 1998 White Paper 'A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone';
- 'Moving Forward: The Northern Ireland Transport Policy Statement' published in 1998;
- 'Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025 - Shaping our Future ' published in 2002;
- 'Regional Development Strategy 2035 – Building a Better Future' published in 2012;
- 'Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012' published in 2012;
- 'Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future – A New Approach to Regional Transportation', published in 2012;
- 'Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015' published in 2005;
- 'Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015' (BMTP) published in 2004;
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2015;
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018;
- Investment Delivery Plan for Roads;
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021; and
- Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015.

The Regional Transport Strategy recognises the importance of removing bottlenecks on the Key Transport Corridors. The bottleneck at the York Street Interchange is identified in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the Consultation Document "*Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015*" published in 2006.

The proposed improvement was developed following the Public Inquiry into the M1/Westlink Improvements that was held in 2002 and the completion of the statutory Orders for the improvement of the M2. It was clearly recognised that both these schemes would deliver traffic quicker to the York Street junction, which even at that time was considered to be operating in excess of its capacity.

In 2005 a feasibility assessment of options to alleviate traffic congestion at the existing York Street junction was undertaken by URS.

Several primary investment options were considered to improve conditions at York Street. These options ranged from traffic management options, which could have been implemented in the short term to provide immediate improvements, to full grade-separation options that removed the conflicts between main traffic movements implemented in the longer term.

This resulted in two reports being produced in 2005, the Traffic Management Options Report and the York Street Interchange Preliminary Appraisal Report.

The Traffic Management Options Report considered traffic management solutions for the junction. The options presented were not considered to provide an acceptable solution in terms of operational effectiveness and safety and therefore were not taken forward.

The York Street Interchange Preliminary Appraisal Report considered the provision of grade separation with direct links between the three main routes. This was confirmed as feasible and this option was presented to the then Roads Service Board in 2006 prior to the scheme being admitted to the TransportNI Forward Planning Schedule.

A short term improvement to widen the Westlink to provide a dedicated off slip to York Road was implemented and completed in 2009.

4. SCHEME DEVELOPMENT, STATUTORY PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION

In March 2008 I was appointed as Project Sponsor and managed the appointment of URS to undertake the scheme development in accordance with the TransportNI procedures as set out in its Policy and Procedure Guide RSPPG E030 entitled "*Major Works Schemes – Inception to Construction*" (DRD-YSI-2-01) and the requirements of the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB).

A Preliminary Options Report which summarises the outcome of a DMRB Stage 1 Scheme Assessment was completed in March 2009. This document considered six options and recommended that four of these be taken forward for more detailed assessment at the next stage, based around the principle of two options with largely elevated links and two links with mainly depressed links. Based on this report the scheme was formally approved by the Investment Decision Maker (IDM) in the form of the then Roads Service Board for inclusion in the Preparation Pool, which is a programme of high priority schemes that TransportNI is committed to progressing through the Statutory Procedures of Environmental Statement, Direction Order and Vesting Order. This is termed Approval Gateway 0 in RSPPG E030.

Following Approval Gateway 0, a DMRB Stage 2 Scheme Assessment was commenced on the scheme. As part of this process a non-statutory public consultation exercise was completed in June 2011, to invite comments from the public on the four options being considered. The findings from this consultation exercise were one of many factors taken into consideration at the end of the assessment process, where a single preferred option was identified. The findings from the Stage 2 Scheme Assessment and the reasons for the selection of the single preferred option are reported in the summary Preferred Options Report which was prepared and submitted to the IDM. Formal approval was granted to progress development of the preferred option and to start work on the statutory procedures in October 2012. This is termed Approval Gateway 1 in RSPPG E030.

The preferred option, now termed the Proposed Scheme, was then further developed to complete a full Environmental Assessment examining the impacts of the Proposed Scheme under a range of headings. This assessment detailed the factors that would be put in place to mitigate the impact of the proposed changes and detailed the land that would be required for the Proposed Scheme.

The statutory changes to the road network, in terms of designation of the roads, were also determined in the Designation Order, with the Vesting Order prepared to reflect and enable the necessary purchase of lands.

The announcement of the proposals for the statutory Orders was made on 27th January 2015 by the Minister for Regional Development.

The documents published for statutory public consultation on 28th January and 4th February 2015 included:

- a draft Direction Order (DRD-YSI-4-02);
- a draft Vesting Order (DRD-YSI-4-03); and
- an Environmental Statement (DRD-YSI-4-02).

The documents were made available at a Public Exhibition held on 9th and 10th February 2015 at the Ramada Encore Hotel, Talbot Street, Belfast. Members of the team were available at the exhibition to explain the details of the Proposed Scheme as required. A presentation of the Proposed Scheme was also made to the Committee for Regional Development on 25th February 2015.

A total of 53 responses were received by TransportNI prior to the closing date and a further 6 received after the closing date of 10th March 2015. The subsequent public consultation report

(DRD-YSI-3-14) summarises the objections as 33 objections to the Proposed Scheme which can be broken down as:

- 4 objections on the basis of cost and that there are other higher priority schemes on the A6 and A5;
- 20 objections on the basis of insufficient provision for non-motorised users and cyclists in particular;
- 3 objections (including petitions signed by 26 people) about the impact of the proposals on the local community and residents of Little Georges Street and Molyneaux Street;
- 3 objections by parties affected by the draft Vesting Order;
- 2 objections relating to the development of the Proposed Scheme; and
- 1 objection relating to the impact of construction.

There were 9 comments in favour of the Proposed Scheme and 17 comments that did not express a view either in favour or against.

Throughout the process, there have been both statutory and non-statutory public consultation periods as highlighted in the evidence above. In addition to these processes there have been many meetings with interested parties and key stakeholders to allow TransportNI to incorporate their requirements and possible mitigation measures during the development of project. Some of these meetings have taken place after the formal objections have been lodged. We will continue to work with identified stakeholders up to and throughout the Public Inquiry.

On consideration of the responses submitted to TransportNI and because of the high profile nature of the Proposed Scheme the Minister for Regional Development announced on 25th March 2015 his decision to hold a Public Inquiry.

5. PUBLIC INQUIRY

TransportNI has appointed Mr Jim Robb as the Inspector to the Public Inquiry, with Mr Jack Cargo appointed as Assistant Inspector. Formal notice of the intention to hold a Public Inquiry has been published in accordance with TransportNI procedures.

Transport NI has prepared responses to the objections that have been lodged and exchanged this information with the objectors.

6. THE DEPARTMENT'S CONSIDERATION

The existing York Street junction which links three of the busiest roads in Northern Ireland by means of a signalised gyratory system has for some time been identified as a bottleneck on the strategic road network. The need for improvement has been identified in key strategy documents such as the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The appraisal of proposals for improvement are assessed against the Government's five criteria of Environment, Safety, Economy, Accessibility and Integration and also against the scheme specific objectives:

- to remove a bottleneck on the strategic road network;
- to deliver an affordable solution to reduce congestion on the strategic road network;
- to improve reliability of strategic journey times for the travelling public;
- to improve access to the regional gateways from the Eastern Seaboard Key Transport Corridor;
- to maintain access to existing properties, community facilities and commercial interests;
- to maintain access for pedestrians and cyclists; and
- to improve separation between strategic and local traffic.

TransportNI has considered the options available and concluded that the proposal to directly link the three main roads will greatly improve conditions for strategic and local traffic, reduce severance between North Belfast and the City Centre and substantially improve facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

7. THE PROPOSED SCHEME

The Proposed Scheme has regard to the significant constraints that are associated with improving the road network within a very tightly constrained urban area. It provides direct links for the following traffic movements:

- Westlink to M2: Two traffic lanes which take the road under the new York Street Bridge and threads between the supports of the Dargan Bridge before rising to join the M2;
- M2 to Westlink: Two traffic lanes which run over a new bridge at Dock Street before descending sharply to below ground level to pass under the Westlink to M3 link, the Lagan and Dargan bridges and then under the new York Street bridge to join the Westlink;

- Westlink to M3: A single traffic lane which runs under the new York Street Bridge and continues at ground level under the Dargan and Lagan Bridges, over the M2 to the Westlink connection before rising to join the M3;
- M3 to Westlink: This single lane link diverges off from the M3 and threads between the piers of the Dargan Bridge below ground level and then under the new York Street Bridge before rising to join the Westlink. This link also accommodates a diverge off to the City Centre (Nelson Street) and Great Georges Street;
- Dock Street to M3: A single lane on slip from Dock Street which connects to the Westlink to M3 link before rising to join the M3. This incorporates a short length of access road to provide access to land that will be available for development post completion;
- York Street: This will be carried over the Westlink on two new bridges. It will provide two North bound traffic lanes to York Street and north of the city , two traffic lanes towards the M2, a single city bound bus/cycle lane, a north bound cycle lane and footways on either side of the carriageway;
- Westlink to York Street and Docks: A new single lane slip road connecting to York Street with traffic lights will be provided; and
- Docks to Westlink: A new access will be created at Duncrue Street which connects to the M2 before the new bridge at Dock Street.

In order to future proof the opportunity to upgrade the Dargan Bridge to accommodate future dualling the foundations of the piers supporting this bridge will, as a minimum, be upgraded together with the piers affected.

The very tight configuration and the vertical and horizontal constraints mean that there will be a series of Departures from Standard associated with the design. The identified Departures from Standard have been submitted and are awaiting final approval from the Director of Engineering of TransportNI.

Speed limits of 40mph will be applied on all interchange links between the Westlink, M2 and M3 within the junction with the exception of the current M2 to M3 road which is currently 50mph. The speed limits on associated slip roads to and from the new interchange links will generally be 40mph, with the exception of the York Street to M2 slip road, which will be subject to a speed limit of 50mph.

The opportunity will be taken to change the current road drainage outfall, which currently discharges to the sewage system and provide a separate pumped outfall to the River Lagan.

The aesthetics of the scheme will address issues of user friendliness and marking the junction as a major gateway to the city. This has been developed under the guidance of a group of key stakeholders as a Strategic Advisory Group and is reported in document referenced DRD-YSI-3-15.

The option appraisal assessment will be set out in the evidence to be given by Mr Michael Megarry of URS. He will be supported by the appointed buildability Mr John Fraser of Gareloch Consult Ltd.

The economic case and traffic assessment will be addressed in the evidence to be given by Mr Russell Bissland of URS.

The environmental assessment and the proposed mitigation will be described in the evidence given Mr Gareth Coughlin. He will be assisted by the specialists in regard to air quality by Mr Garry Gray, noise by Mr Alf Maneylaws, landscape and visual by Mr Paul Tully and in regard to daylight assessment by Dr Foroutan Parand.

8. CONCLUSIONS

TransportNI has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the options for the proposed improvement including a full environmental impact assessment of the Proposed Scheme and where appropriate proposed mitigation measures.

TransportNI has concluded that the Proposed Scheme represents good value for money. The Proposed Scheme has a TransportNI approved estimate range of between £125 million and £165 million. Over the 60 year assessment period it provides a Benefit to Cost Ratio of 2.33 (based on National Road Traffic Forecast Central Growth factors).

The scheme will enhance the connection between North Belfast and the City Centre and will significantly improve access for pedestrian, cyclist and public transport. In particular the connection between the Yorkgate railway station and the city.

TransportNI has approved a procurement strategy which will to some extent be running in parallel with the completion of the statutory procedures and the consideration of the proposal by the Inspector to the Public Inquiry. This procurement programme is necessary to ensure that scheme delivery is within a potential EU funding programme. It is deemed sufficiently flexible to accommodate the outcomes of the Public Inquiry. It includes a pre-qualification process for prospective tenderers that will start immediately after the Public Inquiry and result in publication of a shortlist for tender in February 2016.