

FMC response to the consultation on the Milton Road Improvement Scheme

Friends of Mitcham's Corner have attended the public exhibition at Chesterton Community College, and various members of the Committee have attended other briefing sessions. We have also had discussions with our membership, City and County Councillors and members of the City Deal team. The following comments summarise our views on the options under consideration, and the overall approach taken to the consultation process.

1 Context and approach of the consultation

The consultation has pre-empted important research, and has not presented an adequate evidence base for the public to make well informed comments. The options presented and the process for assessing these are overly dominated by a highways-engineering approach.

The city-wide Cambridge Access Study is ongoing and does not report until mid-2016. We believe it is not sensible to be consulting on major schemes like Milton Road and Histon Road before the results of this wider consultation are available.

No consideration has been given to Policy 21 of the new Local Plan, in which the City has set the objective of reducing the impact of traffic on the Mitcham's Corner area and ultimately removing the gyratory system in favour of a simpler intersection with the emphasis on creating 'a sense of place'. Both of the proposed schemes will lead to increased traffic (and therefore congestion) at Mitcham's Corner and necessitate keeping the gyratory system for the foreseeable future.

We were disappointed with the quality of the presentation materials used in the exhibitions. It is hard for ordinary people to visualise what the options would look like based simply on technical drawings. There need to be CGI images or photo montages to illustrate the final outcomes before it can be claimed the public has been properly consulted. There should also be cross sections of the current highway at strategic points along the route, allowing before-and-after comparisons to be made.

WSP used existing traffic data in developing the options, but this information – or even the modelling principles used – were not available to the public. In particular, we understand that any consideration of a reconfigured junction at Mitcham's Corner was excluded from the present consultation because initial modelling indicated it would cause problems elsewhere on the system. We consider this high-handed, running against the principle of an open, transparent examination of options.

While we recognise that the overarching objective is to improve bus access and reduce congestion, the study has been far too dominated by a narrow focus on highways, vehicle traffic and engineering solutions. We understand that there has been no input from urban planners or landscape architects, even though the proposals will have a massive and irreversible impact on the urban environment. We believe an assessment of impact on the public realm is a mandatory requirement for City Deal investments.

Finally, for a consultation focussing on improving bus services, the bus companies have been little in evidence. They may have been involved in the initial discussions, but do not seem to have committed

to anything whatsoever, and have not sent representatives to the exhibitions and other public meetings. A far more robust engagement with the bus companies is vital, and their inputs should be published with other evidence before decisions can be endorsed.

2 The Do Maximum option is a non-starter

The impact of the Do Maximum options on the urban environment and the limited incremental benefits it brings, mean it can be ruled out immediately.

The Do Maximum option can be dismissed quickly. There is strong, near-unanimous opposition by local residents due to its highly negative effect on the urban environment. It would represent an unprecedented scale of highways development in a residential area (there is no other example of a Cambridge road with two bus lanes, two car lanes and two cycle lanes). Moreover, it would be poor value for money: WSP's own impact assessment¹ shows that it would only bring 4% more benefits than the Do Something option. True, it yields some improvements to bus times, but not anywhere near enough, given the high price financially, socially and environmentally.

3 The Do Something option fails to meet the City Deal's own objectives

The Do Something option fails to meet even the objectives defined by the City Deal itself. It will not improve bus services to the degree needed, could actually increase car use, does not represent value for money, and will have a highly negative impact on the urban environment.

The City Deal has defined the following objectives, and in this section we assess the Do Something option against these criteria:

- prioritise buses
- increase bus usage
- improve air quality
- encourage more frequent bus services
- maintain or reduce levels of car traffic
- enhance the environment and cityscape
- achieve value for money
- ensure sustainability.

Will not sufficiently improve bus services

There is little evidence that this option would result in the required level of improvement to the reliability and use of buses. The fact is that services must be improved immensely before people will use buses rather than their cars. *But investment in roads alone will not achieve this.* Moreover, this 1.5 mile stretch of Milton Road represents only a small proportion of the total bus journeys, so the scheme will have a limited effect on overall timings and reliability.

The scheme includes no measures that would actively encourage *more* bus services. It is extraordinary that there has been so little engagement with the bus companies, which will benefit from a huge investment of public money, yet are not required to make any commitments whatsoever in terms of future services and pricing.

¹ See Section 8 of the Draft Options Report. The figure of 4% is calculated from the weighted totals of 604 for Do Maximum and 578 for Do Something.

Nothing is done to address the major needs of *local* bus users which are that a) all services passing through Mitcham's Corner should actually stop there; and b) bus stops should be located in a much more user-friendly way, to allow ready access to all the services through the area.

Will encourage rather than deter car use

The scheme would result in a better situation for cars coming into the city, because the closure of various junctions would give cars unimpeded movement along Milton Road. This would very likely encourage *more* car journeys rather than fewer.

Will have a highly negative effect on the Milton Road environment

The opposition of Milton Road residents is well known to the City Deal committees. Even the Do Something option involves large-scale intervention in a long-standing cityscape, with no benefit to local residents or businesses, and little benefit to those commuting into and out of the City.

Particularly sensitive issues are the loss of verges and trees, and the restricted access to certain side roads which will create 'rat runs' and further deterioration in access for local residents. In addition, a road system with fast-moving traffic and loss of parking spaces would have a negative effect on the retailers at the developing south end of Milton Road.

Does not represent value for money and is not sustainable

Better value for money could be achieved by implementing a limited and carefully researched set of improvements to the highway, supported by a raft of measures designed to improve bus services and intelligently manage traffic flows (we mention some possibilities in section 5 below). Such an approach would be more scalable and testable than an all-or-nothing engineering project – e.g. banning turns at specific junctions could be tested for a trial period, and solutions like roadside ticket machines could be introduced gradually.

The term 'sustainable' is of course so vague as to be almost meaningless. However, we would say that laying down a 20-metre wide right of way through a residential area and causing irreversible damage to the urban environment cannot be a 'sustainable' approach. Notoriously, traffic expands to fill the road capacity available, and therefore long-term 'soft' solutions absolutely must form part of the package.

4 Reconfiguring the gyratory at Mitcham's Corner should be included in the scheme

There is already powerful momentum for a simplified junction from local businesses, residents and City planners, and this is key for the City's plans to regenerate the area. The Milton Road scheme offers an unprecedented opportunity to address this pressing matter, which must not be missed. A new junction could improve bus times, reduce accidents, improve the cyclist and pedestrian experience, improve the urban environment, release valuable land for development and public use, and strengthen support for the overall scheme.

Friends of Mitcham's Corner and local political representatives strongly believe that a radical restructuring of Mitcham's Corner should be included in the Milton Road Scheme, and not left for a subsequent project by the City Council at an indeterminate time in the future. There is a very clear desire by the City Council and local people that the Mitcham's Corner area be regenerated. Policy 21 in the forthcoming Local Plan lays out objectives for this Opportunity Area which explicitly include reducing the effects of traffic and restructuring the gyratory system at

Mitcham's Corner.² These objectives are supported by residents and businesses, as evidenced by numerous surveys, meetings and local events organised by FMC.

The single largest obstacle to realising these objectives is the gyratory system, which reduces the value of land and buildings, makes the area less attractive to businesses and investment, and locks it into a spiral of slow decline. Our recent surveys show that 75% of local people want the gyratory replaced with a simpler junction.

The Milton Road Scheme offers an opportunity to redesign the highway system at Mitcham's Corner: it brings funds, external expertise and public interest that may never again be available. Yet there is little will from the City Deal highways engineers to replace the gyratory as part of the first tranche of work.³ There appear to be several reasons for this lack of enthusiasm, reasons which we regard as unsound:

- (a) Mitcham's Corner is an efficient junction offering a well-proven solution to the complex flow of traffic at this point.
- (b) Any radical change to this system would have a significant – probably negative – impact on the rest of the highway network.
- (c) The cost (several million pounds) outweighs the likely benefits, and therefore represents poor value for money.
- (d) The benefits would accrue mostly to local people, whereas the focus of the City Deal is on improving bus and car access to the city for people living outside Cambridge.

(a) "... an efficient junction ..."

The view that the gyratory functions well is made from a vehicular perspective; from the point of view of pedestrians, cyclists and residents, the gyratory is strongly *dysfunctional*. Mitcham's Corner is a nightmare to navigate on a cycle, or even by foot, and is a major 'accident cluster site'. Piecemeal improvements to cycle lanes and footpaths would fail to deliver the required improvements to safety and utility.

Brian Stinton said at the special meeting of the North Area Committee that roundabouts are especially dangerous for cyclists, and gave this as a good reason for removing the Elizabeth Way roundabout. Surely the same reasoning applies to Mitcham's Corner, which is an enormous roundabout. Even if cycle lanes are provided along Milton Road, the absence of a cycle-friendly scheme at Mitcham's Corner means that cycling along this route would still be seen as hazardous.

But even from the point of view of buses, a simplified junction with more direct north–south routing would bring worthwhile savings in journey time, and simplify access to bus services by the growing population of residents, students, visitors and workers at Mitcham's Corner. These benefits would be further enhanced by intelligent signalling to prioritise buses, and improved placement of pedestrian and cycle crossings. True, the overall speed of car traffic may be reduced, but in our view this is a good thing: (a) the current speeds achieved are dangerous and wholly inappropriate for a mixed-use area; (b) reducing speeds would be in line with the 20mph

² Policy 21 states that "The radical transformation of the gyratory system is identified as a key public realm and infrastructure project. Improving the traffic-dominated one-way system and promoting high quality redevelopment are fundamental to the overall vision."

³ We note that on p.73 of the Draft Options Report the summary of the Do Maximum option includes "reconfiguring the gyratory, including more direct N–S bus routing", yet the map on p.88 states "feasibility design for Mitcham's Corner gyratory to be developed separately" – clearly there was a change of heart during the drafting of the report.

restrictions in the city; and (c) making things slightly more difficult for car users is in line with the general policy of reducing private car usage in the City in favour of alternative modes. At a minimum the superficial modelling exercise already conducted needs to be variance-tested against a range of criteria relating to speed, volume of traffic and increased utility for cyclists and pedestrians.

(b) “... negative impact on the rest of the highway system ...”

Precisely because the effect may be significant, options to remove the gyratory should be designed by the best available experts, subjected to careful modelling, and well scrutinised by the public. The Milton Road scheme offers funds, expertise and public interest and is therefore a unique opportunity that must not be wasted.

At present, Mitcham’s Corner serves as a node in the ‘inner ring road’. However, the whole concept of an inner ring road is not sustainable as the core of the city expands outwards. Changes at Mitcham’s Corner offer an opportunity to help segment the existing system and put it in a better state to deal with future growth. (Lewis Herbert, at the special meeting of the North Area Committee said that fragmenting the inner ring road is under serious consideration.) Where the ring road inhibits economic growth in a key zone of Cambridge, as at Mitcham’s Corner, eliminating the ring system should be a priority objective.

(c) “... costs outweigh benefits ...”

Removing the gyratory would release valuable land close to the city centre for commercial and public development, stimulate local retailers, and in general reverse the current slow decline. Even in purely financial terms, these benefits would contribute significantly to the overall business case for the Milton Road scheme. In addition, there would be significant public-good benefits that are already a priority for the City (as mentioned in Policy 21).

Focusing simply on highways matters, a simplified junction would improve safety, bring great benefits to pedestrians and cyclists, improve bus services and simplify access to these services.

It would be possible to carry out the development in phases, with the initial restructuring of the highways being followed by public realm improvements funded by the City (potentially with public-private partnerships), plus developers’ Section 106 money.

(d) “... primarily of benefit to local people ...”

Highways schemes like the two options under consultation can prove deeply unpopular with locals, who feel their neighbourhood is being destroyed for the benefit of drivers from outside Cambridge. Redesigning Mitcham’s Corner would bring long-wished-for local benefits, to some degree rebalancing the scheme in political terms. On the other hand, there is a high risk that a scheme that excludes Mitcham’s Corner would make it even more difficult in the future to make the changes that are needed (e.g. by forcing more traffic to go around the gyratory in order to double back up Milton Road to circumvent access restrictions at Gilbert Road).

5 More intelligent, soft options should be considered

The current highway-engineering approach should be scaled back to form one element within an integrated plan. Crucial stakeholders like the bus companies, businesses and the education sector must be involved more actively in order to ensure high-quality bus services, improve cycle and pedestrian travel modes, and manage demand more intelligently.

There is merit in some of the individual measures included in the present proposals, but the overall emphasis is far too much on building new highway infrastructure, which would deliver limited gains. A more sophisticated approach is needed which combines carefully targeted infrastructure improvements and restrictions at junctions, with a number of softer options focused on needs and services rather than roads and traffic. Some possibilities are listed below.

- A single ‘tidal’ bus lane might be an efficient and cost-effective solution, benefiting bus services during both periods of peak traffic. Possibly it would be better to have such a bus lane in the middle of the road rather than on the outside.
- One of the major reasons for delays in bus services is the amount of time that is needed for passengers to get their tickets. They could instead pre-buy tickets from ticket machines at bus stops (like London’s Oyster Card system, or as is currently done for the guided busway).
- The introduction of city-wide residents-only parking would do something to encourage the use of services such as the park-and-ride.
- The park-and-ride system is now in disarray and poorly used. The main reason for that is *not* because of the £1 charge (financially a negligible amount), but because of the cumbersome process and machinery to get a ticket.
- There should be *more* park-and-ride facilities (e.g. at the top of Milton Road, or in Histon), and a bigger difference between the price of parking and the cost of using the park-and-ride and other bus services.
- In a small city centre like Cambridge it makes little sense for all the buses to be such large vehicles (and this will be even more true as the density of bus traffic into the centre increases). There should be more frequent services using smaller buses.
- More could be done by businesses to smooth out the peaks in road use, such as car-sharing schemes, flexible working hours, staggered business hours, encouragement of working from home, and rewards for workers who do not bring a car to work.
- Similarly, the education sector (schools as well as the universities and colleges) could do much more to spread or reduce the traffic they cause. Hours could be staggered, dedicated buses provided, and a larger proportion of students accommodated outside the city.
- The feasibility of deploying a city-wide “intelligent transport system” should be studied. Such systems allow communication between buses, traffic management systems and the public, and have been deployed successfully in many countries.⁴
- Options should be considered for congestion charging or some other means of regulating traffic at the city boundaries.

6 Conclusion

We ask our Councillors and their officers to carefully consider the opportunities presented by the City Deal millions in a holistic and long-term way, and deliver on the difficult but all-important objective of improving the urban environment. We would like to see a truly alternative scheme which includes Mitcham’s Corner and offers a lightweight, reversible, exciting, and imaginatively engineered solution worthy of Cambridge’s worldwide reputation and which stimulates and nurtures the city, its residents, students, workforce and visitors alike.

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For example, Cambridge Broadband Networks has deployed its VectaStar system in 100 cities in 45 countries. It is ironic that Cambridge should be exporting such leading-edge technology while failing to deploy it at home.