

A45 Sprint Consultation – SMBC Technical Response

Context

Transport for West Midlands is consulting on its proposals for 'A45 Sprint'; a Bus Rapid Transit route that will connect Birmingham City Centre with Birmingham Airport and Solihull Town Centre. The scheme, which is targeted to be delivered in advance of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, is proposed to run along various roads for which Solihull MBC is Local Highway Authority – the A45 between the borough boundary with Birmingham and its junction with Damson Parkway, as well as from the A45 / Hobs Moat Road junction through to Solihull Station via Lode Lane and the Town Centre.

Various literature has been released as part of the consultation, along with a set of plans that show preliminary design and highways layout. The material and plans, available at (<https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/economy/sprint/>), have been scrutinised by the Council in developing this response to the consultation.

Policy

The Council's transport strategy, 'Solihull Connected', acknowledges the need for improvements to public transport provision within the Borough to enable a mass-transit network that has the potential to carry large numbers of people quickly, reliably and comfortably. As such, one of the key objectives of the strategy is to "support and enable the integrated delivery of sustainable and efficient forms of transport like mass-transit, cycling and walking". This is translated through the strategy as requiring public transport that is:

- High quality (vehicles, waiting facilities, information and branding)
- High frequency and capacity (based on a 'turn up and go' philosophy)
- Reliable
- Safe
- Integrated within and outside of the system (particularly with the wider public transport network, and not to the significant detriment of the transport network as a whole)
- Ultra-low Emissions
- Utilises a modern and flexible fares and payment system

The benefits that the A45 Sprint scheme aims to deliver are based on two main themes:

- A high quality provision of service through the utilisation of modern, efficient vehicles that offer passengers a level of service and comfort that is similar to a tram with off-board ticketing, multiple-door boarding, wheelchair and pushchair access, free Wi-Fi, air conditioning and on-board audio visual announcements and travel information; and
- The installation of highways works – bus lanes will be implemented where possible, alongside measures and controls that provide a level of priority for buses at key junctions.

Through the delivery of the above, the A45 Sprint scheme will align with, and deliver on, the key objectives set out in 'Solihull Connected'. Perhaps the greatest barriers to increased uptake of travel by bus are journey time and, in particular, journey time reliability as buses are caught in congestion as and when it builds on the highway network; key barriers that the A45 scheme seeks to address. It should be noted too, that the priority measures implemented in association with the Sprint scheme will also be available for general bus use; in effect therefore, the implementation of the A45 Sprint

scheme should generate reduced journey times, and enhanced journey time reliability, for all buses along the A45 and Lode Lane corridors.

Delivery

Whilst the A45 Sprint scheme aligns well with policy set out in the Council's transport strategy, and will improve journey time reliability, it is important to note that the delivery of such a scheme is more challenging in practice – there is a finite quantum of space available within highway constraints in which to ensure the efficient movement of people in general, and the prioritisation of public transport services at key locations on the highway network can come at the detriment of movement by other modes of transport (particularly private car users and Heavy Goods Vehicles) and public environment (in terms of amenity, public realm and biodiversity etc.).

In 2015, the Council delivered measures that provide bus priority on Lode Lane; one of the key corridors providing access to Solihull Town Centre, and a busy route both in terms of private and public transport movements. The scheme provides priority for public transport at key locations (including via a bus lane and a bus-gate at the Lode Lane junction with Warwick Road). Despite initial concern during its implementation, post-scheme evaluation has identified that the scheme has delivered reduced journey times for buses, with negligible impact on general road users. The scheme delivered at Lode Lane therefore proves that the delicate balance between providing a level of priority for public transport, and maintaining a high quality public environment and the efficient movement of non-public transport users in general, can be achieved.

It is within this context that the detail of the A45 Sprint proposal has been scrutinised, and the detailed comments below are provided within the context of seeking to further enhance the Sprint proposal and / or securing a greater understanding of its implications.

SMBC Comments

General / Overarching comments

1. The Council understands that detailed traffic modelling is yet to be undertaken to establish the impact of proposed priority measures at key junctions (for example the A45 / Hobs Moat Road, "Wheatsheaf" junction). Whilst the proposals do not appear, on paper, to result in a measurable reduction in highway capacity, further work is required by TfWM to demonstrate that the future performance of the highway network is acceptable (i.e. when taking into account of additional demand as a result of background traffic growth and traffic generated as a result of committed development).
2. The implementation of bus lanes and priority measures as part of the scheme, and particularly on the A45 Coventry Road, will result in the loss of a number of trees, will affect verge screening and have an impact on the local landscape. Adequate compensation / offsetting for any biodiversity loss will be required, along with replacement screening for affected residents.
3. Greater clarity is required on the approach to signage of Sprint stops that will also be used by local services – is Department for Transport authorisation for new signs required? Are new Traffic Regulation Orders required?
4. Integration / connectivity with standard bus network – Sprint stops are fewer, and more spaced apart, than standard bus stops, meaning that the points at which members of the public can interchange between conventional bus and Sprint are fewer (without a walk between stops). It will be important to ensure that Sprint stops are located in close proximity to conventional bus stops in locations where there is likely to be a demonstrable demand for interchange between services.
5. Use of the A45 Sprint will require some to purchase tickets prior to boarding the bus; it is not clear whether ticket machines will therefore be installed at bus stops / stands. Local experience from the implementation of Metro would suggest that there can be issues of vandalism in such

circumstances; greater clarity, and discussion with TfWM, is therefore required to establish an agreed approach to provision of facilities, and security arrangements at, Sprint stops.

6. The material released as part of the consultation identifies stop locations along the route, and highlights the form that bus stops and shelters could have. However, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to stops facilities is unlikely to be appropriate; the Council therefore requires further discussion with TfWM to ensure that the facilities provided at each stop are tailored to the environment in which each specific stop is proposed – experience has shown that the lighting / advertising can be disruptive to residents, excessively long shelters can impact on visibility / residents' views, and the provision of bins in shelters can lead to excessive littering.
7. Implementation – although the scheme will be implemented by TfWM, its delivery is contingent upon Traffic Regulation Orders being undertaken by SMBC, which will almost certainly require decisions to be made by the Cabinet Member and the application of SMBC staff time and resources. SMBC expects that the costs associated with such activities are met by TfWM.
8. Maintenance – the implementation of Sprint will introduce new and / or additional infrastructure onto the Solihull highway network, generating an additional burden / maintenance liability for the Council. SMBC expects that a suitable commuted sum will be provided to ensure the on-going upkeep of additional infrastructure, on terms to be agreed.

Detailed Comments

9. The proposal includes the provision of a new pedestrian crossing over Hobs Moat Road, to the south of its junction with Old Lode Lane. The Council strongly supports provision of such a crossing facility, to ensure the safe crossing of pedestrians in a location where there is currently significant concern. During detailed design work, and implementation, care will need to be taken to ensure that the provision of the crossing facility does not impact upon existing accesses to / from adjacent properties.
10. A45 / Glencroft Road – whilst not in Solihull there is a concern that the proposed arrangement at this junction could affect Solihull residents. The proposed right turn lanes across the A45 central reservation appear very tight and are of a reduced length, which could generate a road safety concern if two vehicles / long commercial vehicles can occupy the right turn lane without overhanging onto the main running lanes. There may be merit in considering the closure of the right turn out of Glencroft Road.
11. Lode Lane / Boulton Road – clarification is required on the intentions for the existing pedestrian crossing to the south of Boulton Road. It is not clear, from the consultation plans, if the intention is to move the crossing and, if so, whether it could be too close to the junction with Boulton Road so as to conform with highway / road safety standards.
12. Station Approach – the proposal to accommodate Sprint stopping on-line, rather than in layby, will have affect traffic flow; a greater understanding of the impact of this element of the proposal is required. Furthermore, the recently delivered pedestrian link to Streetsbrook Road needs to be shown and access to it accommodated.
13. Ulleries Road – an additional Sprint stop is proposed, which requires extension of the existing layby, resulting in the loss of 4 trees. The potential to incorporate a Sprint stop into the existing stop (i.e. provide a shared stop) should be explored.
14. Hobs Moat Road between the Wheatsheaf and Melton Avenue – there is a significant loss of verge and landscaping alongside the existing service road (which, itself, is retained). Buses, and general traffic, are moved closer to property frontages and the landscaped verge is replaced by a narrow hard standing and / or footway, with footways becoming particularly narrow on the section at the end of the service road and the approach to the Wheatsheaf. The constraints in this location are understood by the Council, and the footway width pinch-points are largely as a result of the proposal to retain the service road in a layout that prevents its use as a rat-run; a

proposal that is supported by the Council. However, in undertaking detailed design work associated with this proposal, the Council will expect TfWM to explore every opportunity to maximise footway widths throughout this section of the scheme.

15. Lode Lane carriageway widening adjacent to Jaguar Land Rover – adequate screening will be required.

Summary

Solihull MBC supports the A45 Sprint proposal in principle, subject to further discussion on, and satisfactory resolution of, items 1 – 15 above.