



**ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 6 JUNE 2019**

A5 – WATLING STREET BRIDGE STRIKES, HINCKLEY

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with the background information to a presentation by Network Rail and Highways England, regarding bridge strikes at the A5 Watling Street rail bridge near Hinckley.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. Leicestershire County Council's Strategic Plan 2018-22 ('Working together for the benefit of everyone') was adopted by the Council in December 2017. It contains five strategic outcomes, including, a growing and resilient economy and keeping people safe and protected from harm.
3. Following comments made to the Cabinet in March 2018, Mr David Bill CC made a request to the Scrutiny Commissioners in December 2018, asking that Highways England and Network Rail be invited to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to provide a presentation in response to an increasing number of bridge strikes by vehicles on the A5 Watling Street.

Background

The Bridge

4. The bridge in question is located on the A5 Watling Street, between M69 junction 1 (M69 J1) and the A47 Dodwells Roundabout, near Hinckley. The bridge is a rail bridge that crosses over the A5 carriageway (see Appendix A location plan).
5. The bridge is owned and maintained by Network Rail and is located on the Birmingham to Peterborough line; which links Birmingham, Leicester, Peterborough via Nuneaton and Oakham (operated by CrossCountry).
6. Bridges with headroom of less than 16'6" (5.03m) are classed as 'low bridges'. These must be signed to identify the maximum height of a vehicle that can safely pass on the carriageway under the bridge. With a headroom clearance of 15' (4.6metres) the A5 Watling Street bridge is classed as a 'low bridge'.

The A5

7. The A5 runs for 275 miles from London to the ferry port of Holyhead and provides

direct connections to the M6, A38, M42, M69 and M1. The A5 is part of the wider trunk road network, which is maintained and operated by Highways England.

8. In the Midlands region, the A5 consists of a mix of single carriage (40mph) and dual carriageway (50mph and national speed limit) sections.
9. The Watling Street section of the A5 is single carriageway with a 50mph speed limit. It carries an average of 23,000 vehicles per day.
10. The A5 accommodates significant HGV flows. On average HGVs account for around 9% of all traffic along the A5, which is twice the national average for 'A' roads of 4.5%.
11. As a long distance route from the south-east to the north-west the A5 is strategically important, both to the regional and national economy. The corridor is a key artery for the movement of people and goods within the transport, manufacturing and logistics sectors, providing access to economic activity and growth.
12. In Leicestershire the route is a focus for economic growth, specifically around:-
 - Hinckley, such as the MIRA enterprise zone,
 - Magna Park, and;
 - Lutterworth and the potential development east of Lutterworth.
13. The route is also important for local connectivity linking local settlements, including Hinckley, Nuneaton and Lutterworth.
14. The A5 provides network resilience for the surrounding trunk road network (M6, M69 and the M1), but it comes under pressure if these roads are congested or closed due to planned works or emergency incidents.

Bridge strikes

15. Last year (2018) the number of bridge strikes across the whole rail network increased, making it the worst year for bridge strikes for five years. During this period, Leicestershire, alongside Cambridgeshire, have had the highest number of bridge strikes in the Country, with over 150 bridge strikes occurring in Leicestershire.
16. In the 12 month period April 2017 to 31 March 2018 the A5 Watling Street bridge was struck 25 times, making it the third most struck bridge in the country.

Existing measures

17. There are a number of existing measures in place on the A5, between the M69 J1 and M42 J8, to prevent strikes to this bridge. Mandatory traffic signs are in place on both approaches, in advance of the bridge. This signing gives drivers advance notice of the clearance height under the bridge in both metric and imperial units.
18. Existing signage on the bridge structure includes 'low bridge' warning signs and additional warning chevrons. There are also mandatory roundel warning signs, to indicate the minimum clearance height under the bridge.

19. There are also additional electronic message signs in both directions, in advance of the bridge. These involve vehicle height detectors, which are positioned on either side of the road. When triggered by high vehicles, an electronic sign illuminates to warn drivers that their vehicle is over height and that they should turn back.
20. Highways England are responsible for the provision of traffic signs on the A5 in advance of the bridge. Network Rail, as owners of the bridge, facilitate the installation of traffic signs on the structure itself.

Impact of bridge strikes (including diversion routes)

21. Nationally, each year there are about 2,000 railway bridge strikes. Taking account of undelivered goods, lost productivity from train delays and road congestion etc these strikes are estimated to have an annual cost to the national economy of up to £23 million.
22. The impact of bridge strikes to the A5 Watling Street bridge may:-
 - Jeopardise the safety of the public using the A5 and the rail line;
 - Cause structural damage to the bridge;
 - Result in delays on both the road and rail line, particularly if strikes happen during peak times and the A5 is closed;
 - Cause congestion on the adjacent local road network; and,
 - Impact on residents, businesses and the local economy in Hinckley and villages in south Leicestershire.
23. Following a bridge strike the A5 may need to be closed, requiring diversion routes. These diversion routes have been agreed between Leicestershire and Warwickshire County Councils, Highways England, Network Rail and Leicestershire and Warwickshire police. A closure can involve a length of the A5 from the A47 Dodwells roundabout to the M69 J1, with north and south bound diversion routes put in place by Highways England and the police (see Appendix B).
24. There are two other low bridges on local roads in the vicinity of the A5, on Nutts Lane and Rugby Road. Diversion routes are signed to avoid other low bridges and, where possible, traffic sensitive areas. However, drivers may choose to ignore diversion signs and divert onto less appropriate local roads (see Appendix A).
25. Traffic diverted from the A5 onto the local road network may also exacerbate issues associated with the traffic management of road or street works. This impacts on the County Council's ability, as the local highway authority, to manage the local road network and fulfil its statutory Network Management Duty.

Resource Implications

26. Officers will continue to work closely with the police to support Highways England and Network Rail in their efforts to reduce the frequency and impact of bridge strikes on the A5 and will keep Members updated, as appropriate.
27. The Directors of Corporate Resources and Law and Governance have been consulted on the contents of this report.

Conclusion

28. There have been an increasing number of bridge strikes by vehicles travelling on the A5 Watling Street, near Hinckley. The Watling Street bridge is owned and maintained by Network Rail, whilst the A5 is maintained and operated by Highways England.
29. The Watling Street section of the A5 carries significant numbers of HGV's and provides network resilience for the surrounding trunk road network.
30. There are a number of existing measures in place to prevent strikes to this bridge, including clearance height signs, 'low bridge' signs, warning chevrons and electronic message signs to warn drivers that their vehicles are too high for the bridge. Highways England is responsible for the provision of traffic signs on the A5, whilst Network Rail facilitate the installation of traffic signs on the bridge.
31. In the 12 month period April 2017 to 31 March 2018 the A5 Watling Street bridge was struck 25 times, making it the third most struck bridge in the country. The impact of these bridge strikes includes an increase in casualties, delays and congestion on the A5 and surrounding local roads and an impact on residents, businesses and the local economy in Hinckley and villages in south Leicestershire.
32. Officers will continue to work closely with the police to support Highways England and Network Rail in their efforts to reduce the frequency and impact of bridge strikes on the A5. Members will be kept informed, as appropriate.

Background Papers

County Council, 6 December 2017: 'Leicestershire County Council Strategic Plan and Single Outcome Framework'

<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=5104&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

Local Hinckley Members:-

- Mr David Bill CC (Hinckley - Hollycroft)
- Mrs Amanda Wright CC (Burbage)
- Mr Stuart Bray CC (Hinckley - St Marys)
- Mr Michael Mullaney CC (Hinckley – De Montfort)

Equality and Human Rights Implications

33. As a third party project, Highways England and Network Rail would be responsible for preparing any assessments, including an Environmental and Human Rights Impact Assessment for any projects relating to the A5 bridge at Hinckley. The County Council will examine its assessments and take account of these when identifying appropriate mitigation.

Partnership Working and Associated Issues

34. Leicestershire County Council will continue to work in partnership with Highways

England, Network Rail and the police in Leicestershire and Warwickshire to seek to reduce the frequency and impact of bridge strikes at the A5 Watling Street rail bridge.

Appendices

Appendix A – Location plan

Appendix B – Diversion routes (north and south bound)

Officers to Contact

Ann Carruthers

Director, Environment and Transport

Tel: (0116) 305 7000

Email: Ann.Carruthers@leics.gov.uk

Ian Vears

Assistant Director, Environment and Transport

Tel: (0116) 305 7966

Email: Ian.Vears@leics.gov.uk

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