

# Farnham Infrastructure Programme

## Farnham Town Council Response to Optimised Infrastructure Plan (March 2021)

### Overview

Farnham Town Council (FTC) is a partner in the Farnham Infrastructure Programme (FIP). While FTC welcomes the publication of the *Optimised Infrastructure Plan (Draft February 2021)* (OIP) produced by the FIP Programme Team appointed to develop the FIP, the views expressed in the OIP are those of the FIP and not necessarily those of FTC. It is therefore appropriate for FTC to record its own views in this response to the OIP.

The OIP has been developed from the Programme's Terms of Reference, which include FTC's Key Principles and Objectives for the programme and it is against those that the Council has evaluated the OIP.

FTC represents all areas of the town and regards them as equal. However, for the purposes described below its response is presented in three sections:

#### **1. Town centre aspects**

The town centre is the critical community and economic hub for the town as a whole, so is considered first. Together with the Neighbourhood aspects that follow, the town centre elements are likely to be the lead projects going forward, partly for reasons of urgency and partly because their delivery is less complex than the Major Road Network (MRN) projects.

#### **2. Neighbourhood aspects**

The town centre depends on the neighbourhoods to survive. Any town centre changes create impacts on the Farnham neighbourhoods; also, the neighbourhoods have infrastructure improvement needs in their own right. FTC consider these in the context of mitigation needed for the town centre changes and the connectivity needs between the neighbourhoods and the town centre.

#### **3. Major Road Network (MRN) aspects**

Both the town centre and the neighbourhood improvements affect the MRN aspects. FTC consider these in conjunction with the issues relating to the major roads in their own right.

Where the Council has not commented on the options and proposals outlined in the OIP, FTC is generally content with the direction in the Plan. What the Council has highlighted below are areas where it has concerns relating to the Plan, or wishes to suggest how the options should be narrowed down during the next stage of the programme. The Council has also not repeated all of the details raised during the programme and in the public consultation responses that have been submitted by others separately. The Council see the Draft OIP and this response as addressing the main issues; with such a broad programme, it is not practical to cover all the details in one go.

FTC recognises the extraordinary uncertainties that currently exist. The big "known unknowns" at the present time relate to future traffic levels; impacts from climate change initiatives; the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic; how people's lifestyles will change in the future, and how the community can be encouraged to adapt to these new circumstances. These issues introduce questions relating to future traffic levels and people's movement habits. Amongst all this, the

Farnham Neighbourhood Plan includes significant planned housing increases in Farnham, and there is substantial growth in the surrounding areas which impacts on the town's infrastructure. Current and existing forecasts should be incorporated in the FIP's plans and updated as relevant and reliable evidence is actively sought out.

Other factors that are difficult to quantify relate to a) future changes in government policy, either motivated by political changes or unseen events, and b) technological advances in transport, information and communications technologies, and c) modal shifts brought about by working from home etc. Hopefully, these will have positive effects that will reduce the ever-increasing traffic congestion. FTC takes the view that the programme team will have considered these issues, as best as anyone can at this point in time.

As illustrated by some of the examples that follow, FTC understands but fundamentally disagrees with the funding constraints that are placed on infrastructure spend. These constraints distort investment to such an extent that routine repairs, planned preventive maintenance and even day-to-day running costs of existing, perfectly fit-for-purpose, basic infrastructure are discouraged (if not banned) in favour of new one-off investment which actually increases the recurring spend funding shortfall. It is important that these constraints do not weaken or compromise the FIP output in any way that renders it sub-optimal (or, in other words, "penny wise and pound foolish"). It is important that a commuted sum should be applied to the scheme deliverables to provide an effective maintenance contribution.

FTC welcomes the proposals for quick wins that will elevate a number of long-standing pressures in the Town Centre and surrounding areas whilst the more detailed work on developing agreed proposals is undertaken. Specifically, the priorities on speed reduction (with 20mph zones) and removal of HGVs and are supported.

The Town Council has several key principles which predicate its response that follows:

- A western link road (incorporating a Wrecclesham bypass)
- Pedestrian focus for Farnham as a destination town is essential, with wider footways and increased pedestrian space to improve the shoppers' experience
- Mitigating the impacts of congestion and poor air quality
- Creating a transport hub around the station may obviate the need for the proposed Hickley's investment.

## **1 Town Centre**

The treatment of the town centre within the OIP is fundamental to the future of the town, not only in respect to what it provides for the community, but also to the economic health of the town's economy.

The OIP recognises that the centre is heavily compromised, at present, by traffic impacts and this affects the centre for residents and visitors in many respects, such as safety, accessibility, health and enjoyment. This particularly affects those businesses in the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors. There is general agreement that pedestrians need to be better provided for and at the expense of vehicle convenience if needs be.

The long-standing debate has been about how traffic can be reduced and some form of pedestrianisation introduced. During the FIP early phases and public consultations, the Council has noticed a growing public expectation that some form of pedestrianisation is desirable.

FTC is surprised that the Draft OIP has not explored further the pedestrianisation options in more detail, especially as other town centre aspects, such as park and ride, and car park provision, are affected by whatever pedestrianisation solution is adopted.

In response to these factors, FTC recommends that the OIP includes designs and modelling for a phased implementation of a pedestrian zone in the town centre that mitigates against any adverse impacts that may be expected. In essence, other measures should be introduced, prior to curtailing the vehicles, so that the town as a whole is not adversely impacted.

These are the specific recommendations (note they are listed as a set of objectives, not a phased order)

## **1.1 Pedestrian Zone**

The key objective is to create a more attractive town centre, especially for pedestrians. Create a pedestrian zone that could include southern section of Castle Street (from St George's Yard), eastern section of West Street (from ex Post Office building), The Borough, western section of East Street (from Threadneedle Street - this is the delivery road for Brightwells, one-way northerly), Downing Street (northern section).

### **Vehicle Access**

All vehicles prohibited, except for permitted vehicles: public transport, emergency vehicles, special delivery vans, mobility vehicles, cycles. Permits granted for private vehicle access to yards within zone. Strict etiquette controls on all vehicles allowed in zone.

### **Streetscene**

High quality paving throughout, with patterned delineation defining a single width vehicle track and wider pedestrian space. Other landscaping features to be incorporated, including planting, seating, cycle stands, market stalls, various occasional event materials.

FTC would resist the perpetuation of 2-way, double width vehicle tracks, since that would undermine the creation of attractive street scenes, as outlined above, given the overall space available. The Council would expect there to be adjacent space for deliveries at the appropriate time; and buses to use smart, clean technology and real time information systems.

### **Deliveries**

Daytime deliveries only by special light vans operating from delivery consolidation centre. Commercial delivery vehicles allowed access off peak in night-time period or phased according to night-time economy needs.

### **Cycle/Scooter Access**

Allowed to share vehicle track, so long as proven not to impact pedestrian considerations.

## **1.2 Castle Street**

This is the premier street of Farnham. New 7m central carriageway, surfaced with prestige material; 6m pavements with high quality paving; high quality streetscene with new planting; limited parking spaces for resident visitors. Residents to be offered alternate options for residents' parking.

Creation of *town square* in the wide (lower) pedestrian section of Castle Street to facilitate a vibrant café culture and event space.

### **1.3 East Street & Brightwells Connectivity**

East Street streetscene quality to match rest of pedestrian zone. Eastern section reverts to roadway for vehicle egress from Threadneedle Street.

### **1.4 North Farnham Vehicular Access to Town Centre**

New access road to be constructed on acquired land between Castle Hill and West Street. This would provide access to the Upper Hart car park from north Farnham, and potentially on to the western side of the town centre.

### **1.5 Car Parks**

Since through traffic will have been eliminated with a pedestrian zone, it is envisaged that 'in/out' vehicles that stop in the car parks can still be accommodated without clogging the access roads. Hence it is recommended that existing car parks are retained for this reason and for personal safety, addressing concerns of accessing distant park and stride locations in the dark.

This facility might be reviewed some years hence if the modes of private transport change. That might then be a time to consider converting some car parks into 'community space'. The council recognises that individual car parks may change (such as when Brightwells Yard comes on stream) but car-parking capacity should be retained indefinitely.

### **1.6 Cycling Provision**

Connected cycle ways to be provided, along the lines suggested in the Draft OIP. This topic to be subject to further consultation with local cycle groups.

### **1.7 Bus services**

Not all town-centre visitors are either willing or able to drive, cycle or walk. All Farnham bus services and routes should be reviewed as part of the pedestrian zone creation.

FTC recommends the introduction of new key north-south and east-west routes to bring people directly to the town centre from the Farnham neighbourhoods, and also extend out to Rowledge. These would be in the form of 'shuttle services', operating at high frequency to encourage high passenger usage.

The key shuttle services, above, would go through the pedestrian zone, so that through connectivity is available to bus users.

### **1.8 Freight Consolidation**

FTC supports, in principle, freight/delivery consolidation centres. These will need careful planning and locating. The Council would not favour placing such a centre in a conspicuous town centre location that would conflict with the historic heart of the town.

Factors to consider include:

- a) operational issues relating to transfer of goods,
- b) optimum distance from town centre retail zone,
- c) accessibility for off-loading vehicles – so as not to add to congestion,
- d) realistic destination delivery times from off-load point.

One consolidation centre, should be near to the retail area, where goods can easily be transferred to small electric vans that can, unobtrusively, drop off small loads to the town centre shops and businesses. Such a centre should also provide courier delivery and collection for the businesses and public.

### **1.9 Other Road Changes**

Consideration should be given to the possibility of Union Road, South Street and southern section of Downing Street becoming 2-way, so that north-south traffic can move to east of pedestrian zone. Park Row to be pedestrian/cycleway only except for access to the private parking.

### **1.10 Town Centre Character**

FTC believes that the essential character of the town centre should be maintained going forward. This hinges around the conservation area strategy (refer to Farnham Town Centre Conservation Area Management Plan – FCAMP), that mandates retention of the heritage character whilst, sympathetically, introducing new features appropriate for the current era. FTC strongly opposes intrusive electronic signage but discrete smart technology would be welcomed.

### **1.11 Alternative Pedestrian Zone**

Further consideration of a slightly larger pedestrian zone that includes South Street between the Royal Deer junction and Sainsburys car park should be made. The advantages of this would be a) improved pedestrian connectivity between the new Brightwells Centre and the historic town centre, b) removal of more through traffic, reducing the vehicle movements on the town centre access routes and furthering the 'in/out' concept, c) enabling improved north-south cycle and pedestrian route from station to town centre and further northwards.

### **1.12 Phasing of Pedestrian Zone installation**

The proposal for pedestrianisation should be phased. Initial options in the OIP should allow for a wider pedestrian Zone. The proposal in the OIP for The Borough should be seen as a short-term enabling measure.

## **2 Neighbourhoods**

In general, the Farnham neighbourhoods value their individual character features and want them at least protected by, if not enhanced equally by, the OIP. The main infrastructure considerations that the Council supports, arising from the Draft OIP, relate to impacts that derive from the town centre responses above and other improvements that are more specific than optioned in the OIP.

Specific recommendations:

### **2.1 Bus Routes and Services**

Bus services in Farnham do not provide a useful travel option for many residents. Anecdotally, people say: 'not enough, not in the right places, expensive'. However, the difficulties in providing services in disparate neighbourhoods and the attraction of using privately owned vehicles are understood. For those with cars, they are the only reliable means of access even for the "last mile" or less if they are unwilling or unable to walk or cycle, be it due to age, infirmity, the need to transport shopping, children and pushchairs, or for personal safety.

If increased use of public transport is a realistic aim, in order to reduce traffic congestion, pollution and cross-town traffic movements, then a fundamental review of routes, service levels and fare structures is needed in consultation with the public, in order to configure a more effective overall service in the town that can still be financially viable to the operator,

FTC believes that modernising the service would help to improve its effectiveness and usage, eg more comfortable rides, on board technology, carbon free power systems, real-time information.

The Council notes that the OIP emphasises the Farnborough Road corridor bus services; but it is not clear why this particular route is highlighted against a more holistic review. FTC would like to see more emphasis on commuting and school routes in order to relieve cross-town car journeys and provide greater independence to children and their ferrying parents.

As an example, possible interconnecting circular shuttle routes for the North Farnham villages as suggested in the Town Centre section at 1.7 above) could be:

- a) Town centre – Shepherd & Flock – Water Lane – Badshot Lea Road – Lower Weybourne Lane – Weybourne Road - Farnham Hospital – town centre
- b) Town centre – Farnham Hospital – Hale Road – Upper Hale Road – Folly Hill - town centre

These anti-clockwise routes would connect all major schools and public facilities and the village centres themselves whilst avoiding congesting right turns.

## **2.2 Public Transport Hubs**

FTC welcomes the development of modern transport hubs in Farnham – locations where buses, trains, cars, cycles and pedestrians converge and switch travel mode. Also, the provision of co-located community facilities (eg shops) so that a range of services is easily accessible. An obvious location would be around the station, an area that needs improvement in many ways as a local neighbourhood centre. There may be other potential hub locations in Farnham.

## **2.3 Park and Ride**

FTC is less enthusiastic about the viability of *park and ride* car parks and seriously doubts the likely success of any Park and Ride scheme due to the geographic nature of the town; however FTC would not be averse to such facilities for visitors to the town and commuters, who have already travelled some way to reach the town. If the town centre is pedestrianised, eliminating through traffic volumes, then the Council contends that residents that still need to come by car would best be able to continue their journey to a town centre car park (ie '*park and walk*') given the resource challenge of operating a park and ride scheme in a small market town.

FTC is unsure of the benefit in trying to create new *park and stride* car parks; some of the car parks are already a stride away from the town centre. A park and stride scheme at the top of Folly Hill would be seen as unrealistic.

## **2.4 North West Farnham Neighbourhoods**

FTC is very concerned about the road and traffic issues in Upper Hale, Hale and Heath End. It is clear that the increases in arterial traffic through this neighbourhood have severely compromised pedestrian and cyclist safety, adversely affecting the well-being of this community. Failure to address this problem over the years has led to local opposition to town centre improvements, so now it is doubly important to ameliorate the problems.

FTC expects all practical mitigation measures that can be designed for the Farnham roads should be implemented at the enabling stages of the plans for the town centre.

FTC recommends that the neighbourhood be transformed into a 'village space' with appropriate streetscene and highway interventions that encourage and enforce severe traffic calming. At the same time the Council expects to see wider footways (more road space given to pedestrians) so that the pedestrian experience is less threatened by the proximity of moving vehicles. FTC also expects to see more, safe pedestrian crossing routes.

Mindful that the A3016 is part of the MRN, consideration should be given to the merits of making Upper Hale Road and Alma Lane one-way roads, thus freeing up some road space to achieve community benefits.

## **2.5 Wrecclesham Neighbourhood**

Wrecclesham has experienced similar concerns to those described for north Farnham. The village centre, itself an important designated conservation area, has been blighted by ever-increasing traffic volumes, most arising from economic and housing developments, and population increases in surrounding areas.

FTC recommends that this area is also transformed into a 'village space', with appropriate streetscene and highway interventions.

A bypass connected to a strategic link road with the M3 would deliver town-wide benefits as outlined further below; this is a key priority for Farnham Town Council.

## **2.6 South Farnham Neighbourhoods**

The main problem in this area relates to the impacts of the level crossing and the nearby convergence of numerous main roads including Hickley's Corner. The level crossing itself is a major pedestrian and cyclist hazard, that has been ignored for many years because it is in the 'too difficult' category, and because it requires the cooperation of the railway authorities to design an integrated solution.

A redesign of this whole area around the station would open up possibilities for creating a transport hub, a safer road environment and a workable active travel route to the town centre. With some more imagination, some of the space might be released for some associated economic, rather than housing development, that could defray the capital costs. FTC is disappointed that the Draft OIP has not yet addressed this potential. FTC would expect to be fully involved in any emerging proposals.

## **2.7 North East Farnham Neighbourhoods**

Any displacement of traffic from the town centre without mitigation would be unacceptable. Weybourne and Badshot Lea already suffer similar road and traffic disadvantages to Farnham's other neighbourhoods; narrow roads and the shortage of adequate on-street parking leads to congestion and anti-social parking at peak times when pedestrians (eg schoolchildren) are present and most vulnerable. At less busy times, the situation changes with speeding and anti-social driving becoming the key issues.

The proposals for a School Safer Street in Bullers Road are welcome, but for these road traffic problems, the community needs many of the measures proposed for the town centre to be expanded to this area:

- a) a blanket 20mph speed limit, encouraged by adequate signage and physical calming measures like speed bumps;
- b) pedestrian prioritisation with adequate paving, lighting and pedestrian crossings;
- c) improved capacity for cyclists and scooters;
- d) restrictions on HGV access (physical if necessary);
- e) a review of the layout of key traffic junctions, starting with the Water Lane roundabout, and
- f) a commitment to improve the maintenance of the existing road infrastructure, starting with the drains which continually flood.

While Weybourne and Badshot Lea have accepted a disproportionately large allocation of development in the Farnham Neighbourhood Plan, it is the only Farnham ward which has no designated 'Neighbourhood Centre'. Measures in the OIP could be a once-in-a lifetime opportunity to start to correct that.

### **3 Major Road Network**

FTC welcomes the detailed analysis and background information relating to the MRN that is included in the Draft OIP.

However, the range of potential options presented and the depth of justification for what is currently implied do not yet appear to have incorporated responses to various concepts that have been put forward by local people, and aspirations of the Vision Statement are being potentially reduced. Evaluation of Strategic Roads should relate to the benefits for the wider area that appear to be beyond the scope of the terms of reference of the current project. Neighbouring authorities are concentrating development with access to the A325 and A31.

In 2017 the Recrafting Farnham project, supported by RIBA South East, invested significantly in this subject; and other schemes have been suggested by various bodies and individuals in recent years. Yet there is no evidence these schemes, presented to the Programme, have been incorporated in the Draft OIP. All major highway interventions are, inevitably, expensive, so FTC would hope to see a thorough analysis of all options in due course and looks forward to contributing to the next stage.

FTC would also expect to see evidence that any potential schemes have been, or will be, evaluated thoroughly in terms of environmental and economic impacts, both short term and long term, before they are either progressed or discarded. In the post war (circa 1947) era, some very progressive plans were discarded, only to have long term consequences that the Town is now having to deal with.

It is also important that any MRN schemes, proposed for the near term, consider the longer term opportunities that might be beyond the framework of the currently defined FIP. This again is the strategic approach, necessary to ensure that the long term is not compromised by short term decisions. Examples of this are covered below.

#### **3.1 A31 Corridor**

The Draft OIP considers many aspects relating to this area. Progression of the Hickley's Corner question needs, as a precursor, greater clarity on the town centre solutions (discussed above). The extent to which South Street and Firgrove Hill access is re-engineered to improve connectivity, depends on the level of traffic curtailment in the town centre. The Farnham Neighbourhood Plan seeks to soften the A31, not urbanise it.



FTC believes that the solution for the Hickley's junction itself, needs considerable work. The Draft OIP is suggesting that the 2004 proposals should be discarded. FTC is reticent to support the underpass proposal, as was, but other variations might still be favoured. For example, FTC strongly supports as an alternative, a proper interchange to interconnect the A31 and the A287 at the Firgrove Hill crossover (Firgrove Hill Interchange), if this is technically viable. Such a solution would deter traffic from the south funnelling into the town centre, providing instead easy routes west or east on to the bypass. It would also provide better A287 continuity via a strategic western bypass link, if that ever came to pass. This scheme could also be considered as a viable and affordable solution to the Hickley's problem. A roundabout solution at Hickley's should also be considered.

A much-needed active travel route could be provided between Red Lion Lane and Weydon Lane, restoring the historic connection. FTC is disappointed this and the Firgrove Hill Interchange options are not in the Draft OIP.

FTC agrees with technical improvements suggested for the Coxbridge and Shepherd and Flock roundabouts, however the Council would no longer support any highway intervention into the Shepherd and Flock conservation area.

### **3.2 Station Hill and Level Crossing**

This is a difficult MRN technical challenge within the programme, linked to Hickley's Corner issues. FTC believes that a safe solution must be found for the level crossing problem within the programme. This is considered to be one of the biggest problems for the town.

Suggestions of a bridge or underpass at the level crossing are viewed with scepticism by FTC, in the absence of a technical viability and the impact on the nearby residential area. Similarly, it is unclear that a proposal for a pedestrian/cycle bridge 6m over the Hickley's junction would be an acceptable active travel option for the area.

The whole area enclosed by Hickley's, the station and Firgrove Hill seems, to FTC, to require a comprehensive, integrated solution in order to achieve:

- a) a safe environment,
- b) effective highways interconnection,
- c) effective active travel solutions,
- d) an attractive neighbourhood centre that incorporates a public transport hub.
- e) a resolution to the level crossing problems.

In order to progress improvements in this area, FTC would welcome the Station Approach Road being adopted by Surrey County Council.

### **3.3 North Farnham, A3016**

The A3016 has been part of the MRN for generations, as will be apparent to north Farnham residents. As with many major roads, both within Farnham and elsewhere nationally, many people cannot avoid the growing intrusion that increasing populations and car usage cause.

Given that broad caveat, FTC does take the view that effective mitigation measures need to be taken on the area's main roads to provide an acceptable level of safety, healthy living and wellbeing for the north Farnham residents. Wider footways are essential which may necessitate single lane traffic and the option for one way traffic should be investigated. Along with other measures recommended in this paper (1.4) and in the Draft OIP, which will improve access to

the town centre from the northern neighbourhoods, the Council hopes that the FIP will deliver improvements to this area, whilst also facilitating improvements in the town centre.

In conjunction with this package, FTC urges the FIP to continue evaluating a more significant new highway intervention, such as a western strategic link/ bypass to remove traffic from the A3016.

### **3.4 Wrecclesham**

FTC supports, in principle, the construction of a Wrecclesham bypass, as outlined in the Vision Statement. The Council notes reservations that are expressed in the OIP, but would emphasise that Wrecclesham village centre is currently paying the price for facilitating housing developments and other traffic growth drivers (eg Bordon) that are not of Wrecclesham's making.

As with North Farnham, above, general increases in traffic are compounded by regular bridge strikes (two more at the beginning of March 2021) and the arguments relating to resident safety and wellbeing apply equally to Wrecclesham.

### **3.5 Western Bypass/Strategic link road**

A western bypass has long been an aspiration for Farnham people. It is seen as the best way of diverting some traffic away from north Farnham and providing an alternative to the A287 route through the town centre. It would also alleviate the congestion existing in the constricted road at the St John's Church area in Hale.

A Western strategic link road could be considered to be a greater priority than Hickley's Corner improvements. FTC recognises that a western bypass will not become a reality within the timescales needed to create a pedestrianised town centre and to improve matters in north Farnham. The Council recommends that the FIP prioritises a western bypass/strategic link road in its strategic aims, so that it can ultimately form part of the long term MRN. FTC understands that a western bypass may require economic development to the west of the town to support its implementation.

FTC recognises that improvements at the A31 bypass/A287 junction are designed to facilitate effective routing of the A287 westwards so that it would ultimately transfer to a future western bypass.

FTC would recommend that all the above points be included in the OIP going forward.