

Motion requesting support of Pangbourne Parish Council for widening the access road by the Toll Bridge

Jim Donahue, Frances Parkes - Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council

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Congratulations on your work to improve the camber on the pavement under the railway bridge on Whitchurch Road! This will clearly improve pedestrian safety and shows that these type of improvements are eminently achievable.

I assume that everyone is aware of the situation that the road leading up to the toll bridge on the Pangbourne side has long been a pedestrian safety issue due to the narrow width of the road and pavement. According to a study of the road by Peter Brett Associates:

- Road width ranges from 4.7 – 5.2m, where Department of Transportation (DoT) standards call for 5.2m minimum and prefer 5.5m
- The Footpath width ranges from 0.9m to 1.3m where DoT standards call for 1.5m
 - o Pedestrians cannot easily pass one another without stepping onto the road. Hopefully people give way for those with prams and mobility scooters.
 - o The result is ongoing reports of ‘wing-mirror clipping’ and other near misses
- Frances Parkes from Whitchurch PC is re-introducing an effort to document these incidents, and will also monitor footfall. Previous attempts by the Bridge Company to log these incidents came to nothing.
- This is an area where we need the support of Pangbourne residents to report these as it is not just Whitchurch residents using this footpath. Parents from Pangbourne walk over the bridge with prams and small children to Whitchurch Primary School every morning. The Thames Path also crosses the bridge and the route is popular with walkers and cyclists from Pangbourne and the surrounding area.

The private Toll Bridge company owns the road up to about the entrance to the Boathouse Surgery but has little incentive to fix it due to the required cost.

- We have no real influence over a private enterprise with Statutory Authority from the Whitchurch Bridge Act.
- If we were to try to force them to do something, with public pressure, for example, we know the result would be further increases in toll bridge fees to compensate them for the work.

The Whitchurch Parish Council has tried to influence the Toll Bridge company for at least 10 years with limited success and mostly lip service and lack of action:

- In 2012/13 when the replacement bridge was being designed, we pushed them to improve the access road but they said they only had enough money to fund the actual bridge replacement.
- In 2015, as part of the approval of the toll increase to 60p, the Bridge Company agreed under public pressure to ‘look at it’ and commissioned the PBA report in 2016, that evaluated 4 options:
 - o 2 options to widen the road on the east (Dolphin centre) or West side (Surgery). These were not recommended due to the cost, impact to a number of mature trees and need for neighbouring landowners consent.

- 2 lower cost options effectively make the road single lane with passing places that would allow for footpath widening, but only in parts. One option has a chicane to force traffic to give way for traffic calming.
- A fifth option, proposed by a resident, avoids changes to the road to build a footbridge through the trees on the medical centre side, which also has pros and cons.
- Whilst the report was useful, ***the improvements ultimately need to be approved and be implemented under the auspices of West Berk County Council who are the Highways Authority for this stretch of the road.***
 - The report was evaluated by West Berks in 2017/18 and but they only gave non-committal feedback that the impact would need to be evaluated by the affected landowners on the Medical Centre and Dolphin Centre sides, and on impacts to some mature trees.
 - The Bridge company never pushed this and it was dropped.
- The Toll Bridge was sold to a new owner in 2019.
- We have approached the new owner about this but with COVID there has been even less enthusiasm due to severely decreased traffic levels and reduced income for the Bridge Company.

With traffic levels increasing again, I have recently tried to take a new approach, raising my concern about pedestrian safety to West Berks Councillor Gareth Hurley and Becky and Peter from the Pangbourne Parish Council.

- Gareth is supportive of doing something about this and confirmed that ultimately West Berks Council would need to make this a priority as part of their annual budget planning process.
- Gareth would want to know that this is supported by Pangbourne Parish Council, ***so your support is critical.***
- Whitchurch Parish Council, Oxfordshire County Council, and local Henley MP John Howell should also show support, which I am happy to push for and am confident they will provide.
- Barbara Singleton-Crisp from PAWS is also supportive of this as part of their Active Travel initiative. She recently raised this to Jon Winstanley and Clive Tombs of West Berks Council.

Some really positive news is that I just learned last week that West Berkshire Chief engineer has reviewed the PBA report and are ready to move forward with it.

The findings of the earlier PBA report have been re-appraised by a Principal Engineer at West Berks:

- *If there is appetite at Ward Councillor and Parish Council level, then the next stage would be to bid for funding in order to commission consultants to undertake detailed design and generate up-to-date costings;*
- *Subject to the Ward Councillor and Parish position, the Network Management Team within Environment Department would need to bid internally within WBC in August-September of this year for funding to enable that consultancy work and costing to take place;*

- *With agreement of our Network Manager, I have contacted the Ward Member for Pangbourne, and also Pangbourne Parish Council, to ask whether or not they are supportive of us bidding for funding, to enable this consultancy work and costing to be carried out if such a bid were to be approved.*
- *Subject to the above stages and the costings generated by the consultants: a further, large-scale capital bid, most likely to an external source, would then have to be considered in a future financial year if construction was to be progressed.*

So in conclusion, this was never going to happen quickly, but I am very excited to hear that West Berks is now willing to progress this. This will clearly take a minimum of 1-2 years to accomplish. The things we need from the Pangbourne Parish Council are:

- 1. Confirmation that you support this project in principle and will relay that to Ward Councillor Hurley and West Berks Council.**
- 2. At least one Councillor from Pangbourne to participate in a small Cross-River Working Group with other key stakeholders to help us stay aligned and push this along as long as required.** *Other stakeholders could include representatives from Whitchurch PC, PAWS, the Bridge Company, OCC, West Berks Council, and West Berks Ward Councillor Hurley.*

From a Whitchurch Parish Council perspective, we are fully committed to drive this and hope you will work with us on this!