

DEPARTMENT FOR INFRASTRUCTURE

Written Ministerial Statement by Minister Hazzard MLA

Minister for Infrastructure

York Street Interchange Project - Publication of Notice of Intention to Proceed and Making of the Designation Order

I wish to inform Members of my decision to accept the outcomes of the Public Inquiry for the £130million York Street Interchange Scheme and to proceed to progress the scheme in readiness of funding becoming available.

The scheme will address a major bottleneck on the strategic road network, replacing the existing signalised junction at York Street with direct links between Westlink, M2 and M3, the three busiest roads in the north. It will also separate strategic traffic from local traffic movements via underpasses below the existing road and rail bridges and underneath a new bridge at York Street.

The Inspector, appointed to chair the inquiry to examine the case for and against the scheme, concluded that the case to replace the existing York Street Junction Gyratory System has been demonstrated.

The Inspector therefore recommended that the Environmental Statement, prepared by the Department containing proposals for provision of a grade separated junction at York Street to provide direct links between the Westlink and the M2 and M3, should be used as a basis for taking the scheme forward through both the detailed design and eventual construction stages.

They also recommended that the associated Designation Order and Vesting Order should be implemented.

In considering the Inspector's Report, the Department carried out a thorough examination of the Inspector's comments and recommendations. It concluded the scheme should proceed subject to recommendations relating to mitigation measures adjacent to residential areas, increased local community liaison and consideration of further provisions for cyclists.

Part V of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 sets out the statutory requirements for the assessment of environmental impacts of road schemes. With regard to Habitats Assessment, having caused an Appropriate Assessment to be carried out and having considered the Environmental Statement and the consultation responses to it, I am satisfied the likely significant environmental effects of the proposed scheme have been properly assessed and have been sufficient to inform judgements on the scheme. Accordingly, in light of the Appropriate Assessment process undertaken and the information presented within the Statement to Inform the Appropriate Assessment and the Environmental Statement, I accept the Department's conclusion (as the Competent Authority) that the construction and operation of the York Street Interchange Scheme would not, by itself or in combination with other known plans or projects, adversely affect the integrity of the Belfast Lough Special Protection Area and the Belfast Lough Open Water Special Protection Area, or their ability to meet their conservation objectives.

I have carefully considered the Department's Statement on the Public Inquiry and agree with its conclusions. I have therefore decided to proceed with the scheme subject to the availability of future funding. In doing so, I commit my Department to carrying out the necessary actions to facilitate the Inspector's recommendations and the mitigation measures described in the Department's Statement and the Environmental Statement.

The procurement process for the scheme is well advanced and this was progressed in parallel with the overarching statutory process. Simultaneously, my Department has worked closely with the European Commission over a period of time to build the case for this project to be recognised as a priority for EU co-financing. In the event of the project being approved, this co-financing could have provided up to 40% of the project's costs subject to meeting a number of conditions with regard to project timing and duration. The outcome of the referendum vote and the projected timescales for withdrawal does, therefore, have significant negative implications for delivery of this project. Without substantive guarantees of replacement funding from the Treasury, this would add to the pressure on the Executive's capital budget.

While I welcome the Chancellor's most recent announcement, about guaranteeing EU funding for those projects signed off by the Commission while we remain in the EU but continue after we have left, I believe this does not go far enough. I will continue to press the Government and the Treasury to secure the best outcomes and support for the North.

The York Street Interchange project, however, remains a priority for me as it would deliver significant social and economic benefits, both in terms of alleviating traffic congestion and also in terms of improving access to key port and gateways.

For this reason I am committed to do all that I can to deliver the scheme within the current financial context, working with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues.

The release of the Inspector's report and making of the necessary statutory orders will permit the scheme to be progressed in readiness for funding.

Consequently, I have asked my Department to publish the formal Notice of its Intention to Proceed and to make the Designation Order for the scheme. The associated Vesting Order will remain in Draft until finance becomes available to build the road.