



**ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE – 3 JUNE 2021**

**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 Highways England (Appendix C), with Network Rail and Leicestershire and Warwickshire Police in attendance, regarding bridge strikes at the A5 Watling Street rail bridge near Hinckley.

**Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

2. In June 2019, the Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a presentation by Network Rail and Highways England, on the work being carried out by the two agencies to reduce the frequency and impact of bridge strikes on the A5 and the surrounding road network.
3. In December 2020, in response to a continuing number of bridge strikes at the A5 Watling Street rail bridge and various government announcements regarding the A5, Mr David Bill CC made a request to the Director of Environment and Transport, asking that Network Rail and Highways England officers be invited back to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to provide a further presentation to update members on progress.

**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. Network Rail, as owners of the bridge, facilitate the installation of traffic signs on the structure itself. Highways England are responsible for the provision of traffic signs on the A5 in advance of the bridge.
7. 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

8. 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.
9. In the Midlands region, the A5 consists of a mix of single carriage (40mph) and dual carriageway (50mph and national speed limit) sections.
10. 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.
11. 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%.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. The route is also important for local connectivity linking local settlements, including Hinckley, Nuneaton and Lutterworth.
15. 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.
16. As part of the Road Investment Strategy (RIS) Period 2 (2020 to 2025), Highways England are undertaking a 'RIS3 Pipeline Project' on the section of the A5 from Hinckley to Tamworth; whilst officers do not as yet know the scope and objectives of this project, it is understood that it is likely to be looking at options for the strategic upgrade of this section of the A5. From a County Council perspective, it is to be expected that any strategic upgrade would include a 'proper' solution to the bridge strike issue (i.e. removal of the height restriction). It is important to note that at this time there is no funding commitment to deliver the upgrade.

### Impact of bridge strikes (including diversion routes)

17. 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 (Network Rail figures).

18. 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.
19. Following a bridge strike the A5 may need to be closed for safety inspections or clearing up debris, 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).
20. 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.
21. 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**

22. 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.
23. The Director of Corporate Resources has been consulted on the contents of this report.

### **Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)**

24. Officers will continue to provide updates to the committee, as appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

25. Bridge strikes continue to occur 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.
26. The Watling Street section of the A5 carries significant numbers of HGV's and provides network resilience for the surrounding trunk road network.

27. 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**

- Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny report June 2019:  
<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s146115/306%20-%20A5%20-%20ET%20Scrutiny%20Committee%2006.06.19%20V10.pdf>

### **Press Articles and Announcements:**

- Leicester Mercury Article; 15.12.2020; “Most-Bashed Bridge in Britain”:<https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/local-news/most-bashed-bridge-britain-hit-4801945>
- UK Parliament Topical Questions; Vol. 685: debated on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020:  
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-12-03/debates/715A9842-44C4-4735-8682-5E5466E4F92F/TopicalQuestions#contribution-67DF6F22-7109-4F52-AA44-F4E3AC07235D>

### **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**

28. 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**

29. 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 – A5 Watling Street Bridge Location Plan
- Appendix B – Diversion Routes (North and South bound)
- Appendix C – Highways England Presentation

### **Officers to Contact**

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