

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**PLANNING and TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD**

**22 February 2011**

**Report of the Director of Planning, Transport and Leisure**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)**

**1 PEDESTRIAN GUARD RAILING – TONBRIDGE TOWN CENTRE**

**Summary**

**The County Council is proposing to remove lengths of pedestrian guard rail that it considers have little justification on highway safety grounds. The Board is invited to approve a response to the County Council that is broadly supportive of the concept subject to some modification of the detailed proposals to meet particular local circumstances.**

**1.1 Introduction**

1.1.1 The County Council is currently reviewing pedestrian guard railing in a number of Kent districts aimed at assessing whether there is scope for removing some without adversely affecting highway safety. This reflects a general sentiment nationally that a considerable improvement in the appearance of town centre main streets can be achieved by ‘decluttering’; that is, removing street furniture that serves no useful purpose and just makes the appearance of places rather unattractive. In many town centres, pedestrian guard railing is one of the elements of street furniture that contributes significantly to the clutter and, more critically, presents a positive obstruction to reasonable access and movement. Current levels of guard railing in many town centres stems from a time of rather severe approaches to highway railings whereas a more proportionate approach has been the more recent trend.

1.1.2 The sole reason for installing pedestrian guard railing should be to preserve road safety. It almost always has a detrimental effect on the visual amenity of a street but this is tolerable and can be justified, on balance, if there is a clear necessity in providing it to steer pedestrians to particular crossing points or to protect them at locations where large vehicles might otherwise overhang the footway while manoeuvring round a corner.

1.1.3 **Where there is no clear road safety justification, it is reasonable, if not essential, to challenge why guard railing has been installed.** This is the fundamental premise of the current exercise by the County Council and I

recommend it to the Board as a reasoned and valid principle to be adopted and endorsed.

## **1.2 Pedestrian Guard Railing in Tonbridge**

- 1.2.1 As far as Tonbridge is concerned, there does appear to be considerably more guard rail than many comparable towns in the south east. Why this might be is a legitimate question and, if the answer is that there is no clear road safety justification, then there is a straightforward opportunity to reduce the amount installed.
- 1.2.2 The judgement that there is such an opportunity is supported by work that the Borough Council has been carrying out as part of the Streetscene Action Plan. This involves an audit of all street furniture in the High Street and some neighbouring streets to identify what is superfluous and could be removed and, if an item needs to remain, what its state of maintenance is. The exercise has yet to be completed and, when it is, I will be reporting the findings to a future meeting of the Environmental Management Advisory Board. In the meantime, the early draft of the report points clearly to the adverse impact that such a preponderance of railings throughout the High Street has on the feel and ambience of the town centre.
- 1.2.3 One reason why there might be so much guard railing in Tonbridge is that it is a consequence of the high degree of risk aversion within design standards and regulations in years gone by. It was not uncommon in public consultations on schemes for local residents and businesses to comment adversely on the guard railing that accompanied proposals for items such as controlled crossings, only to be told that this was an essential requirement of the design rules that applied at the time, 'in the interests of road safety' without the case being justified.
- 1.2.4 This was frustrating at the time because there was no room for judgement, just the application of rigid rules, and it meant that many lengths of rather stark and unattractive pedestrian guard rail were installed with questionable justification.
- 1.2.5 Those regulations and design rules have been relaxed in recent years as a result of detailed assessment and study of the real impact and value of guard railing. Much of this work is encapsulated in Local Transport Note 2/09 and this is reflected in a number of pioneering schemes such as one frequently referred to at Kensington High Street where almost all guard rail and many other items of street furniture have been removed by the local highway authority with no adverse consequences for road safety, but ironically, if anything an improvement. [A copy of this document has been placed in the member library for reference].
- 1.2.6 The assessment work on design standards and the experience from the many schemes across the country aimed at removing unnecessary clutter in town centres has had a major consequence. It has demonstrated that the matter is far more complex than pitting visual improvement against personal safety. Making

town centres more liveable, civilised places by removing guardrailing has even been shown to be beneficial in terms of road safety.

- 1.2.7 In summary, the current design guidance and standards provide engineers with an opportunity to carry out highway and traffic management schemes with more thought and balance when considering guard railing. The standards focus on what is really essential in highway safety terms rather than rigid and inflexible application of rules. This design framework has been reflected in the County Council's own draft 'Barrier and Guardrailing Policy' reproduced at **Annex 1**.
- 1.2.8 Perhaps the most fundamental consideration in assessing the County Council's proposals for reducing the extent of guardrailing installed in the town centre is that it is tightly aligned to our own adopted policies. The Quarry Hill Conservation Area Appraisal states:
- *There are a large number of prominent railings within Quarry Hill Conservation Area. An audit should be carried out with the highway authority to see how many remain necessary. Wherever possible, the aim should be to remove the railings.*
  - *One example of a particularly prominent railing is along the centre of Quarry Hill Road. Removal of the railings would reduce the visual barrier which subdivides the public space at the centre of the conservation area and detracts from the setting of the church and the surrounding important visual spaces.*
  - *Other locations requiring careful consideration include Waterloo Road close to the church and the cycle barriers on the Quarry Hill Road footpath.*
  - *The Conservation Area is particularly afflicted by a proliferation of utilitarian railings which detract from the setting of historic buildings, including St Stephen's church; intrude into landscaped areas and visually subdivide public spaces.*
- 1.2.9 This exercise therefore represents an opportunity to achieve streetscene improvements explicitly sought within the Borough Council's adopted operational policy.

### **1.3 Detailed Consideration of the Proposals**

- 1.3.1 The detailed proposals for guard rail removal are contained in the County Council's report, produced by its consultant, Jacobs, **Annex 2**. In late November the County Council invited comments from the Borough Council but, before responding, I sought views from local Members and from the Civic Society since there had been no earlier broader consultation exercise on what was being proposed.

- 1.3.2 The general response has been one of general support for the proposals, subject to specific caveats on the detail. However, two Members registered clear and firm views against any removal of guard railing. I am therefore seeking the views of the Board on the proposals.
- 1.3.3 The Civic Society helpfully provided comments and it too is broadly supportive, albeit with some reservations on the detail. Interestingly, it indicated another couple of sites that it considers merit assessment and I share its view. These are at the Dry Hill Road/London Road corner and at the Shipbourne Road/Dry Hill Park Road/Yardley Park Road junction.
- 1.3.4 **Annex 3** contains an assessment of the 12 sites contained in the County Council's report and recommends a Borough response to each of them. I have incorporated these recommendations into the draft reply to the consultation contained in **Annex 4**.

## **1.4 Scheme Coordination**

- 1.4.1 I mentioned that the Borough Council is itself conducting an exercise similar to this one as part of the Streetscene Action Plan. The aim is to refresh the appearance of the town centre by getting rid of as many redundant signs, posts and other items of street furniture as possible and to encourage the County Council to carry out maintenance works to tidy up those elements of street furniture that remain.
- 1.4.2 There is therefore potential for some joint working on the proposals that come from the streetscene project and from the final version of the guard railing scheme adopted by the County Council. This could help cut down the aggregate cost of both initiatives and I will be working with officers at the County Council to try and achieve this.
- 1.4.3 I should just comment that when the Borough Council directly promoted schemes under the Kent Highway Partnership arrangements, such as this guard railing assessment project, we would automatically have sought wider community engagement through a public consultation exercise. Those arrangements came to an end some years ago and it is now the County Council, as local highway authority, that decides the style, content and scope of consultations for the projects it is responsible for. Nevertheless, I am suggesting in the draft response that the County Council might wish to consider some wider survey of local sentiment because local residents and businesses are sure to have an interest in these proposals.

## **1.5 Legal Implications**

- 1.5.1 None for the Borough Council.

## 1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.6.1 None directly for the Borough Council.

## 1.7 Risk Assessment

1.7.1 Implicit within the commentary on the proposals for each location.

## 1.8 Equality Impact Assessment

1.8.1 See 'Screening for equality impacts' table at end of report.

## 1.9 Policy Considerations

1.9.1 Community.

## 1.10 Recommendations

1.10.1 That the Cabinet be requested **TO ENDORSE** the draft response at Annex 4 to the County Council guard railing consultation.

The Director of Planning, Transport & Leisure confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

contact: Michael McCulloch

Local Transport Note LTN 2/09

Steve Humphrey

Director of Planning, Transport and Leisure

Screening for equality impacts:		
Question	Answer	Explanation of impacts
a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?	No	The decision recommended is a response to a consultation by the County Council. It requires no direct action by the Borough Council. Nevertheless, the potential actions arising from the County Council's proposals are neutral as far as equality impacts are concerned.

<b>Screening for equality impacts:</b>		
<b>Question</b>	<b>Answer</b>	<b>Explanation of impacts</b>
b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality?	N/A	See previous comment.
c. What steps are you taking to mitigate, reduce, avoid or minimise the impacts identified above?		N/A

*In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above.*