Question 32

Does existing and future predicted traffic in Durham City have an unacceptable impact on the city? Please give reasons for your response.

We agree that existing levels of motorised traffic in Durham City have an unacceptable impact on the ability of pedestrians and cyclists to move freely around the city and have wider adverse effects on the city because of the intrusion and pollution caused by motor vehicles. We live in a very uncertain world so all future predictions need to be viewed with caution. Traffic growth is unlikely to follow past trends and rapid technological change combined with social and economic transitions mean that many of the Council's working assumptions during the plan period need to be revisited. Uncertainty does not appear to have been effectively managed to ensure robust conclusions consistent with all future scenarios.

Before setting out our observations on the causes of this situation and potential solutions, it is necessary to comment on the context for this question which the Council has provided in its document, particularly in paragraph 4.94 but also elsewhere in sections 3 and 4. Regrettably, paragraph 4.94's description of the origins, purpose, and implementation of the upgraded through route in the city that was constructed in the 1960s is so confused and inaccurate that readers can only reach one of two possible conclusions – either that the Council's understanding is so imperfect that it is not in a position to assess these issues on a properly informed and objective basis, or that its drafting has been deliberately biased in an attempt to create the case for the inclusion of a city ring road in the County Plan.

This through road - whose conception dates back to at least the 1940s – was planned and built by the then County Council, not the City Council, and its primary purpose was to enable local and regional traffic converging on the city centre to avoid the two single-carriageway streets – both then designated as A roads – leading from the mediaeval river crossings at Framwelgate Bridge and Elvet Bridge to the Market Place. The construction of the two new bridges and their immediate approach roads was all that was necessary to remove general traffic from Silver Street and the original bridges and to transform the retail and pedestrian environment in the core of the city.

The railway line referred to did not run "through" the city centre as stated: it terminated on the edge of the inner city at Gilesgate. Nor was it disused: it remained an operational railway until 1966, when it was acquired by the local authority for conversion to a road. Though this new section of the A690 connects with the inner city relief roads, its intended function was to provide a high-quality link between Durham City and the County Durham section of the A1(M), which was being constructed on a phased basis during the 1960s to divert strategic north-south traffic to the east of the city. This section of the motorway consequently provided a by-pass for a significant proportion of the traffic then passing through the city.

Paragraph 4.94 appears to imply that the provision of a Durham ring road would have been more appropriate than the schemes that were undertaken in the 1960. However, if a ring-road solution had been preferred, traffic accessing the core of the city – including town service buses and the regional buses from the east and much of the south of the county – would have had to continue to pass through traffic-light controlled single carriageway streets which were clearly inadequate

both for the volumes of motor traffic of the time and for pedestrians who were restricted to sub-standard footways through the city's main shopping area.

The same paragraph goes on to claim that 35%-40% of the traffic using Milburngate Bridge does not have an origin or destination in the city. No current evidence has been provided in support of this assertion, nor has the Council indicated what proportion of this traffic could actually be diverted. The one substantiated statistic that is offered is that Milburngate Bridge carried a daily average of "over" 47,000 vehicles in 2015.

Previous County Durham Plan documentation referred to then daily averages in excess of 60,000 vehicles in seeking to justify additional road building,[1] so from the Council's own statistics it appears that there has been a recent reduction of over 20% in the traffic using this main artery through the city. It should further be noted that a planning report submitted in connection with the redevelopment of the Milburngate House site indicates that the Milburngate junction is operating at "well within" its design capacity, even in the peaks,[2] again contrary to previous assertions by the Council. The suggestion that Milburngate Bridge is unduly congested is not therefore consistent with either the significant reduction in traffic volumes reported in the Council's figures or with this recent technical assessment of the key junction at its western end. The traffic statistics instead reflect fairly normal patterns of peak hour capacity influencing the times and route choices for many travellers. Substantially higher daily traffic flows could be achieved on the A690 without further road improvements, but to assess this in detail more needs to be known about travel patterns.

By seeking to construct its arguments from a basis of existing or predicted traffic congestion, the Council is simply demonstrating that its transport policies for Durham City are not aligned with its wider aims for a wealthier, healthier, greener and safer city, but remain based on retaining ultimate primacy for the motorist. Traffic congestion is just one aspect of the far wider problems created by this mindset on the Council's part. Traffic congestion can be a key part of the toolkit for managing demand, while by slowing motor traffic below the inherently unsafe 40 mph still permitted on parts of the urban network congestion reduces the risk to pedestrians and cyclists. With changes in fuel and engine technology the immediate pollution resulting from traffic congestion is also being reduced.

The basic reasons why traffic conditions in the city are a problem for other road users arise from the Council's failure to implement Department for Transport guidance, which is that in urban areas the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport users should be given priority over those of motorists. This failure is exhibited in the continued lack of consideration for pedestrians and cyclists in the design of key junctions and in the phasing of signal-controlled crossings; in the absence of continuous or adequate footways on key walking routes and in the lack of a convenient segregated cycle route through the city; in the lack of any effective measures by the Council as

[1] For example, Durham County Council, *Pre-submission draft local plan* (October 2013), para 4.125.

[2] WSP|Parsons Brinkerhoff, *Milburngate House Durham: transport assessment* (2016), paras 5.3.5, 5.3.7. (Accessed via https://publicaccess.durham.gov.uk/online-applications/files/D79BEC95C9AC89EB64410525C69ED50F/pdf/DM_16_01228_FPA-TRANSPORT_ASSESSMENT-1773485.pdf)

highway authority to deal with illegal obstruction of footways by parking, commercial activities, or advertising boards; and in the general degradation of the surface of many footways in the city.

All of these issues can be speedily addressed with relatively little expenditure and in many instances simply by re-prioritisation within existing budgets. Yet, despite the fact that paragraph 4.97 of the document acknowledges that demand management is a key tool that can be delivered more quickly than infrastructure improvements, the underlying position stated by the Council in paragraph 4.99 and elsewhere is that provision of additional road space for motorists is a pre-requisite for any systematic improvement in the conditions for other road users.

We totally disagree. As experience during last year's road works on Milburngate Bridge amply demonstrated, traffic flows in and through the city can adjust effectively to a significant reduction in inner-city road capacity, and the demand management tools that could "lock in" such capacity reductions are already available and have been successfully deployed by more progressive transport authorities across the world, including comparator cities in Britain such as Oxford and York. We therefore reject the Council's proposition that the provision of a new by-pass road such as a Northern Relief Road is necessary in order to improve conditions for other road users in Durham City: instead, as the history of additional road building in or around the city over the last hundred years clearly shows, the provision of more road space simply increases total motor traffic volumes in the area and ultimately further degrades conditions for other categories of road user.