

Freshford Rural Transport and Road Traffic Issues

An Overview by Freshford Parish Council

The parish of Freshford forms part of the area under the administration of Bath and North East Somerset Council. It lies on the county border with Wiltshire. The village of Limpley Stoke in Wiltshire is part of the one community sharing many of the same local resources.

It was in this context that the Freshford and Limpley Stoke Neighbourhood Plan was developed, made and Adopted by the two Local Authorities of B&NES and Wiltshire in 2016. It remains, we believe, the one joint Neighbourhood Plan which spans two administrative areas and a county border.

The NP sets out in clear terms Planning Development Policy for the two villages together with the expressed hope and aspirations of residents for the future of the community for the years 2014 - 2039. Objectives and proposals set out in the Plan cover Planning and Development, the Natural Environment, Local Green Spaces Policy, Walking, Cycling and safer roads, Community Development Policy and Business and Technology.

The Neighbourhood Plan sought to give local context to the expressed aims of the National Planning Policy Framework:

“Plans should protect and exploit opportunities for the use of sustainable modes for the movement of goods and people..... and where practical give priority to pedestrian and cycle movements..... Create safe and secure layouts which minimise conflict between traffic and cyclists and pedestrians, avoiding street clutter.” Paragraph 35 NPPF.

The Neighbourhood Plan Objectives include the following:

- To have an integrated transport policy and to seek to apply shared space principles throughout the NP area.
- To reduce vehicle speed.
- To minimise road signage and street clutter
- To construct village gateways
- To enhance and preserve key pedestrian links used by residents in the two villages to access local facilities and public transport.
- To preserve and support public transport links serving the two villages and to encourage both B&NES and Wiltshire Councils to recognise the importance of their provision especially in the context of their crossing local authority boundaries.
- To improve the road safety of residents crossing the A36 from Midford lane and Pipehouse Lane seeking Highways England recognition in the consideration of lower speed limits and pedestrian refuges.

The Neighbourhood Plan built on work already undertaken by the Parish Council in seeking to press the Local Authority to develop an integrated Transport Policy to help resolve a wide range of traffic related issues. The Shared Space Report (2007) and Getting About In Freshford (2009) continue to be relevant in part to addressing those issues.

[linkhttp://www.freshfordvillage.com/living-in-freshford/parish-council/neighbourhood-plan-and-key-community-documents](http://www.freshfordvillage.com/living-in-freshford/parish-council/neighbourhood-plan-and-key-community-documents)

We list below some of the distinctive facets of the village to give a flavour of local life. This is a flourishing, active and vibrant community and as such it is inevitable given the narrow roads and lack of public parking space that there is constant pressure to seek to resolve, improve or balance a wide range of sometimes competing road safety issues such as - parking, speed, pedestrian safety, Sat Nav misdirection and signage.

Distinctive features of the parish include:

- Freshford Railway Station. It is the only village in the B&NES area to hold that distinction. The station lies on the Heart of Wessex Line (Weymouth - Yeovil - Trowbridge Bath - Bristol). Passenger numbers have more than doubled in the last fifteen years.
- The A36 primary trunk route passing through the parish. The speed limit is unrestricted. The daily volume of traffic is some 21,000 vehicles (89% private cars). Inevitably the road presents very real issues of road safety and the physical severance of communities. (and see below)
- Freshford Primary School. The school is flourishing, has some 140 pupils and its catchment area extends to the neighbouring Somerset villages and those close by in Wiltshire.
- 24 new homes under permitted development within the village on the former Peradins factory site. (Freshford Mill). The population of the village will increase by some 10% when the new development is complete and fully occupied.
- The Galleries Community Shop and Post Office.
- Freshford & Limpley Stoke Community Association (FLiSCA), Galleries Shop & Café is constituted as an ordinary limited company but it is 100% owned and governed by the Freshford & Limpley Stoke Community Association (FLiSCA).
- FLiSCA is a registered charity – charity number 1129476 – with the following objectives: providing or assisting to provide facilities for recreation or other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare, the relief of need particularly amongst those who are elderly, disabled, young or experiencing financial hardship and the advancement of education for the public benefit.
- Freshford and Limpley Stoke Energy Community Shares Ltd (FLECS)
 - A community benefit company catching solar energy.
 - 72 solar panels in two separate arrays of 36 panels each angled slightly differently
 - 20 local investors, 25-year investment
 - Yield 17 Megawatt hours per annum
 - £8000 contributed to the community in donations to FLiSCA.

The A36

The link road scheme

For the best part of 30 years and alongside the residents of the villages similarly affected Freshford has opposed the construction of a link road joining the A36 with the A46.

The 1991 Report submitted by Independent Panel Inspector Sir Michael Giddings KCB, OBE, DFC AFC and Bar concluded emphatically and without any reservation against the case for the A36 link. "It is unimpressive in trunk road terms, prejudicial in some important

respects, intolerable in the landscape impact and devastating to recreational amenity. Of course, something will have to be done to meet the north south through traffic demand but to build an A36 link would be to disregard the widespread effect on the Avon valley that would have to be endured forever and which might well set a precedent for further inroads into that treasured landscape.”

The Valley Parishes Alliance (an alliance of the parish councils of villages in the Avon valley) was formed in part to counter the continuing threat posed by the potential resurrection of this scheme and has actively campaigned to oppose all attempts to progress like or similar schemes. Only two years ago B&NES Council and The West Of England Combined Authority (WECA) sought to resurrect the scheme by having it included in the next Road Investment Strategy (RIS2) which identifies for development in the years ahead, key strategic national highway routes.

The A350 Option

For some years now the VPA has been pressing for an alternative improved north/south link which will provide an effective and sustainable solution to the A36/A46 link. The preferred option is for the A350 (Warminster - Chippenham - M4) route to be upgraded and for the A36 to be downgraded so that the responsibility for it passes from Highways England to the local authorities. While studies are ongoing it is thought that Highways England also favour this option. The Bath MP is also pressing for this option as it links also with the proposals to limit the weight of vehicles using the Cleveland Bridge in Bath. That in turn has a knock-on effect with reducing levels of vehicle emissions in the City.

The Parish Council would encourage WECA to accept that the A350 option for the north/south trunk road connecting the coastal ports to the M4 motorway network is a better and more acceptable option than the discredited A36/A46 link. For the last twenty years or so we have witnessed various attempts to either press ahead with the A36/A46 link road or to reject it. Always subject to the vagaries of local political life it is time for resolution and for clear strategic intent to instead support the A350 option and to explore with the Wiltshire authorities the common ground for bringing this to pass.

Severance of Communities

A VPA initiative led to the formation of a VPA Highways Group which established a regular forum with representatives of Highways England to meet and to discuss with a view to resolution of local road traffic issues - speed, road safety in general, accident reporting, Route Investment Strategies, the severance of communities caused by trunk roads, maintenance work and road closures etc.

As a direct consequence of these meetings Highways England funded and produced a Severance Report which detailed a wide range of road improvements along the Bath - Warminster stretch of the A36 which if implemented could help improve road safety and ease the practical difficulties encountered by local residents in seeking to access safely local services and facilities i.e., the shop, the school, the railway station.

At the time of writing Highways England are considering, subject to budgetary constraints, what local schemes might be developed and implemented.

WECA should support the need to improve road safety for those local communities where severance by major trunk routes impedes residents safely accessing local facilities.

Bus Routes

The village of Freshford is served by the Number 94 bus route which travels on weekdays between Trowbridge and Bath. In broad terms the service enables residents to access public transport every two hours throughout the day. The early morning service provides also a service for some children attending schools in Bath. There is no service at weekends. This is a diminution of the service once provided which also used to cover Saturdays. There is no evening or night-time service.

The responsibility for the service run by Libra Travel is by contract with Wiltshire Council. Bath and North East Somerset Council pay a proportionate amount of the annual costs to Wiltshire.

So: the service has declined over recent years and there appears to be a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Local Authority to secure its long-term future. If Wiltshire determine to end the contract with Libra Services, it seems most unlikely that B&NES will step in to remedy the loss. We believe that B&NES Council should take action independent of Wiltshire to secure a sustainable service responsive to local needs.

Further, there needs to be a review of just what bus routes would be beneficial to the local community. The present East/West orientation of bus services is probably historical (the main road from Trowbridge to Bath was along Pipehouse Lane) and does not now necessarily reflect what people need.

For example, the closure in Freshford of the part time Doctors Surgery means that patients are now seen at the Surgeries premises in Beckington and Frome. Many people are more attracted to shop in Frome than to go into Bath. It is something of an anachronism that Hinton Charterhouse now enjoys an upgraded bus service to Frome, Beckington and Bath while just down the road we struggle to get a public transport responsive to our needs.

We ask the question whether it might be possible for the Bath - Hinton Charterhouse - Frome bus service to 'loop' round Freshford so that it can be readily accessed by residents of Freshford and Limpley Stoke? In the alternative, we see some benefits of running a fast connecting service from Bath - Frome along the A36 corridor and would like to see this explored in more detail.

The Limpley Stoke and Freshford Link Scheme was first set up in 1989 in Limpley Stoke and later extended to Freshford, to help people make important journeys which they could not do by public transport. The villages are spread over steep hillsides and therefore medical, shopping or social visits can present major problems for the elderly, the frail or people with disabilities.

The Link scheme is of continuing benefit and relevance but, we would submit, it should be seen by the local authorities as a beneficial adjunct to, and not a substitute for, a sustainable and integrated transport policy.

We have difficulty at times in seeing, for example, the priority given to placing an electronic sign on the main road in Freshford at an overall cost of some £70,000 (most of the time it says nothing more than 'drive safely' or some other similarly bland announcement) while

being told that we may lose our local bus service with annual costs of about one third of that amount.

We question the balance of spending on large Trunk Road Investment Strategies at a time when local road infrastructure and connectivity are viewed as very poor relations unworthy of real long term and planned support.

WECA should be promoting sustainable public transport networks and improving them so that they are responsive to changing local needs.

Freshford Railway Station

We are fortunate indeed to have a railway station and one which provides, in the main, ready access to Bath and Bristol and the London services while also linking to the Heart of Wessex stations down to Weymouth.

During the years of the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership (2003 - 2019) passenger numbers have more than doubled, funding advanced to help the team of local volunteers to look after the Station Garden, new shelters installed, the platforms have been extended, historic 'Freshford' rail signs have been found, restored and placed at the station.

Great Western have shown considerable commitment to maintaining the links with all the volunteer Groups at every station on the Wessex line - it is a happy and symbiotic relationship which brings benefit to both parties.

Freshford now falls within the Severnside Railway Trust (as from 2019) and it is telling to see what has been done to bring this into effect. The short answer is that Bath and North East Somerset Council appear to have given no notice to the parish council to advise of the termination of the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership nor advised that it has been replaced by Freshford becoming part of the Severnside Rail Trust. Equally there has been no contact with the Severnside Trust and no indication, for example, of whether or not funding might be available to help support the volunteers in maintaining the station garden. We would have expected a more dynamic and committed start from those who have imposed the change.

During the Heart of Wessex years, a Register was maintained and updated annually to list the known wishes of those looking after their local stations so that wherever possible schemes could be implemented to upgrade and improve the train services. In effect it was a rolling programme of works which helped both Great Western and Network Rail understand and recognise what their customers were saying to them and to respond where possible.

Freshford Railway Station is close to the centre of the village. It can only be approached via a single-track road. Parking is limited to some 10 vehicles. Over recent years the tendency has been for early travellers from outside the village to drive to Freshford, park for free all day and then continue on by rail to Bath or Bristol. From time-to-time enquiry has been made to see whether or not the Station can be expanded to accommodate more commuters. Given the restricted road approach to the Station the possibility for expansion is extremely limited and would be met with sustained and effective local opposition.

It needs also to be recognised also that while the station provides easy access to those living in the village centre it is a less attractive option for those in the community who live some 10 - 15 minutes' walk away.

A ready alternative to rail or bus travel is for many to get into their cars and to make the 10/15-minute drive into Bath. For Bath planners this is probably an unattractive option but for the local motorist it makes sense: it is quick and reasonable in terms of cost. There is no Park and Ride Scheme on the South East side of the City. On the downside, the motorists from Freshford and Limpley Stoke to find parking in Bath must then cross over the Churchill Bridge, Midland Bridge or Cleveland Bridge since there is limited parking on the east side of the City and so adds to the congestion and pollution in the city centre.

WECA to support and improve the local rail network.

Local Roads and Highways

The narrow roads of Freshford all add to its charm and its designation as a Conservation Area but inevitably there are continuing tensions over parking, road safety, vehicle speed and access.

With the average width of popular vehicles having increased by near 20% in the last 20 years - they are 'one fifth fatter,' combined with a significant increase in home and shop delivery services, SatNav misdirection and the general increase in vehicle ownership the picture which emerges is of increased damage to home property, increased poor parking, public service vehicles, notably school buses, unable to pass freely along the highways due to inconsiderate parking. And so on.

The Parish Council has been active in achieving a reduction of the speed limit in the centre of the village from 30 mph to 20 mph, has overseen the restrictions on HGVs accessing the village along single track routes into the village, has proposed and endorsed double yellow lines to be placed to allow for the free flow of traffic, has pressed for road improvements at the High street junction by the school and for pedestrian improvements on The Hill.

Road clutter and signage presents a good example of the tensions which can exist. With the implied consent of the local authority the parish council moved all road signage which was either superfluous or unnecessary to the minimum requirements of the law. Before the Speed Watch Group could be given the green light to come into being it was insisted that additional road traffic speed signs be placed throughout the village - 14 in all. The outcome was that there was an overall increase in the number of road signs.

There is also now a Freshford Community Speed Watch Group monitoring vehicle speed at key points throughout the village where the 20mph limit is in force. In its first twelve months of operation, it reports that "the traffic police have written warning letters to 49 drivers whose speed they considered to be excessive, speeds sometimes well above 30mph with one car passing by at 44mph."

Until a few years ago there existed a Tasks Register operated by the Highway Authority. In consultation with the PC the Authority set down what road traffic improvements might be of benefit to the community. In time the schemes most deserving of action would be realised and brought to fruition. Now with budgets pared to the bone there appears to be no prospect of implementing these small schemes. The Task Register is no more.

The overall sense is that there is a steady and marked decline in the local road infrastructure - more potholes, poor road surfaces in general, less hedge cutting putting pedestrians at increased danger, drains and culverts not being cleared as frequently. In isolation many of these small incidents are of small consequence but grouped together they form a persuasive picture of increasing neglect. It is as if the patient is not being treated holistically but is being patched up where absolutely necessary. Unless the means are found now to reverse this trend, the time will fast approach when remedial work will be prohibitively expensive and well outside any determined budgets.

On the positive side the introduction of the online Fix My Street programme appears to be working well and provides residents with a platform for both reporting local problems and for keeping them informed of what action is to be taken and when. There are at present some 10 outstanding Reports in Freshford for action. The Parish Council has publicised the scheme and urged residents to make use of it. As familiarity and confidence with the scheme grows, we see it playing an increasing role in resolving local issues.

Concluding Remarks

The Parish Council recognises the considerable changes that will flow from the long-term commitment to reduce carbon emissions while simultaneously promoting more sustainable forms of energy. But nevertheless, it must surely remain a constant that the essential local road structure is both maintained and improved whatever steps are taken also to implement shared space schemes and improving safe pedestrian and cycle networks. It is often the small but incremental improvements to local roads and road safety that improve the local quality of life and which demonstrate to residents that local authorities do care about the local infrastructure and have a strong vision in both sustaining and improving it.

What vision of village life does WECA wish to see and to promote? How does it propose to place itself to deliver, for example, electric charging points at key village locations? How will it encourage travellers to use efficient and effective public transport networks? What will it do to improve cycle and pedestrian pathways? How will its transport strategy dovetail with its vision of promoting the health and wellbeing of local communities? How will it ensure that health facilities and services can be accessed readily and locally? These are just some of the questions which need to be addressed and brought together in a coherent plan for the future. Most importantly it will be action and not words that will determine whether or not the will exists to bring about significant change.

NJS
2/12/20.