

M3 Junction 9 Improvement Scheme

Assessment of impacts on Public Rights of Way (PROW) and Non-motorised User (NMU) Access

Current Situation The M3 is both a visual and physical barrier to accessing the National Park to the east of the motorway. Existing routes for non-motorised users (NMUs) are limited and/or severely compromised. Of particular relevance to the proposed scheme at junction 9 are the following routes:

Bridleway 502 and National Cycle Network route 23 (NCN23) The bridleway terminates in the middle of the existing Junction 9 roundabout, with users continuing on an undedicated and therefore illegal footpath towards Winchester.

Itchen Way and St Swithun's Way These two promoted, long distance trails, 31 miles and 34 miles respectively, are each crossed by two bridges carrying the A34 dual carriageways. Both routes are largely made up of public footpaths and as such are mainly used by walkers. As promoted routes both have the potential to attract walkers out of the city and further into National Park, however, the quality of access is poor. For example, one under-bridge crossing offers extremely limited headroom with access via a steep bank: a barrier for some users.

Recreation The Winnall Moors Nature Reserve, an extensive network of channels forming part of the river Itchen, lies to the west of the M3 and is bounded to the north by the A34. St Swithun's Way runs to the west of the reserve and the Itchen Way to the east. The reserve is not only an important site for nature conservation but also a significant recreational asset for local communities and visitors to the city. The reserve, managed by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HIOWWT), has seen a rise in visitor numbers in recent years, resulting in increasing pressure on this fragile site.

The South Downs Way National Trail is the obvious high profile recreational route into the National Park and crosses the M3 between junctions 9 and 10. The long distance trails mentioned above are also key gateways into the National Park for walkers. There are however, few circular routes for cyclists and equestrians and no facilities for users with restricted mobility, for example access for all paths.

HE Assessment of Current situation for NMU access and Tourism/Recreation

The Report acknowledges severance caused by the existing highways estate and in particular the arrangements at junction 9. Whilst acknowledging the severance the report also claims good connectivity with the National Park via footpaths such as the Itchen Way and St Swithun's Way. The report does not address the poor quality of this access despite evidence of loss of path width due to erosion on the river bank, low headroom and proximity to fast moving traffic.

No information is provided in either the Environmental or Technical Reports about current or future levels of use.

Tourism and recreation are not considered to be impacted by the current situation or the proposed scheme. Our findings suggest otherwise: severance caused by the motorway is likely to contribute to the recreational pressures experienced on fragile sites such as Winnall Moors and St Catherine's Hill to the south as recreational users are deterred from visiting parts of the National Park east of the M3. It should be noted these sites are designated for nature conservation and cultural heritage whilst also functioning as key public greenspaces for the city.

The report does not consider the role of the National Park as a destination for tourism and recreation other than a brief reference to the location of the South Downs Way crossing. As a result there is nothing in the report to suggest improvements or enhancements to the public rights of way network might be appropriate in order to improve the tourism and amenity value of the existing routes and to mitigate some of the proposed scheme impacts as well as the historic severance impacts.

The Technical report concludes that all options considered by HE will have a slight adverse effect on People and Communities.

Proposed scheme provision for NMU access and recreation.

Immediate impacts

The proposed scheme for junction 9 offers immediate benefits for cyclists and arguably wider NMU access across the junction. A new NMU route is proposed which will address the missing link in route NCN23 allowing access to both sides of Easton Lane and a route for cyclists in and out of the city. The existing bridleway 502 is incorporated into part of the proposed NCN23 but it is unclear whether the bridleway designation will also eventually extend across the junction or indeed whether there is any merit in doing this.

Scheme drawings in the public consultation documents suggest an additional link will be provided for pedestrians, and possibly cyclists, extending from junction 9 to the east of the A34 and north along the A33. It is unclear from the drawings whether this route will connect with the public footpath running under the Itchen Bridge. The route as shown runs parallel to the proposed new carriageways and as such will bring users extremely close to fast moving traffic. There are minimum requirements for horizontal separation of non-motorised users from traffic and it is not clear from the drawings provided at this stage whether these standards can be met. An alternative route taking users away from traffic would be preferable.

Overall the scheme will result in a much extended junction with the addition of several new carriageways. This may deter NMU access into the National Park particularly for those on foot.

Opportunities for access enhancements

The two long distance routes which connect the city with the South Downs are severely impacted by the presence of the A34 and A33 carriageways. Access mitigation and enhancement should focus on these routes as the closest to the scheme and the issues of headroom, accessibility, path width, surfacing, and protection from proximity to fast moving traffic should be addressed. As both routes pass through or adjacent to sites managed by HLOWWT, the Wildlife Trust's input into to any proposed access enhancements will be essential.

The proposed NCN23 link across junction 9 is welcomed and should be built to the requirements for cycle tracks set out in Highways England's Interim Advice Note 195/16 Cycle Traffic and the Strategic Road Network

Wider considerations for access

As outlined above the M3 is the major barrier to accessing the National Park from the west and as a result the green infrastructure sites immediately west of the motorway are increasingly pressured. As well as Winnal Moors, St Catherine's Hill and the Itchen Navigation to the south should be a focus for wider access enhancements. A two pronged approach is proposed:

- Protect sites from further damage by funding path and river bank stabilisation and restoration.
- Enhance connectivity to the east through the creation of a green bridge over the M3 in the St Catherine's Hill/Twyford Down area. In the longer term there is an ambition to re-route the South Downs Way National Trail to this location.

