

Bearwood Road Improvements



Consultation Document

Introduction

Sandwell Council, as part of its programme of improving town centres, has identified a sum of money amounting to around one million pounds for capital improvement works along Bearwood Road from the junction with Waterloo Road through to Hagley Road West at the Kings Head junction.

As local Ward councillors we are aware of a number of measures that need to be carried out in order to enhance the street scenery. Items like new waste bins, pavement repairs, street lighting and removing clutter are obvious issues.

At our surgeries and via correspondence we are also aware that people are concerned about issues around pedestrian crossings, the drab appearance and lack of greenery, pollution, traffic flow, lack of parking, empty shop units, and the unwelcoming appearance around the 'gateway' entrance near the bus station.

We know we cannot solve all of these issues in one go, with a single capital sum of a million pounds, and some issues, like shop ownership for instance, cannot be easily resolved in the short term either. We can make a start though, and the proposals in this document are designed to kick that process off.

It is a genuine consultation, and we do want to hear the views of residents and traders, both on the proposals here, and any other suggestions which we may be able to incorporate, or include in a future improvement programme. These proposals have emerged from residents views, but they are not tablets of stone. We don't want to spend valuable resources on implementing schemes that residents don't want or which won't improve things, and if there are other suggestions that would be more effective we want to hear them.

A series of maps accompany this document to show in more detail some of the proposed improvements, and feedback forms are also available to download.

Thank you in advance for your time in reading the document, and your feedback will be welcomed.

Steve Eling, Ann Jaron and Bob Piper
Abbey Ward Councillors



Clearing the way for pedestrians

One of Sandwell Council's key priorities for Bearwood is to give pedestrians a better deal. Bearwood is a highly-developed neighbourhood, with the big advantage that shops, schools, places of worship, pubs and parks are mostly within easy walking distance of people's homes. This makes for a sociable and sustainable place to live and work. Unfortunately this 'walkability' doesn't prevent the streets from being clogged with traffic for much of the day. This, in turn, creates two problems that the Council is determined to tackle.

One relates to the relative priority given to pedestrians and vehicles. Over the years, there has been an emphasis on trying to meet the needs of traffic. With the wisdom of hindsight, this approach has encouraged more traffic, while making conditions worse for pedestrians.

As your Abbey Ward Councillors, we are determined to give people on foot a better deal, and to rebalance our streets in favour of pedestrians. After all, everyone who uses Bearwood does so as a pedestrian, whether they have arrived by bus, in a car, on a bike or on foot. We want to help local businesses and to make Bearwood a more prosperous and busy centre, so helping people to get around safely and easily is key to achieving that aim.

One of the first issues we will tackle is the state of pavements and footpaths. Bearwood Road, between Adkins Lane and the Barleycorn (Hadley Hall) was resurfaced in block paving about twenty years ago. Although much of this paving survives in good condition, some areas do now need some work.

Bearwood Road has been surveyed in detail, and a scheme of repairs and improvements drawn up.

- ◆ The block paving will be repaired or renewed where there are odd dips and humps, while cracked or broken blocks, as well as broken kerbs, are to be replaced.
- ◆ A lot of the drainage channels that cross the pavement are either broken or uneven, and these will be dealt with.
- ◆ The number of street signs and poles will be reduced, to remove clutter, avoid duplication and make movement easier for pedestrians.
- ◆ Extra drop kerbs and 'blister' paving, to meet disability requirements, will also be provided at all side road crossings.
- ◆ Where crossings and pavements need bollards, to protect people or prevent vehicles driving or parking on the footway, new bollards will be installed, to a simple but robust design.
- ◆ Old litter bins will be replaced with new litter or combined recycling 'Duobins', to an easily recognisable design. These will hopefully improve recycling rates, as well as reducing litter.
- ◆ New LED streetlights are to be introduced along Bearwood Road. These have proved successful and popular elsewhere, combining better illumination with greatly reduced running and maintenance costs.

We know from regular Councillors' surgeries that many people in Bearwood have an issue with the pedestrian crossings in the shopping area. Although these are well placed and helpful, people say they are frustrated by the lack of a green man display on the far side of the street to let them know when it is safe to cross. We have asked officers to look into this issue and it is proposed to fit these four crossings with far-side displays for pedestrians.

At the Bear junction we propose a more radical redesign, to hopefully provide pedestrians with an improved diagonal crossing. This is a more complex and ambitious scheme and is described in detail elsewhere in this consultation.

We believe this investment by the Council will encourage pedestrians, and hopefully help with regenerating the shopping centre, by making walking around our neighbourhood easier, safer and more pleasant.



Bear tavern junction remodelling

The issues

- ◆ The junction of Bearwood Road with Sandon Road and Three Shires Oak Road, outside the Bear tavern, is busy and congested for much of the day, but particularly at peak hours
- ◆ All types of traffic use the junction: Bearwood Road is an 'A' road linking the A456 Hagley Road with Smethwick, with no convenient alternative route. Traffic includes HGVs and large numbers of buses

- ◆ At times, the approach arms get blocked by vehicles waiting to turn right; there is no space to create extra lanes or extend the junction because of the restricted building line at back of pavement
- ◆ The building line reduces pavement widths for pedestrians, creating congestion and making for an unpleasant and threatening environment
- ◆ The closeness of buildings and high volumes of traffic create a canyon, trapping air pollution most noticeably when traffic is queuing
- ◆ In summary, the junction doesn't work well for pedestrians or drivers

Our aspirations:

The Council's aim is to radically revisit the way the junction works, in order to

- give pedestrians a fairer deal
- help improve road safety
- reduce uncertainty and make priorities clear
- create a pleasant urban space out of what is currently a hostile, traffic-dominated non-place

From other examples around the UK we know it is possible to reconfigure and redesign this junction based on the recent redesign of London's Oxford Circus



This crossroads carries large numbers of buses and taxis throughout the day, while multitudes of pedestrians need to cross in all directions. The existing four-way pedestrian crossing was supplemented by a diagonal crossing, known as a “scramble crossing”. When the green man appears, people can cross safely in any direction, with enough time allowed for the extra distance involved in crossing diagonally. Additional signals were installed to safely control the diagonal movements and countdown timers added that advise pedestrians how many seconds are left in which to cross safely. The roadway was boldly marked to draw attention to these extra pedestrian crossings. The scheme, which opened in 2009, has halved the time it takes people to cross the street, while removing guardrail makes people feel less hemmed-in.

Tackling poor air quality

One of the key issues that the Council needs to tackle is the emerging problem of poor air quality along Bearwood Road. The two key elements of air pollution are nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate matter (PM₁₀), the latter closely associated with emissions from diesel engines. For a number of years the Council has sampled air quality through equipment installed within the shopping centre, and this confirms the presence of high levels of pollutants, mostly – it is believed - from vehicle emissions. Several factors combine to concentrate the problem here, including:

- Bearwood Road is a major through route carrying a lot of traffic all day
- There seems to be a high concentration of diesel-engined vehicles, especially buses and taxis, responsible for particulate emissions
- The number of junctions, crossings, side roads and kerbside parking means vehicle speeds are slow, and in places traffic queues back throughout the day, which concentrates pollution
- Unfortunately it seems the most polluted stretches of Bearwood Road are also the busiest - near the shops and around Bearwood school
- The narrowness of the street and the height of the buildings that line it creates a canyon, trapping particulates and other forms of air pollution

This will not be a quick or easy issue to deal with. Bearwood is highly built up, with very few cleared sites or development opportunities and no possibility of re-route traffic away from the main Bearwood Road spine. In short, we are stuck for the foreseeable future with the roads and buildings we have now.

Nonetheless, finding ways to improve air quality is a challenge the Council is determined to face up to, in view of the impact that exposure over time to these pollutants has on people's respiratory systems. We need to begin taking action straight away, though some of these proposals are aimed at helping us understand better the scale and make-up of the problem.

The Council has now taken a decision to invest in additional sampling equipment, by installing a ground-level monitoring station along Bearwood Road. This will provide a more accurate measurement of NO₂ levels than can be obtained from the existing rooftop equipment. It will also enable particulate matter (PM₁₀) to be measured for the first time.

At the same time the Council will carry out an intensive survey to determine the main sources of vehicle emissions along Bearwood Road. This will be done through a combination of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras and video traffic counts which, together, can provide information on the numbers and types of traffic running along Bearwood Road. The study will determine emissions from each vehicle type for each hour of the day over a four day period and will correlate these findings with DVLA data to determine vehicle characteristics based on age, make and engine type. This should enable the Council to quickly build up an understanding of what vehicles are the worst offenders for creating air pollution. From this exercise it will be easier to devise a strategy for tackling the issue effectively.

Greening Initiatives

Although Bearwood has quality parks and green spaces, the main Bearwood Road corridor is heavily built up, with limited opportunities for introducing greenery. In the past the Council has successfully worked in partnership with local traders to provide containers for plant displays and help soften the street. It remains our aim to plant more street trees and install further planters wherever practical to do so: the current investment proposal includes both.

We are looking at unused or leftover spaces along Bearwood Road, to create pleasant, green, landscaped oases where shoppers can rest. Details of these will emerge once discussions have taken place with landowners.

The growing awareness of the problem of poor air quality and traffic pollution calls for more radical steps. One solution that has been suggested involves the installation of green screens alongside or close to the pavement. These consist of self-contained, ultra-thin, ivy hedges grown in troughs off-site then relocated into their new position. They provide an instant screen and, as well as being attractive, are effective at removing particulates from the atmosphere at street level, so improving air quality for pedestrians.

Several potential locations for these screens have been identified along Bearwood Road, including within Bearwood School. Following discussions with owners, the Council will look to install these screens and monitor their effectiveness at improving air quality. We are also looking for a suitable place to plant a 'living wall', formed of more colourful and decorative plants.

We are also keen to make something out of the unloved area at the far end of Bearwood Road, between Adkins lane and Hagley Road West. As you may know, we have campaigned to have the former Kings Head clock repatriated to Bearwood and this could form a centrepiece to the tarmac space recently used as a contractor's compound. We are aiming to demolish the redundant toilets and are holding talks with Centro about how the bus interchange will work once the Sprint project takes place in 2016, This times well with the anticipated restoration of Lightwoods Park and House, also due to finish in 2016. Our aim is to create an attractive and distinctive link from Lightwoods Park to the shopping centre of Bearwood. We also envisage this being a high quality gateway into Bearwood and Smethwick from Hagley Road.

We have no fixed ideas about how this space should look once complete and are keen to hear your thoughts about what form this transformation should take. Please let us have your ideas and suggestions.