

REPORT OF INTERIM SERVICE DIRECTOR PLACE AND COMMUNITIES

RUFFORD LANE FORD: OPTIONS REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider the future options for Rufford ford following the emergency closure of the crossing in 2022 for safety reasons on Police advice.

Background

2. Rufford ford is on Rufford Lane where Rainworth Water crosses to the west of Rufford Country Park. Rufford village was mentioned in the Domesday book and the adjacent Rufford Abbey Sawmill and outbuildings are Grade 2 listed. A ford has been in this location for hundreds of years and features on Chapmans Map of Nottinghamshire 1774.
3. The Mill and Rufford Country Park to the east attract in excess of 500,000 visitors annually and a viewing platform for the ford is constructed on the east side of the crossing. Traditionally visitors would congregate here whilst visiting the Country Park to watch vehicles traversing the ford. The Average Annual Traffic Flow prior to the current closure was approximately 1900 vehicles a day.
4. In 2020, a local student began posting videos of vehicles crossing the ford and in particular, those that failed to do so and were damaged by water ingress. These films on YouTube quickly went viral and started receiving over several million views. This in turn attracted other social media creators who travelled significant distances to capture footage of the ford. There are over 10,000 videos on YouTube alone with 8,700 on TikTok, 4,200 on Instagram and 3,500 on Facebook collectively with many millions of views.
5. The creation of attractive content on social media can be a lucrative career. Youtubers with high numbers of subscribers can generate substantial income primarily from advertising revenue and several of those posting were travelling large distances to visit the location.
6. By 2022, the numbers of those filming and those wanting to be filmed had increased significantly. The general behaviour had deteriorated with vehicles driving at increasing speeds repeatedly through the ford with the hope of being filmed doing so and becoming part of the viral footage. Amateur filmmakers regularly stood in the carriageway to get prime footage and it was clear that a road safety issue was emerging. The Police attended regularly in an attempt to bring order to the situation but this in itself was filmed, uploaded, and again viewed thousands of times.
7. On 22nd October 2022 a motorcyclist drove at high speed into the ford and the impact propelled him at speed over the handlebars. This in itself was also filmed and uploaded to YouTube. Following this incident, the Police instructed that the escalating behaviour was creating a

significant danger and they requested that the County Council used its powers to temporarily close the highway on the grounds of public safety.

8. On 2nd December 2022, using a public notice, Rufford Lane was closed to vehicular traffic for a period of 18 months under S14(1b) of the Road Traffic Regulation Act because of the likelihood of danger to the public. In the ensuing period, the County Council has developed and assessed a number of long-term options.

Permanent Options

9. The options considered are set out below. The costs given are high level estimates of construction costs that are provided to enable comparisons between options, but they do not include for risk, contingency, legal processes, diversionary work for utilities or cost inflation. They must therefore be viewed with caution as any detailed works have the potential to be significantly higher.

Traffic calming

- (i) Three options to slow traffic speeds are considered, road humps, cushions, and a chicane with cushions. All three options are expected to reduce vehicle speeds in general (although cushions will not slow two-wheeled vehicles). However, due to needing to avoid the potential extents of the maximum flooded areas and the fact that many of the vehicles that were traversing the ford at speed were large 4x4's, it is unlikely that using traffic calming features will have any real impact upon the anti-social activities described above and it is possible that such features may actually exacerbate certain undesirable driving behaviour. Likely costs would be in the region of £18-£30K and any chosen features would have to take into consideration the aesthetic of the location.

Improvements to existing signing and/or lining

- (ii) This would represent a low-cost attempt around £5K to highlight the ford further with enhanced signing/lining whilst keeping it fully open to all traffic. This is highly unlikely to deliver any change to the dangerous anti-social behaviour.

Reduction in flood occurrence

- (iii) This option would require the removal of vegetation and silt along the riverbed either side of the ford with the aim of reducing the occurrences of floods across the carriageway which in turn attracted the highest number of participants attempting to cross the ford. The option is though problematic as the land either side is in private ownership and there are potentially serious implications for the ecological habitat. In addition, the build-up of vegetation will return, and some flooding is therefore inevitable without constant maintenance. The cost of a one-time removal assuming permissions could be granted would be in the region of £32K.

Permanent closure of the ford

- (iv) A full and permanent closure using a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) prohibiting motor vehicles would ensure that there would be no return to the anti-social behaviour and public safety risk previously associated with the location. It would though mean that motorists would have to continue driving around the closed section of road using the A614 and A606 which is a detour of approximately 4 miles. A prohibition of driving would ensure that Rufford Lane would remain open to pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders who would have the opportunity of travelling on a much quieter road.

- (v) A full closure would also require changes to the existing permanent direction signs on the A614 and A606. There is insufficient room within the existing highway for a turning space for large vehicles so if that becomes a necessity, third party land would be required.
- (vi) The costs of a full closure would range from £43K for the basic closure with gates upwards depending on the final design. The physical barriers would have to be designed to prevent any possibility of larger vehicles traversing the ford.
- (vii) The closure would require a TRO subject to public consultation and at that stage, all responses received can be carefully considered before proceeding.

Traffic signals

- (viii) The option of using traffic signals to halt both approaches before changing to green on demand and effectively slowing all traffic has also been considered. This solution though has no precedent and there are significant technical challenges.
- (ix) Signals would have to be placed within the 'dry' areas approaching the ford and operate on a shuttle-system basis similar to those used as narrow bridges. An all-red base setting could slow vehicles approaching and require them to stand for a period whilst the green phase is called.
- (x) Major difficulties surround both the electrical connections across a river and the problems that would arise when the road is flooded. On those occasions, a green light could be interpreted as being safe to cross when in fact the levels are dangerously high.
- (xi) In addition, in view of the type of driving behaviour that was witnessed prior to the current temporary closure, it is unlikely that a red light would have much impact upon drivers determined to cross the ford at high speed for the cameras.
- (xii) The cost of this solution if deliverable is estimated at £150K.

Bridge over the ford

- (xiii) A detailed feasibility study was undertaken to consider the costs and implications of constructing a bridge over the ford for vehicular traffic. The most significant factor is the estimated cost of over £1m with contingencies with the high likelihood that after more detailed design considerations this could be significantly higher.
- (xiv) Leaving aside the significant cost implications, the construction of a bridge in this location would present considerable challenges not least of which would be a design that would be appropriate for the setting adjacent to the Mill. A bridge would effectively end the association of the location with a ford that forms part of the place name.

Controlled access through the ford

- (xv) This option comprises of consulting on a TRO that restricts access through the ford to certain approved vehicles using an access only order. Such a restriction could potentially in the future be enforced using Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras if the Department for Transport grants the powers to the County Council in 2024.

- (xvi) Leaving aside the inability of the Council to enforce this currently, the inherent difficulties of this approach would be in determining which properties locally were exempt from the restriction. If the exemption extended to, for example, the Rufford Golf and Country Club to the east of the ford, this would be unworkable because of the high number of vehicles involved.
- (xvii) Similarly with the traffic signals, the nature of the behaviour was such that the threat of an ANPR camera is unlikely to have much impact. The cost of a Penalty Charge Notice is not significant measured against potential income from YouTube.

Conclusion

- 10. A number of options have been analysed to address the unique problem of anti-social behaviour at Rufford ford caused by filming for social media. It is certain that such behaviour would return if the road was re-opened because filming such activities is lucrative and many others wish to participate in these films that will go on to be viewed potentially millions of times worldwide. For this reason alone, any option chosen should ensure that the return of this danger is not just minimised but effectively eliminated. On this basis, options such as traffic calming, enhanced signing/lining, signals, vegetation removal and access restrictions should be discounted because they all leave the ford open to some or all traffic. Because of the potential earnings from filming, the vandalism of equipment such as signals or ANPR could also become a possibility.
- 11. The only remaining viable options therefore are the construction of a bridge or a permanent closure to motor vehicles with a TRO. The feasibility study on the bridge indicates that costs will be high and if a detailed design proceeded, taking into consideration the location adjacent to a listed building, these are likely to increase significantly. A modern bridge is likely to be a highly contentious proposal bearing in mind the extensive history of the site and it would effectively be the end of the ford that forms part of the Rufford place name.
- 12. A full and permanent closure would offer the opportunity to transform Rufford Lane into a walking, cycling or horse-riding only route connected to other local footways and bridleways. Closing the road to vehicles only would also ensure that this historic location would be preserved largely unaltered. The ford would remain as it was originally intended as a local crossing point of Rainworth Water before the advent of motor vehicles.
- 13. Rufford Lane has been closed temporarily since December 2022 on the grounds of preventing danger to the public and whilst initially there were some concerns and queries raised by residents, there have been very few recent ones and only occasional vehicles turn into Rufford Lane and have to turn around. All indications therefore are that motorists understand the road is closed and have managed to establish acceptable alternative routes through Eakring or Ollerton.

Other Options Considered

- 14. The option of doing nothing and re-opening the ford when the temporary closure expires has been considered and rejected. It is a very significant risk that the anti-social and at times dangerous behaviour evidenced at the ford prior to the closure and amplified by social media will return. Noise, accidents and damage to the highway and surroundings would return to one of the county's prime tourist attractions. The report above details the other options considered.

Reasons for Recommendations

15. It is considered that approving the formal consultation for closing Rufford Lane permanently to vehicular traffic is the best option to remove the risk of anti-social behaviour generated and encouraged by social media platforms whilst preserving this unique historical location safely for future generations. If the closure is approved following advertisement, the opportunity to enhance the local environment with improved landscaping can be explored if funding becomes available.

Statutory and Policy Implications

16. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability, and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Crime and Disorder Implications

17. If the prohibition of driving restriction is approved after consultation, it will remove the risk of anti-social behaviour and dangerous driving at this location that led to the emergency temporary closure in 2022. In the event that the TRO is not progressed, alternative options would then have to be considered to prevent the return of this behaviour.

Financial Implications

18. If the prohibition of driving restriction is approved after consultation, a permanent closure with gates and changes to local direction signing is estimated at £44K which can be met from the 2024/25 ITM budget as a local walking/cycling improvement.

Human Rights Implications

19. The implementation of the proposals within this report might be considered to have a minimal impact on human rights (such as the right to respect for private and family life and the right to peaceful enjoyment of property, for example). However, the Authority is entitled to affect these rights where it is in accordance with the law and is both necessary and proportionate to do so, in the interests of public safety, to prevent disorder and crime, to protect health, and to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The proposals within this report are considered to be within the scope of such legitimate aims.

Public Sector Equality Duty implications

20. As part of the process of making decisions and changing policy, the Council has a duty 'to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not' by thinking about the need to:
 - Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share protected characteristics (as defined by equalities legislation) and those who do not.
 - Foster good relations between people who share protected characteristics and those who do not.

21. Disability is a protected characteristic, and the Council therefore has a duty to make reasonable adjustments to proposals to ensure that disabled people are not treated unfairly.
22. If following formal consultation the decision is made to permanently close Rufford Lane to through traffic this should assist vulnerable pedestrians including the elderly or disabled visiting this location.

Implications for Sustainability and the Environment

23. If, following consultation, the decision is made to close Rufford Lane permanently, this offers an excellent opportunity to further improve the local environment with enhanced biodiversity around Rainworth Water as well as removing vehicle emissions. Cycling, walking and horse riding would all be assisted along Rufford lane with the vehicles removed and this provides further opportunities to create local networks on quiet routes for sustainable transport options.

RECOMMENDATION/S

It is **recommended** that:

- 1) A Traffic Regulation Order proposing the permanent closure of Rufford Lane at the ford to motor vehicles is consulted upon and the responses will be considered in due course by the Cabinet Member.

MARK WALKER, INTERIM SERVICE DIRECTOR, PLACE AND COMMUNITIES

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Constitutional Comments (CEH 13.10.2023)

24. The recommendation falls within the remit of the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment (TE.1).

Financial Comments (GB 12.10.2023)

25. It is proposed that the £44k costs associated with recommended option would be funded from the 2024/25 Integrated Transport Measures budget which is already approved within the Transport and Environment portfolio capital programme. Further developments would be subject to future funding approvals.

Background Papers

None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

Sherwood Forest Councillor Scott Carlton