

A RURAL COMMUNITY TRAFFIC STRATEGY FOR DORSET

Executive Summary

Rural communities in Dorset are increasingly at risk from the rise in recent years in heavy traffic using rural roads and lanes. The increase arises for a number of reasons, including national trends and local factors. Realistically, it cannot be reversed or significantly curtailed. However, it is open to Dorset Council to put in place a strategy to mitigate the worst effects, through planning policies and decisions, speed controls and route restrictions.

This note is based on experience in the Puddletown Area Parish, with examples from the local area, but it is likely to resonate with other rural parts of the County.

The Issue

Puddletown Area Parish is located 6 miles east of Dorchester. It straddles the A35 and comprises four parishes mainly located south of the A35: Puddletown, Athelhampton, Burleston and Tolpuddle. To the east lies Stinsford Parish, to the south Tincleton, to the east Briantspuddle and to the north Milborne St Andrew.

The A35 bypass built in the 1990s has done an enormous amount to calm these settlements, reducing traffic flows from 20,000 a day in the summer to what are largely local vehicle movements and visiting traffic. But more recently a number of factors have led much more heavy traffic using local roads:

- the national trend towards ever larger lorries and articulated trucks for the transport of goods and material around the country. Together with the rise of internet shopping, the costs of breaking bulk down to allow delivery by smaller vehicles and the expansion of businesses operating from farm units this makes for many more large vehicles plying along country roads and lanes.
- the trend towards greater use of contractors by farmers for many aspects of agricultural work. Whereas in the past, farm vehicles might travel up to a mile or two on country and trunk roads as they operated around the farm, now they travel very significant distances along Dorset's roads. Moreover, these vehicles, especially those operated by contractors, are growing ever larger and heavier.
- specifically in our nitrate sensitive area, the move towards industrial dairy farming means large number of contractor movements shifting waste products from cattle, often involving journeys of many miles, including on trunk routes which are very busy in the summer;
- again, specific to our area, the number of large dump trucks on the road associated with local quarrying.

It is our view that the impact on small rural settlements and on smaller rural roads of these changes has not been given sufficient attention by successive local authorities and that, without some action, the risks will grow.

Key issues are:

- damage to verges, small bridges, tree canopies and vulnerable older buildings arising from the size, weight and height of vehicles. By way of example, traffic on the B3990 between the A35 and Crossways has increased substantially recently, not least because of the new housing development at Crossways. Much greater use is being made by articulated lorries, aggregate dumper trucks and farm contractor vehicles. These vehicles are unable to travel through the bends south of Affpuddle without crossing over the centre line on the road. They have done great damage to the verges, spilling gravel and soil onto the carriageway. They frequently bring

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down branches from the overhanging tree canopies which pose a real danger to cars and cyclists. Heavy farm vehicles using Southover Lane pass within a few feet of 18th and 19th century cottages usually built with minimal foundations. On several occasions, small bridges over the Piddle have been damaged by heavy traffic.

- risks to the safety of the public and small rural communities. Heavy delivery and farm contractor vehicles are operating to tight time constraints. Inevitably this results in some of them travelling too fast for the routes they are taking. There have been several near misses in the bends south of Affpuddle. As more and more cars use this route because of the expansion at Crossways, it seems only a matter of time before a major accident occurs. In Tolpuddle and Puddletown, even if they do not exceed 30 mph, large tractors and trailers sway around intimidatingly as they take bends and avoid parked cars; and during the harvest season, there are often tyre marks on these roads where they have had to skid to halt to avoid oncoming vehicles.
- Damage to amenity in rural communities. Modern industrial farming is virtually 24/7. Work starts early and continues late into the evening, sometimes under headlights. The cabs of large tractors pass by intrusively at the first floor window height of traditional cottages. Together with speed and weight issues, all this impacts on the well being of those in these communities.

The simple fact is that there has been a big increase in larger, heavier vehicles using roads that were never designed or intended for them.

What Can Be Done?

Dorset is a working rural county and that contributes much to its charm. It is not possible to turn the clock back to the days when farm vehicles were smaller and travelled only locally, or to reverse modern trends in online shopping and deliveries. But there are things that can be done in mitigation.

The new Council should consider putting in place (or if it has one, updating) a ***Rural Community Traffic Strategy***. The aim would be to identify rural roads and communities at greatest risk from these transport trends and to propose measures to offset the worst effects. A first step should be to carry out a structured survey of parish councils who would need to provide plausible evidence of the problem in their area. This might need to be followed up by more detailed assessments by highway authority staff.

In the light of this work, a range of mitigation steps might be considered where problems have been identified:

- a presumption against approving planning applications which will generate very heavy traffic movements in areas with acute problems; or restrictions on approval which are enforced;
- where other routes are available, restrictions on the size and/or weight of vehicles that may use certain rural roads (except for delivery);
- lower speed limits (eg 20 mph) for heavy vehicles travelling through villages, hamlets and at risk rural roads;
- time of day restrictions for heavier vehicles or specific types of vehicle to protect the amenity of communities at quiet times;
- selective use of traffic calming to slow down heavy vehicles in sensitive areas.

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This should not be a recipe for widespread and potentially confusing traffic regulation across the County but a proportionate, measured response to what is an increasing problem for some communities and rural routes. **We commend it to the Council for consideration.**

**Puddletown Area Parish
September 2019**