

A251 Safety Improvements – the need for appropriate speed limits

A report by the Mid Kent Transportation Manager to the Highways Advisory Board on 9 January 2007.

Introduction

1. As part of the safety improvements proposed for A251 between Ashford and Faversham, a study was undertaken. This showed that a reduction of the speed limit through the villages of North Street, Badlesmere and Sheldwich from 50 mph to 40 mph and the sections between from 60 mph to 50 mph could be achieved. This was based upon speed surveys, which established the 85th %ile speeds and the injury crash record.

Discussion

2. In line with the latest Government guidance on the setting of speed limits (1/2006), the existing speed limits on all 'A' and 'B' roads will be reviewed during the next 5 years to ensure that those posted limits are still appropriate and meet with the criteria. If they fail to comply, they will be changed in accordance with the criteria. It is possible that some limits could be increased as well as reduced to comply with these requirements. The criteria for the latest guidance now uses '**mean**' speeds rather than the 85th percentile in determining appropriate limits. In this particular case as the safety improvements for A251 are already in the Integrated Transport programme expectations have been raised that the scheme will happen and I am concerned that to delay this further, pending the full review of all A and B roads, would be unwelcome by local residents, local members and the Parish Councils.
3. Table 1 below shows the **mean** speeds that were recorded as part of the speed assessment. This shows that the latest criteria can be met and justifies the implementation of a 40 mph speed limit through the Villages shown.

Table 1

Location	Northbound (Mean speeds)	Southbound (Mean speeds)
North Street	40 mph	42.5mph
Badlesmere	39.5mph	39.6mph
Sheldwich	41.8mph	41.4mph

4. Members will recall that a report outlining the need to set appropriate speed limits was presented to the July 2006 meeting of the Highways Advisory Board (HAB) and was approved. This was then the subject of a report to Swale JTB in September 2006. The proposal to reduce the speed limits through the A251 was the subject of a separate report to this meeting of the Swale JTB. It was explained that 30 mph limits through the above villages did not conform to the previous guidance (Government Guidance Note Circular 1/93), the latest guidance (circular 1/2006) or the resolution of HAB in respect of appropriate speed limits and that a 40 mph limit is the most appropriate. The Police concur with this view. Members of Swale JTB recommended that a 30 mph speed limit through the above villages should be pursued.

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5. In setting any limit both the Police and the County Council are seeking limits that foster compliance and as much self-enforcement as possible. This can only be achieved if the criteria are strictly applied and that the majority of drivers 'believe' in the posted limit and understand why it is there. Speed limits are likely to be at their most effective where it reflects the local environment.
6. There is also a risk that by implementing an inappropriate limit, i.e. one that does not relate well to the 'natural' road environment, could encourage driver frustration, bunching, potential for shunts and overtaking manoeuvres which could serve to introduce a new safety problem and actually worsen the existing crash record rather than reduce it.
7. Kent Police's Senior Forensic Collision Investigator believes that setting inappropriate speed limits may 'inadvertently encourage dangerous manoeuvres', because if a large number of motorists fail to comply with the reduced limit, then they are more likely to try and overtake those in the minority who do. There is a risk of encouraging that particular manoeuvre if the road in question does not suit a lower speed limit which could lead to serious head on collisions. Such a situation arose on the A228 (administered by Medway Council). Although a different class of road, a lower limit was introduced against the wishes of the Police and the safety record worsened, rather than improved, as a result of the manoeuvres described.
8. The introduction of an inappropriate limit is likely to breed contempt, lack of compliance and lack of respect for the law and place undue pressure upon the Police. Once there is a realisation among the local community as to the ineffectiveness of the limit, pressure is likely to be placed upon the County Council to introduce traffic calming measures (see the latest County Council policy on traffic calming as endorsed by members at the July 2005 HAB). This would have to take its place in the queue for funding and, alongside the necessary signing thus risks urbanisation of the countryside as well as increasing the financial burden upon this Authority, including the on-going maintenance costs.

Conclusion

10. Speed limits have to be appropriate to the local environment, existing traffic speeds and crash record if they are to bring any benefit in terms of improved road safety. It is therefore paramount that we deal with actual problems rather than the perception of a problem. The views of the Police are paramount in this regard.

Recommendations

11. It is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste that a 40 mph speed limit is introduced on A251 through the villages of North Street, Badlesmere and Sheldwich with a 50 mph speed limit for the remainder of the road.