

TO: SWALE JOINT TRANSPORTATION BOARD

DATE: 18 September 2006

SUBJECT: Criteria for Speed Limits

BY: Divisional Manager – Mid Kent Division,
Kent Highway Services

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report provides details of the recently approved criteria for speed limits.

Decision required: That Members note the report.

Introduction

1. Following the in-sourcing of the highway functions a review of the outstanding proposals to change the speed limits on various sites within Mid Kent was carried out. It was found that there was a varying approach by the former Highway Units.
2. It was therefore decided to revise the existing procedures and propose a new set of criteria to meet with the requirements of the national guidelines and our agreement with the police. The proposed criteria were the subject of a report to the meeting of the Highway Advisory Board on 11 July 2006 and Members recommended that the procedures be adopted.

Decision Required

3. That Members note the report.

Background Papers

Report to the Highways Advisory Board on 11 July 2006, 'Speed Limits – the need to set appropriate limits'.

Responsible Officer

David Bond 01622 798339
david.bond@kent.gov.uk

Speed Limits – the need for setting appropriate limits

A report by the Mid Kent Transportation Manager to the Highways Advisory Board on 11 July 2006

Introduction

1. According to Government figures released in 1999, the majority of drivers regularly break speed limits. This is true for all classes of road, all times of day and all days of the week. Clearly, many drivers treat posted speed limits as guidelines and fail to recognise the risks they pose to themselves, their passengers and those outside their vehicles.
2. Speed limits are set in one of three ways;
 - if there are no street lights and there are no signs to say otherwise, the national speed limit applies
 - if there are street lights and there are no signs to say otherwise, the speed limit is automatically 30 mph for all vehicles regardless of whether the road is a single or dual carriageway; the government has made a regulation that specifically prohibits Councils from erecting 'repeater' 30 mph signs on such roads
 - if a Highway Authority wishes to impose a lower or higher speed limit to the above, they must make a legal order to set it and before they can do this, they must consult with the Police who are the enforcement authority for the criminal offence of exceeding the speed limit; to allow Kent Police to target enforcement of speed limits most effectively, they only support a lower speed limit in the following circumstances;
 - (a) if no more than 15% of drivers are travelling above the proposed speed limit (the 85th percentile rule)
 - (b) if, at the same time as introducing the new speed limit, the Highway Authority installs physical measures that are likely to reduce drivers' speeds to the proposed speed limit
 - (c) if there have been a high number of speed related crashes and non-physical measures aimed at reducing speeds are not implementable and that the site does not meet the criteria for speed cameras
 - (d) density of development (the higher the density the lower the speed limit)
3. The Department for Transport's Circular 1/93 states that, 'it is not axiomatic that the lowest limit will produce the lowest actual speed. If the limit is unrealistically low drivers may well choose to ignore it whilst a higher, but more realistic, limit could affect drivers' choice of speed'. Further, 'specific speed limits cannot, on their own be expected to reduce vehicle speed if they are set at a level substantially below that at which drivers would choose to drive in the absence of a limit'.

Background

4. A report was submitted by Kent Highway Services to the April 2006 Joint Transportation Board (JTB) recommending the conversion of Heath Road, between Linton Crossroads and Langley Crossroads, to a 40 mph limit throughout its length. The current limits are;

40 mph between Linton Crossroads and just beyond Marlpit bends, then national (derestricted), 40 mph through Chart Sutton, and then national through to Langley.

5. Despite the recommendation, the JTB went against it and instead want to see the section of road between Linton Crossroads to just beyond the Cock Inn at Cock Street become a 30 mph limit. This is a distance of approximately 1.3 miles.
6. The County Council's proposal does already recognise that there is a safety issue on this section of road, there having been 6 slight injury crashes in the latest 3 year period (up to 31st December 2005). This includes 4 at the junction of Heath Road with Hubbards Lane. The 85th %ile speeds have shown traffic to be travelling at over 50 mph and the character of the road does not naturally suit a 30 mph limit. It is unclear what is expected to suddenly change the behaviour of the majority of drivers from travelling at over 50 mph to speeds which are at or about 30 mph.
7. 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 is 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. On a point of comparison it is worth considering the environment of a road quite well known to some of us, for example, Willington Street, in Maidstone, which has an existing 30 mph limit. This is a road that bears no resemblance in character (built-up, urban residential, high traffic flows, high pedestrian movements, etc.) to the section of Heath Road under discussion, yet is being requested to be treated in a similar manner.
8. 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.
9. 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 (as suggested in the speed surveys referred to in Item 6) 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 30 mph speed limit which could lead to serious head on collisions. A similar 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.
10. It is our view that 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. The Police are no different to any other organisation in that they have to prioritise resources and target them in those areas where they believe they will be the most effective and bring the greatest benefits. It would be quite illogical and wrong if the Police were pressured into enforcing an inappropriate limit on a road such as this as this could be at the cost of more pressing needs elsewhere.
11. Once there is a realisation among the local community as to the ineffectiveness of the limit, I can foresee pressure being 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, attached, and documents are available). This would have to take its place in the queue for funding and, alongside the necessary signing, risks

urbanisation of the countryside as well as increasing the financial burden upon this Authority, including the on-going maintenance.

12. It is also important to bear in mind that although this does not apply in this case, if a road is street lit then 30 mph repeater signs cannot be provided. We therefore have to be mindful of a potential situation whereby a change of speed limit, from 40 mph to 30 mph in a street lit area, will result in the removal of the 40mph repeater signs, yet they will not be replaced. However, should the situation change in Heath Road whereby there is a need to provide street lighting and a 30mph limit had already been introduced, speed limit repeater signs would have to be removed.

Other examples

13. A28, St Michael's

St Michael's Primary School contacted KHS about concerns about traffic driving in excess of the existing 40 mph limit. The School approached Jacobs to carry out the speed surveys and when we eventually obtained a copy it was found that the majority of traffic was complying with the limit. The stretch of road in question has a low crash record and none has involved excessive speed. It now seems that the School are not content with this and now want a 30 mph limit to be introduced when there is no justification to do so.

A28, Chartham

KHS officers recommended that the speed limit should not be lowered, yet this was overruled by the Canterbury JTB who insisted upon a length of 40 limit, just to the west of Hatch Lane and 50 for the remainder to join up with the existing 50 in Chilham.

A251, between Faversham and Challock

Following a safety review of the A251 between Faversham and Challock, which included signing and lining as well as speed limit changes, it was recommended that a speed limit of 40 mph was appropriate for the villages of North Street, Sheldwich and Badlesmere. This reflected the safety record, speed surveys, local environment and Police support. This was reported to the Swale JTB who insisted upon the introduction of a 30 mph limit for each village.

Conclusion

13. 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.

Recommendations

14. Subject to the views of this Board, it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste that:
 - **the proposal to introduce a 40 mph speed limit between Linton Crossroads and Langley, as described and as recommended in the report to the April Maidstone JTB, should be endorsed**
 - **the request by the Maidstone JTB to introduce a 30 mph speed limit between Linton Crossroads and the Cock Inn, Cock Street, should not be supported**
 - **that members should only support the introduction of those speed limits that are supported by the Police and recommended by officers**

