

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Tuesday, 25 June 2002 at 10.30 a.m.**

Agenda Item No.

**2**

**TOPIC GROUP REVIEW OF MINOR RURAL ROADS**

*Report of the Director of Environment*

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Executive Member:- I Tarry

Topic Group Members: M Bayes (Chairman), J Anderson, N Brook, S Jones,  
I Simpson

**1. Purpose of the Report**

To advise the Scrutiny Committee on the recommendations of the member topic group following their review of operational issues associated with minor rural roads.

**2. Summary**

The report sets out how the topic group reviewed operational issues associated with minor rural roads. The aims of the scrutiny were to:

- Gain an understanding of current policies, standards and practices;
- Check whether current practices actually conform to policies and standards;
- Make recommendations for any improvements in operational policies, standards or practices;
- Identify areas of local good practice and innovation, which may be suitable for countywide application;

**3. Conclusions**

The Committee is invited to consider recommendations proposed by the members topic group.

## **4. Background**

4.1 CC Ian Simpson requested that the subject of “Vehicular traffic as it affects rural roads (U&C roads) and villages” be considered for scrutiny by the Environment Scrutiny Committee of 19 March.

4.2 The Committee considered the supporting officer’s report and a refined proposal from Ian Simpson and agreed:

*“that a Topic Group should be set up to scrutinise operational issues related to the maintenance of rural roads, particularly concentrating on the environmental damage caused by vehicle erosion of edges and verges, and the working of drainage systems. Traffic management and safety issues would also be considered.”*

## **5. Scrutiny Process**

5.1 At the initial meeting on 29 April, CC Mary Bayes was elected as the Chairman of the group and the nature and scope of the scrutiny was agreed.

5.1.1 The aims of the scrutiny were to:

- gain an understanding of current policies, standards and practices;
- check whether current practices actually conform to policies and standards;
- make recommendations for any improvements in operational policies, standards or practices and
- identify areas of local good practice and innovation, which may be suitable for countywide application;

5.1.2 The group was presented with a menu of typical operational issues that officers confront together with a description of the associated policies and standards. The group reviewed the list, selected issues and set out a number of questions under four main headings:

- Drainage
- Edge of Carriageway deterioration & verge management
- Traffic Behaviour
- Carriageway Maintenance

5.2 A group tour of sites in East Herts and North Herts followed on 7 May with the attendance of 3 local managers from the Area Offices.

5.3 A questionnaire was circulated to the Area Managers to gain a picture of local practices around the County.

5.3 A further two meetings were held to review the observations of the site visit, the answers to the set questions and to formulate recommendations. A representative from Hertfordshire Constabulary attended the last meeting to provide a police perspective.

## **6. Outcomes**

6.1 The group found that the constructional history of minor rural roads tends to be unknown and construction standards can vary across the County.

6.2 Knowledge of the rural road network and its condition tends to be locally based and is not necessarily recorded. Some of the knowledge is held by contractors, rather than the County Council.

6.3 Against this background and the history of budgetary constraint, maintenance of minor rural roads has tended to be reactive and often to involve local, pragmatic solutions.

6.4 Routine, programmed activities, such as grass cutting, tend to conform to defined standards, although it was noted that standards sometimes vary across the County.

6.5 The group noted that well-intentioned intervention for maintenance, safety or verge protection purposes could have the undesirable effects of urbanisation and / or make the roads more attractive as through routes.

6.6 The group recognised the opportunities that the new contracts, new organisation and asset management approach can bring for efficiencies and consistency.

## **7 Recommendations**

7.1 The group recommends that a number of general aims are embodied within the developing asset management approach and the new way of working in order to facilitate good practice and provide better value for money:

- i) that the importance of local knowledge, local determination of solutions and the associated responsive service is recognised. In particular parish councils should be consulted;
- ii) that guidelines on maintenance techniques are produced, particularly to provide a framework for local managers to work within, by updating, completing and maintaining the Highways Management Manual;
- iii) that formal processes are introduced to facilitate the exchange of knowledge across the County of good practice and new techniques through the constitution of an officer Maintenance Standards group;

- iv) that better knowledge of network and condition of network is gained by making and keeping records in order to improve the planning of maintenance. This can be achieved by completing the Hermis inventory. Also, under the new contract the works contractor will be required as part of the new way of working to log all activity carried out onto the database, which in time will help improve decision making.
- v) that the ratio of planned maintenance to ad hoc/reactive maintenance on minor rural roads is increased through the asset management approach.
- vi) that economies of scale are sought through the co-ordination of works programming across the county by the Joint Planning Team.

7.2 The group also has a number of more detailed recommendations regarding maintenance and minor improvements:

- i) that a database of drainage “trouble spots” and of grip, ditch and soakaway locations is established with a view to devising a more systematic approach to drainage improvements and maintenance;
- ii) that a database of the grass cutting specifications, agency arrangements and costs of cutting around the county is established;
- iii) that there is a presumption against the use of kerbing on minor rural roads except in special circumstances such as protecting a hazard, or providing positive drainage and when there are no practical alternatives.
- iv) that greater consideration is given to making full depth permanent repairs to damaged edge of carriageway, rather than short term repairs;
- v) that quieter surface treatments than traditional “bitumen and chip” surface dressings are used within villages;

7.3 Finally the group recognised the need for further research and development in traffic management techniques on minor rural roads. It recommends that the LTP Rural Strategy Group considers developing pilot projects for:

- i) controlling HGV routing through, for example, 7.5ton weight limits.
- ii) formalising selected minor rural roads as “single track roads with passing places”.
- iii) making use of speed “buffer” zones on the approaches to villages.

## **8. Financial Implications**

- 8.1 Recommendations 7.1. i) – vi) and 7.2. iii) can be incorporated within the Asset Management Improvement Plan process without additional cost.
- 8.2 Recommendations 7.2. i) and ii) require data collection that would necessitate an extension of the current programme for developing the Hermis inventory and would need to be budgeted for by reprioritising the asset plan improvement programme.
- 8.3 The cost of introducing full depth permanent edge of carriageway repairs (Recommendation 7.2. iv) and quieter road surfaces in village centres (Recommendation 7.2. v) would currently have a significant budgetary impact. However, these recommendations should become affordable targets in the future given the asset management approach aimed at increasing the ratio of planned to reactive repairs (which should also provide more durable solutions) and the new contracts, which will bring economies of scale.
- 8.4 The cost of implementing the recommended pilot projects (Recommendations 7.3. i) - iii) would be funded through the LTP Rural Strategy Programme. On demonstration of success the measures would be incorporated within the Rural Strategy “tool kit” and future schemes would be funded through the LTP, or through the Transport & Environment budget.