

SAFER ACCESS BETWEEN TOLPUDDLE, BURLESTON, ATHELHAMPTON AND PUDDLETOWN FOR NON-MOTORISED TRAFFIC

Background

The Dorset Echo tells us that 'in April 1999 the Tolpuddle to Puddletown bypass opened, relieving the residents living on what had been the A35, from the continuous stream of noisy traffic which had divided our communities'.

Unfortunately, after a welcome initial lull, in the intervening years, the volume of motorised traffic using the road has steadily risen, particularly at peak times, a fact which is fuelled by the expansion of the main villages of Tolpuddle and Puddletown. It feels like there has also been an increase in the speed of vehicles travelling between the main villages, but with fewer speed checks in recent years I can produce no evidence to support this. The increased speed of traffic is probably less noticeable in the larger villages, and in Athelhampton on days when there are church services, because the parking of vehicles on the roadside has a slowing effect on traffic. However, between Athelhampton and Tolpuddle, traffic is unhindered and increasingly, even under normal circumstances, some drivers travelling through Burleston appear to show less regard for the current speed limit.

An important consideration in any discussion about a footway, has to be that the road is still a relief road for the A35. This means that traffic can be diverted from the main A35 at any time. Residents had a timely reminder of this fact very recently when traffic was unexpectedly diverted from the westbound carriageway of the A35 through the villages, catching out unwitting pedestrians, cyclists etc who were using the road when the traffic was diverted.

Growth of villages

Since the bypass, both Tolpuddle and Puddletown have grown and prospered. Both villages now have a variety of amenities. Tolpuddle has a play park, a pub, the Old Chapel and a programme of activities, while Puddletown has a library, a pub, the GP surgery, veterinary practice and a village shop. Athelhampton has a church, and the historic house and gardens which have been developed so that the attraction can now boast two restaurants catering for a range of dining from morning coffee to an a la carte offering. Like the National Trust, Athelhampton House has also enhanced its parking facilities by installing electric car chargers in the car park which benefit residents and visitors alike.

Athelhampton is not quite so acutely affected by the road as Burleston, as many residents can access the bridleway to Southover from the rear of their properties. Burleston, in stark contrast to the developments elsewhere, has nothing. In fact, it does not even have a defibrillator, an idea that I proposed when I served my last term as a parish councillor. The proposal was intended to ensure that even when the main road was packed in the summer, all residents still had rapid access to a device to manage a sudden cardiac arrest. Tolpuddle and Puddletown both have access to these devices and it is assumed that this facility is privately provided at Athelhampton House for use by visitors and staff. Burleston, however, does not. The residents are, after all, just a minority.

Risk management

Dorset Council is a member of Dorset's Local Resilience Forum. The Forum's membership includes colleagues from the: Emergency Services, National Bodies, Health, other Local Authorities, Utility Companies, Transport Providers and Voluntary Organisations. Members of the Dorset's Local Resilience Forum work together to assess the impact and likelihood of risks in our local area producing the Community Risk Register and multi-agency response plans are developed based on the resulting risk ratings. The Parish Council builds and maintains a risk register which allows it to have a complete and current overview of risks across the parish which it can share with Dorset Council.

It is quite amazing that currently the use of the road by non-motorised traffic is not considered a risk because the number incidents and near misses, reported to Dorset Council, involving any road user whether they are driving, walking, cycling, jogging or riding is insignificant. If you have lived on the road for any length of time you will initially be surprised by this data, but if you reflect on your personal experience, you will recognise that most of us have never thought, or did not even know, the significance of reporting an incident or near miss on the Dorset Council website. All road users must be encouraged to report any incident or near miss if this information is to be used to support any decision-making process which affects their safety. Without community participation in the reporting process, the data is worthless. Road users and residents must be made aware of how, what and where to report all incidents and near misses. Without community engagement in this process any decision made by responsible bodies, based on the available data, is flawed. All reports of incidents and near misses should be fed into the Parish Council's risk register so that this can be cross referenced with the County register.

Unfortunately, it is not just the current state of this data that gives a false impression of the actual situation. Another confounding factor in the current data is the fact that many residents no longer leave their homes except in a car because they are simply too frightened to walk. I have attempted to engage with anyone that I have met using the road, or the bridleways in its immediate vicinity, in conversation about their use of the road. Unfortunately, many appear to have given up any hope of achieving safe access on foot or on a horse or bicycle many years ago and have a very negative view of the likely success my current efforts to rectify the situation in future. Some, like a runner from Puddletown that I spoke to early one morning, will not run beyond Athelhampton because of the Burleston bends. The person that I spoke to clearly felt that negotiating the bend between Athelhampton and Puddletown was stressful enough. With that comment in mind, we should not forget that some residents have and do negotiate the road on their mobility scooters while others push prams. Several walk dogs and others walk to work at Athelhampton House. Those accessing their place of work are particularly at risk as they use the road at peak times. Horses sadly rarely use the road now, but all equine road users are now officially considered vulnerable road users in the highway code. Anyone walking to work is at additional risk as they are walking at peak times.

Lives matter even if they are the lives of people in Burleston. Just because something has not happened does not mean that it will never happen. The risk should still be on the risk register because the consequence of an incident involving any of these vulnerable road users will be significant and the probability that the risk will occur is high, particularly at times when the road becomes a relief road. Horses can be frightened, bicycles can be unbalanced by debris and any road user can be involved in a collision simply because a driver is distracted, travelling too fast or does not expect the unexpected.

It is incredible to believe that the road was designated as a relief road without any provision being made for traffic which would not normally be permitted on the A35. A dedicated path would seem to be the minimum provision for non-motorised traffic. The use of the road to relieve the A35, without any provision for non-motorised traffic is at best an oversight and worse irresponsible. I doubt that parish councillors would be exempt from blame if a fatality occurred. Non-motorised traffic users, as happened recently, can find themselves faced with much heavier traffic than anticipated when the road is used to relieve the A35. Councillors should consider whether they would recommend that anyone should ride a horse or bicycle, or walk their dog, on the A35. If the answer is no, then why is it acceptable to divert the A35 through the villages where these activities may be taking place without providing a dedicated path for non-motorised traffic?

As a minimum, the level of risk that this situation presents must be recognised in both the Parish Council risk register and in the Dorset Council register. This is a potentially very dangerous situation. It must be recognised that the likelihood of traffic being diverted is impossible to predict but is always a possibility. This presents both Dorset Council and the Parish Council with a dilemma. The consequence of any incident is always going to be higher in this situation as non-motorised traffic may be caught out and will not be prepared for the increased volume and type of traffic diverted. More serious accidents are more likely as a result. Fortunately, the recent diversion cited, involved traffic from only one carriageway and was slowed through Athelhampton by the parked cars of those attending a service at the church. A dedicated footway to take the non-motorised traffic and separate the road users is the only realistic solution for ensuring the safety of road users in the event that traffic is diverted.

A shared objective

If councillors only focus on what happens in their own specific part of the parish, then it is the parish which suffers. The Parish Council should make every effort to unite the villages and hamlets in a shared objective that delivers greater benefits for all. Providing safer access along the road with a simple footway is a good example of this. We are fortunate to live in an amazing location where other people choose to holiday. Improving access benefits not only residents and visitors, but our local businesses, including those offering bed and breakfast opportunities. The Parish Council should view access along the road primarily as a safety issue, but it should not underestimate the advantages that promoting access for all could have for local businesses and the activities and events that they offer. Improved access along the road would also open up access to our rights of way network. The Ramblers have met and walked from here

and a few years ago we were on the route of an equestrian endurance ride. More of this sort of traffic would be very welcome as participants and supporters might appreciate an opportunity to visit the village shop, one of the pubs or Athelhampton House for refreshments.

Many people living on the road only ever leave their property in a car. The chances are if you leave in a car, you will bypass local facilities and drive to Dorchester or Blandford instead. You will not use a local business. I have been advised that the Parish Council feels that a footway would only benefit a minority, ie those in Burleston, but I would consider this a rather introverted view. If the Parish is seen as a single unit and councillors work for the common good, then the possibilities for a wider use of local amenities and the development of a more inclusive and integrated parish community become a reality. We have younger families moving into Burleston and Athelhampton, they should be encouraged to interact with their neighbours in the larger villages and visit the play parks while their counterparts living in the larger villages should be encouraged to venture out and introduce their children to the local countryside.

The proposal

To facilitate safe access between all of the villages and hamlets by non-motorised traffic, it is proposed that a simple gravel path is considered and costed which would allow pedestrians, scooter users, pram pushers, cyclists and equestrians to access all areas in the Parish in safety, even if traffic is diverted from the A35. A kerb would be desirable to focus the attention of drivers to the new separation of motor vehicles from other road users. Photographs taken recently show that the existing verges are sufficiently wide along most of the route to accommodate a path and drainage could be incorporated, using pipes under the path to allow run off onto fields as now.

Grass verges alone are not suitable because the surface is uneven, deteriorates in poor weather, and the unmown grass masks the litter thrown from cars creating hazards for users.

Finally

The Parish Council should act now and not wait for a fatality to prove that a path is required. Ironically, when I applied for planning permission for my stables, our then representative on Dorset Council stood up and publicly announced that she wanted to see horses riding through the villages again. Admittedly, this was shortly after the bypass when we were all still filled with hope for the future. I doubt that a similar planning application would be made or supported now.

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