20 MPH SPEED LIMITS

Introduction

This briefing paper is what went to the Council’s former Environment Scrutiny Committee. It sets out the current situation regarding 20mph speed limits, the County Council’s policy regarding their introduction, benefits of their introduction as well as associated difficulties. Area Committee may find the information this note contains of use in considering how to respond to the County Council on its advertised 20 mph proposals.

20mph speed limits / 20mph zones

The Department for Transport Circular 01/2006 - Setting Local Speed Limits explains the differences between 20mph speed limits and 20mph zones.

A 20mph speed limit generally covers a single street. In order for the speed limit to be enforceable, the limit needs to be indicated by terminal speed signs, with repeater signs at regular intervals along the route. An example of this in Oxford would be the Cowley Road.

A 20mph zone usually covers an area consisting of several roads. Each zone has to have entry and exit signs and also require that no point within the zone should be further then 50 metres from a traffic calming measures (such as a speed hump), unless in a cul-de-sac less then 80 metres long. The Walton Manor area of has been designated a 20mph zone, as has much of Greater Leys.

The circular says that as a rule, successful 20mph speed limits or zones will be self-enforcing. 20mph speed limits are unlikely to be complied with unless they are accompanied by the introduction of traffic calming measures (such as road humps, road narrowing measures etc). The circular also advises that 20mph limits should not be introduced on “roads with a strategic function or on main traffic routes”.

Oxfordshire County Council policy on 20mph speed limits

Oxfordshire County Council is supportive in principle of 20 mph speed limits and has agreed criteria for the implementation of 20mph speed limits and zones. The main driver of any 20mph scheme will be to improve road safety. The criteria states the following:-

“20mph limits and zones have a high profile in not only casualty reduction but also in changing attitudes to speed and the way public space is shared between vehicles and vulnerable road users which could be a key element in encouraging more walking and cycling. Accordingly the presumption should be to allow these measures (20mph speed limits or zones) wherever possible provided funding is available to ensure the following design criteria are met:-

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1. Mean speeds must be below 25mph at all points, achieved either by the existing road layout and 20 signs alone or by additional calming measures*.

2. Speed monitoring must be undertaken to gauge the likely level of calming needed to meet criterion 1.

3. Speed monitoring must be undertaken once the scheme is in place to ensure criterion 1 is being met.

4. Funding should be reserved to provide sufficient calming to ensure criterion 1 is met.

5. If criterion 1 is not met after 2 years the scheme should be removed.

*A minimum level of calming is mandatory for 20mph zones*

In terms of selecting schemes, the County Council criteria says:-

"In practical terms the priority given to any 20 limit or zone is likely to depend on how it meets the second LTP criteria and how it fares against competing demands within each budget area”.

Budgets to fund 20 limits or zones include Casualty Reduction Programme funding or Area Engineers budgets. Funding may also come from developer contributions, secured under planning agreements.

**Effectiveness of 20mph speed limits and zones**

The DfT circular 01/2006 suggests that 20mph speed limits are only suitable in areas where speed limits are already low (mean speeds below 24mph) or where additional traffic calming measures are also planned. This is because research carried out by TRL in 1998 showed that where a 20mph speed limit alone was introduced, reductions of about 2mph were achieved. Traffic calming measures appear to have a greater impact on road safety than the introduction of lower speed limits without any additional calming. Evidence from Oxfordshire County Council is in line with this research. Where 20mph limits have been introduced without additional calming measures, safety benefits have been modest – a 5% to 10% reduction in accidents.

20mph zones appear to be more useful at reducing collisions and injuries on the road. Research by Webster and Mackie in 1996 suggests that accidents may be reduced by up to two-thirds in 20mph zones, where the mandatory traffic calming is also present.

The scheme in Portsmouth, where 20mph speed limits have been set on many minor and residential roads, is still to be fully evaluated. Results are expected in Autumn 2008. Attempts by Oxfordshire County Council to trial a town wide 20mph scheme in Thame in 2005 weren’t progressed because of opposition from the Town Council.
The estimated cost of introducing a citywide 20mph speed limit (through signs, but not traffic calming) would be £300,000, as well as the environmental cost of additional sign clutter. Based on research into the effect of sign only schemes, the number of accidents in the city could be expected to fall by around 10 per year if this was introduced.

**Potential problems with 20mph speed limits and zones**

There are a number of potential issues that Area Committees may wish to consider.

20mph limits and zones are supposed to be self-enforcing. In areas designated as 20mph zones, they only comply with the law if there is no point within the zone further than 50 metres away from a traffic calming measure. Not all 20mph zones in Oxford comply with this requirement. There would be a significant budget implication if traffic-calming measures were installed within the zones, as well as environmental impacts.

At the same time, some of the historic streets within the city may not be suitable for an official 20mph speed limit because of the requirements for repeated signs. This would add to the clutter of streets and effect the environment of some of the cities landmark streets.

Additionally, the introduction of 20mph limits in one area could result (from a driver’s perspective) in a patchwork of different limits, which could be confusing. Some people also query the value of a 20mph speed limit in streets where the vast majority of cars don’t reach 20mph when moving along them. Survey data from Oxfordshire County Council of Oxford’s residential streets suggests that in most cases the mean speed of cars is under 30mph.