

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**LOCAL COMMITTEE (GUILDFORD)****DATE: 23 MARCH 2016****LEAD OFFICER: JOHN HILDER****SUBJECT: A31 HOG'S BACK GAP AT EAST FLEXFORD LANE****DIVISION: SHALFORD**

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| <u>SUMMARY OF ISSUE:</u> |
| The committee is asked to consider making a traffic regulation order for the closure of East Flexford Lane central reservation gap. |
| <u>RECOMMENDATIONS:</u> |
| <p>The Local Committee (Guildford) is asked to:</p> <p>(i) Having reviewed the objections to the formally advertised closure of the A31 central reservation gap at East Flexford Lane at Annex 1 agree that the traffic order be made and the gap permanently closed to all road users.</p> |
| <u>REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:</u> |
| <i>The committee is to agree to the gap closure in the interest of road safety.</i> |

1. BACKGROUND**Road Safety Working Group**

- 1.1 The Road Safety Working Group (RSWG) for Guildford comprises SCC highways & road safety officers and the Police road safety officer for western Surrey. The group meets several times a year to review accident clusters and consider what might be done to reduce collisions. There is dedicated RSWG for each of the eleven districts and boroughs within Surrey.
- 1.2 The group rely on accident data provided by Surrey Police, who record information for Personal Injury Accidents (PIA's which are accidents the Police have attended or have been reported to them).
- 1.3 The group consider locations where clusters of accidents have been reported. This used to be at sites where three PIA's or more had been reported within a
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twelve month period, but is now more sophisticated and flexible in identifying accident 'hotspots'. The RSWG will then investigate all accidents that have occurred within the previous three years. They try to identify any common themes in the Police accident reports in order to identify contributory factors. For instance loss of control accidents would suggest an investigation into vehicle speeds, warning signs and the skid resistance of the road surface.

- 1.4 If the group can identify possible contributory factors they will undertake a site visit.
- 1.5 In May 2014 the RSWG reviewed accidents at the central reservation gap on the A31 Hogs Back at East Flexford Lane. The group noted '7 accidents involve RT using gap in central reserve' and that further accident analysis would be carried out. The group undertook a site visit and at their next meeting in November 2014 they asked that the Area Highway Manager took a recommendation to the Local Committee to close the gap. They also suggested consultations with residents took place.

Consultation on the proposed closure

- 1.6 In February 2015 the area highways team wrote to residents advising them of the intention to close the gap in the interest of road safety. This was an informal consultation and nearly all residents who responded stated they would object to the closure.
- 1.7 A recommendation to formally advertise closing the gap was taken to the March 2015 meeting of the Local Committee who resolved to proceed with this process. The committee were advised that there were likely to be objections from residents who are directly affected and such objections would be reported to a future meeting committee for a decision on whether to proceed with the proposed closure.
- 1.8 Formal consultation started 7 May 2015 with the publication of the traffic regulation order for the closure of the gap. This was advertised in local papers and sent to statutory consultees. Anyone wishing to respond or object was requested to do so in writing no later than 5 June 2015.

Objections

- 1.9 Details of responses from residents are set out at **Annex 1** each with the comments of Road Safety Working Group officers.
- 1.10 All 15 respondents strongly objected to the proposed closure and it is understood the local Surrey County Councillor has received further objections.
- 1.11 The above was reported to the committee meeting in September. In view of the strength of objection the Area Highway Manager undertook to review possible alternatives to full closure and come forward with recommendations at the December meeting of the committee.
- 1.12 The Area Highway Manager agreed to meet residents in advance of a further report to committee in December 2015. Because this meeting did not take

place before the December meeting the Chairman decided that the report should be deferred until today's meeting, 23 March 2016.

Area Highway Manager Meeting with Residents

1.13 The Area Highway Manager (AHM) has met with residents twice, on the 2nd and 9th of March, and the following headings were discussed.

Accidents at the gap

1.14 At the first meeting the AHM handed residents the latest three year accident record for the A31 in the vicinity of the gap which had been supplied by the Police covering the period June 2012 to September 2015. This logged 15 accidents. The Police had checked their own records for these accidents and confirmed that four of the fifteen were associated with drivers trying to use the gap, two attempting to turn right from the eastbound carriageway and two attempting to turn from the westbound carriageway. The Police had provided the following commentary which was also shared with residents.

'I have now looked at the actual road traffic collisions and have marked the four that were caused by vehicles intending to use the gap in the central reserve. The main theme is that the drivers were lost or were looking for somewhere to turn around. None were local people. They were all travelling at about 50/60mph, some in lane one who changed lane at the last moment and all braked late and were hit in the rear by a following vehicle, where that driver was taken by surprise by the manoeuvre. '

1.15 The 4 accidents associated with the gap resulted in 5 slight and 2 serious injuries.

1.16 Residents pointed out that the majority of accidents were not associated with the gap and asked why the RSWG had not made any recommendations to address these. Residents thought that the majority of accidents were tail end shunts as a result of the queues that regularly develop on the eastbound carriageway tailing back from the merge with the A3 and drivers injudiciously changing lanes within queues or on the approach to them.

1.17 Since meetings the RSWG have confirmed they have introduced measures to address the shunt accidents on the eastbound approach to the junction with the A3. In 2014 two 'Queues Likely' signs were installed to the east of Flexford Lane which they expect to reduce the number of shunt accidents.

1.18 Residents said they are accustomed to using the gap and when approaching on the A31 from either direction they get in lane well in advance and, signal early and brake slowly over distance. They consider the lack of advance signing leads following drivers to think they had left indicators on after moving into the offside lane and that providing advance signing would make the right turn safer. They said they were accustomed to using the junction and were comfortable with the right turn manoeuvre.

Alternative routes with the gap closed

- 1.19. With the gap closed residents of East Flexford Lane would have to use the A31 U-turn 0.5 miles to the east to join the westbound carriageway. Residents of Monkhatch would have to use the Puttenham interchange 1.2 miles to the west to join the eastbound carriageway.
- 1.20 Residents of East Flexford Lane acknowledged the detour is relatively short at around a mile. However they were extremely concerned that when there were stationary eastbound queues they would effectively be trapped in their road for perhaps hours. They pointed out there were regularly accidents on the northbound A3 that closed the road, and that these were particularly frequent at the Cathedral Interchange. With no gap and stationary eastbound traffic they would be trapped in their road since the private roads and tracks to the north of East Flexford Lane are all but impassable. One resident felt his family's life could be affected by this to the extent he would consider moving.
- 1.21 When the A3 northbound is closed traffic queuing on the Hog's Back is likely to use the U-turn to join the westbound carriageway or continue ahead to use the Farnham Road into Guildford to avoid the A3, so there is likely to be movement on the eastbound Hog's Back, albeit slow.
- 1.22 Residents of Monkhatch were concerned about the length of the diversion at approximately 2.5 miles and at having to use the Puttenham interchange. They consider the right turn exiting the off slip to join the B3000 Puttenham Hill to be particularly difficult and even dangerous and to have more accidents than the gap. They considered something should be done to improve this junction before the gap is closed.
- 1.23 The AHM agreed the right turn can be difficult at busy times, but pointed out the Puttenham interchange is a standard highway junction carrying high volumes of turning traffic and the accident rate per vehicle would be far lower in comparison to the accident rate for the low numbers of vehicles using the gap at Flexford Lane.

Alternatives to closure

Improve signing and conspicuity

- 1.24 As at 1.18 above residents think that the right turn could be safer by providing advance signing.
- 1.25 Advance signing is absent on the A31 on both the eastbound and westbound approaches to the gap and it is difficult for drivers on both carriageways to discern where the crossing is due to the dense screen of trees and shrubs within the central reservation. The signing could be improved and vegetation removed say 20m either side of the crossing. However there is the likelihood that this could result in more drivers attempting to use it and consequently exposing themselves and others to risk as they brake to very low speeds in the offside lanes in order to turn into the gap.

Prohibit entry from the eastbound carriageway and East Flexford Lane

1.26 The crossover is narrow and at a steep gradient since the two carriageways are at markedly different levels. Making it 'one way' from the westbound carriageway to the eastbound carriageway may improve safety as it should remove the possibility of a vehicle slowing and entering from the A31 encountering a vehicle waiting within the crossover to exit in the opposite direction. However, drivers may risk ignoring the signed restriction and the above scenario could still occur.

Provide offside deceleration lanes on the A31

1.27 Deceleration lanes such as that on the westbound carriageway at White Lane near Ash Green have been considered. These would allow turning vehicles to diverge from the main carriageways before braking. However the fairly steep level difference between the two carriageways would be accentuated to the extent that crossing would be unacceptably steep.

1.28 Westbound traffic joining the A31 from the A3 slip road would need to cross into the offside lane to use a deceleration lane, as it does now to use the crossing. The distance between the A3 merge and the crossing is well below that required by national standards to allow this manoeuvre to be made safely.

Extend the 50mph speed limit west beyond East Flexford Lane

1.29 Residents felt high vehicle speeds contribute to accidents and that extending the 50mph limit to the west would improve safety.

1.30 The AHM considers that under Surrey's Speed Limit Policy, which is based to a large extent on existing speed, it is unlikely extending the 50mph limit would be recommended, and doubts it would be supported by the Police who do not carry out enforcement at this location at present.

Reduce the A31 to a single lane in each direction

1.31 Residents suggested the A31 could be reduced to a single lane as has been done on the A31 Alton Road at the Surrey/Hampshire boundary. This would allow the introduction of deceleration and acceleration lanes at side roads, private accesses and central reserve gaps.

1.32 The Hog's Back carries around double the volume of traffic than is currently using the A31 Alton Road. Reducing to a single lane would nearly halve capacity and a feasibility study would be required to determine the effects on congestion, road safety and the wider road network. The AHM very much doubts a study would recommend such a reduction in capacity on the strategic road network.

SatNav

1.33 Residents pointed out that the gap is included on SatNav systems and that this will remain the case if the gap is closed and drivers will attempt to manoeuvre to use it even though it no longer exists.

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1.34 The AHM has already asked that SatNav companies are instructed to remove the gap from their systems, whether or not the gap is closed. This will apply to future systems but few systems automatically update, and few drivers pay for updates, so it will be on the majority of systems for some years to come.

1.35 If the gap is closed permanent red backed 'gap closed' signs will be installed on both A31 approaches.

Previous gap closures on the Hog's Back

1.36 Residents said that when a number of gaps were closed in the past, the gap at East Flexford Lane was retained (as well as one at Inwood Farm to the west) and that they were given the undertaking by the Highway Authority these gaps would remain indefinitely.

1.37 The AHM advised that documentation held by Guildford Borough Council (GBC) had been found for the Guildford Partnership Area Transportation Sub-Committee, the predecessor to the current Local Committee. Minutes for meetings record that on 21 April 1999 this committee approved the advertising of a traffic regulation order for the closure of 9 crossover links through the central reservation. In November 1999 the committee approved the making of a TRO giving effect to the closure of 7 crossovers.

1.38 GBC retain meeting agenda's for only a limited period and no longer have the agenda's for these meetings. However one resident thought he had the papers and would send copies to the AHM. These have not yet been received.

1.39 Residents said the closures were accompanied by recommendations to improve signing and side road accesses.

Objections by the Emergency Services

1.40 Residents had heard that the emergency services had objected to the closure. It transpires this was based on the personal opinion of a local Fire & Rescue officer.

1.41 The three emergency services are statutory consultees for closure orders and none submitted an objection (this has been checked since the meetings with residents). Indeed they did not submit any comment, which is the norm unless they wish to object.

Pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders

1.42 The AHM explained closure was expected to be effected by demountable bollards and that the emergency services hold keys to these. Pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders would still be able to use the gap. Residents expressed concern that these more vulnerable users would still be able to cross a dual carriageway at this point.

1.43 However this would not be the case. The SCC Road Safety Audit team has recommended that closure is affected by continuous kerbing.

Missing objections

- 1.44 Residents felt some objections had been submitted during the formal consultation which are not included in the Annex to this report. The AHM is having this checked and will provide a verbal update at the committee meeting.

Views of Surrey Police and SCC Road Safety Team Manager

- 1.45 The SCC Road Safety Team Manager remains of the view that the gap should be closed in the absence of affordable alternatives. The AHM believes there are no alternatives, affordable or otherwise, that will reduce accidents to the extent that closure would.
- 1.46 The Surrey Police Road Safety officer strongly supports closure and has particularly asked that the record of accidents associated with use of the gap is brought to the committee's attention before they make a decision.

View of the Area Highway Manager

- 1.47 The AHM believes there are no alternatives, affordable or otherwise, that will reduce accidents to the extent that closure would and that the gap should be closed as originally recommended by the Road Safety Working Group for Guildford. While this will undoubtedly inconvenience residents this must be balanced against the record of accidents and injuries associated with use of the gap. The fact that it will remain on SatNav for some years to come is a concern, but this is unavoidable and given the provision of 'gap closed' signs should not be considered good reason for leaving the gap open.

The Area Team had already identified shortcomings in the signing for side roads and accesses along the length of the Hog's Back and are in the process of carrying out a review, with additional signs funded from the ad-hoc signs & lines budget.

2. OPTIONS:

- 2.1 Alternatives to closure are discussed within the report, but none are recommended.

3. CONSULTATIONS:

- 3.1 As described in the report both formal and informal consultations have been carried out.

4. FINANCIAL AND VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS:

- 4.1 The Road Safety Working Group have undertaken to fund in full costs associated with the closure of the gap.

.5. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS:

5.1 None

6. LOCALISM:

6.1 This is a road safety issue identified by SCC Highways and Police officers and localism is not really relevant.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

7.1 None

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

8.1 . In the interest of road safety the committee is asked to proceed with making the traffic regulation order for closing the central reservation gap at East Flexford Lane.

9. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:

9.1 The order will be made and measures to close the gap will be put in hand by the RSWG. Residents and local members will be advised of likely timescales.

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Consulted:
As described within the report

Annexes:
1. East Flexford Lane Consultation Responses

Sources/background papers:
Local Committee for Guildford:
Wednesday 25 March 2015: Item 15: 'Highways Update Report'
Wednesday 30 September 2015: Item 15: 'Highways Update Report'