

Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road Agenda Item – JTB 25th January

Summary

The Friends of Cornford Lane and The Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Residents Association have for very many years requested for action to be taken to resolve the considerable and growing danger to safety, the environment and the economy caused by the excessive volume, weight and speed of traffic using the roads as a rat-run to avoid entirely the A264 – the main road designed to carry traffic in and out of Tunbridge Wells.

We request that the Members of the TWBC Joint Transportation Board vote on 25th January to set up a Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road Working Group which includes representatives from both roads to review the problems and consider schemes to be implemented to resolve those problems.

Background

Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road are two historic roads lying within and overlooking the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Cornford Lane ranks 3rd highest value out of 167 local lanes in TWBC's Rural Lanes Planning Guidance document and both roads provide rich biodiverse habitat. They also offer unique potential less than 2 miles from Tunbridge Wells for 'Active Travel' through an area of high landscape and amenity value which connects Tunbridge Wells, Pembury, Hawkenbury, Sherwood and Dunorlan Park. Links to High Woods Lane and the Tonbridge Cycle Route via Blackhurst Lane extend this potential further.

Danger

During the first Lockdown from 21st March 2020 the absence of traffic allowed these routes to demonstrate their value daily as walkers, runners and riders, sometimes numbering in their hundreds, used and enjoyed these roads.

At all other times, however, this amenity is lost. Excessive and ever-increasing volumes of traffic, including high numbers of commercial vehicles and frequent HGVs, use the routes habitually or led by Sat Nav. While this use was originally at peak times to avoid congestion on the A264, it can now be seen increasingly at any time.

This traffic causes extreme danger both to personal safety and the environment, as well as serious emergency access obstruction and economic loss due to regular gridlocks, and use of the routes for Active Travel is almost non-existent.

Safety

Accidents, caused by careless and speeding drivers, have occurred regularly over many years. Severity ranges from minor knocks to vehicles driving through hedges, colliding head on and even rolling over as well as injuries to people not in vehicles. Injury accidents involving the emergency services are not uncommon and both residents and residential care homes within the roads have experienced and reported serious near-misses and injury accidents.

To quote one local councillor's comment regarding these problems:

"Absolutely total bloody madness and it's not going to change unless something fundamental is done."

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Environment

Environmental damage to the roads continues to accelerate. Verges are continually macerated by vehicles trying to pass one another on single track sections and plant life has been decimated. Hedgerows described by KCC as 'Species Rich Intact' have been undermined and crushed and habitats destroyed. The 6'6" width restriction in Halls Hole Road is blatantly disregarded and no attempt is made to enforce it. The weight of traffic is rapidly collapsing several sections of the south side of Cornford Lane into the lower adjacent fields while massive verge erosion and vibration of traffic is causing the higher banks on the north side to slip down to the road. The historic sandstone wall in Halls Hole Road is repeatedly damaged and bank erosion and landslips have at the north end has undermined large and specimen trees. All of this, combined with the reduction in air quality and the disturbance from the noise of vehicles and horns plus the shouting and abusive language of frustrated and angry drivers has led to further loss of biodiversity.

Economic Loss

Emergency access obstruction and economic loss due to the now frequent gridlocks is significant. Regular delays, often lasting 40 to 60 minutes, occur at any time on any day of the week. Vehicles are unable to move and residents can neither leave nor return to their homes. Emergency service access to homes, and in particular the care homes within the roads, is impossible and the consequences of such delays in the event of fire, serious illness or criminal activity could be life changing. Economic loss is significant with the miles of cars trapped within the gridlocks able neither to move in any direction nor reach their destination and valuable work time is lost. Frustration from delays results in anger and aggression as well as unauthorised access as drivers use and damage private driveways and gates to clear the road. Major repairs to the collapsing substructure of parts of the roads are imminent and will require considerable funding.

History

For many years The Halls Hole Road and Cornford Lane Residents Association and The Friends of Cornford Lane have campaigned for TWBC and KCC to address these problems that have been increasing in severity since 1990. During this time many councillors and council officers have acknowledged that there are, here, serious issues that need addressing and yet, despite a long history of discussion and a wealth of policies, both in place or proposed, to encourage councils to protect rural lanes such as these and to promote Active Travel, nothing has been resolved neither has any action been taken to address these issues.

Twenty five years of discussion culminated in 2014 with KCC Highways, at the request of the JTB, proposing 5 options for addressing the problems in Cornford Lane. A public exhibition of their proposals was followed by a public consultation. 223 responses to their proposals recorded a 79% support for a trial closure of Cornford Lane to through traffic. However for reasons not supported by any evidence we could see, the JTB passed a last minute proposal **to defer any further progress on the closure of Cornford Lane, until such time as the Borough Transport Strategy had been amended, to include specific reference to Pembury Road.** The Transport Strategy was published over five years ago, but progress on Cornford Lane appears still to be deferred.

From the onset of Covid 19 the government realised the importance of safe routes for Active Travel and in July 2020 provided funding for schemes to this. The Friends of Cornford Lane submitted suggestions for both Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road to be considered under this scheme but no interest was shown by the councillors and council officers involved (although ironically Reynolds Lane became Access Only!)

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The Way Forward

For 30 years the problems of these roads have been neglected and the suffering caused by them, as predicted continues, to escalate. The Draft Local Plan and current planning consents indicate the extraordinary amount of local development forecast in the next 10 years and the traffic implications this will bring are obvious.

Many of us live with these problems all day and every day, the residents of both roads, the workers and vulnerable residents of the care homes. We have no choice but to use the roads. Others suffer too – those who are delayed in the gridlocks, those who are injured here, those upset by the aggression shown by some drivers, those whose vehicles are damaged, those who are denied the opportunity to use these exceptional routes for walking, running and riding, and not least those species that rely on the fragile environment that is currently being destroyed.

If no action is taken to address these problems we shall require the JTB to answer many questions including:

- Why Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road are routinely ignored in schemes to alleviate traffic problems?
- Why with evidence of numerous accidents the safety of the users of these roads warrants no consideration?
- Why no action is being taken to counter the environmental threats to these two roads in an era when the need to safeguard our environment for this and future generations?
- Why no action has been taken since the 2014 voted for scheme was deferred?
- Why, with so many formal documents guiding TWBC to protect roads such as Cornford Lane and Halls Hole Road, has nothing been done?

Proposal

“The Friends of Cornford Lane request the Members of the Tunbridge Wells Joint Transportation Board to propose and agree to a motion on 25th January to set up a Halls Hole Road and Cornford Lane Working Group to review the many problems of these two roads and to develop a scheme to address them. The group must include representatives from Halls Hole Road and Cornford Lane”.

We are aware of the new proposal for a roundabout to replace the A264/Halls Hole Road traffic lights and as ever are very disappointed that there has been no discussion of this with us. This increases the need for such a Working Group to be formed. It will create the opportunity for long-ignored problems to be debated fully without the constraints imposed by 3-minute presentations at the JTB with never time for full discussion and development of ideas.

Footnote – The Friends of Cornford Lane have a proposal that they would like the Working Group to consider - a scheme for traffic management in Halls Hole Road and Cornford Lane which would not only address the problems within these two roads, but also have the potential to considerably reduce traffic delays at the Halls Hole Road / Pembury Road traffic light intersection. This scheme has the interest and support of many of the residents of both roads as well as the Pembury Society and the Tunbridge Wells Town Forum. Hawkenbury Village Association is also currently reviewing the scheme.

For further information please contact

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