

Tunbridge Wells JTB (April 2022) – Highway Improvement Plans Briefing Note

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Introduction

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide some clarity surrounding the Highway Improvement Plan (HIP) process following questions being raised by some elected representatives. It is hoped that this document will explain the purpose of the HIP, and how it can be utilised.

Background

A number of years ago some parish councils raised concerns with Kent County Council (KCC) as they felt rural areas did not have a formal method of requesting changes to the highway network that they believe are important to their communities, and as such were under-represented. Consequently, the Highway Improvement Plan (HIP) was introduced as a way for parish councils to promote and fund their own schemes on KCC's roads, with those projects being designed and delivered by KCC officers.

Purpose of the Highway Improvement Plan

The HIP is a document that parish councils can use to propose highway changes they wish to promote and fund from their own budget (although on occasion we may be able to pay for very small improvements such as a single sign or road marking). KCC has committed to supporting parish councils in the delivery of their schemes, usually up to two projects per year, which will be agreed at an annual meeting between the relevant KCC officer and the parish council. It may be possible to deliver more than two schemes in a given year depending upon the complexity.

The HIP should not be used to communicate urgent matters, or those which relate to an issue the parish is not looking to address themselves; in these cases, the Parish Portal should continue to be used, whereby KCC will respond as appropriate.

This approach is similar to a third party who is required to make changes to the highway as part of a development, for example. Whilst this would usually require a Section 106 or 278 agreement, parish councils are able to utilise the HIP process instead.

Delivery of Schemes

As with all projects carried out on the highway, any schemes that a parish council wishes to promote and fund will be triaged and delivered to the same standards, rules and regulations as those carried out by KCC directly. This will include for example, but not limited to, only permitting the use of standard palette materials, all appropriate conditions/thresholds being met, agreement to adopt the asset by the relevant person within KCC and approval by the Principal Designer (see CDM Regulations below for further information). As the Highway Authority, KCC needs to be content that any changes implemented on the highway, including those funded by external parties (such as parish councils) are appropriate and adhere to best practice.

Construction, Design and Management (CDM) Regulations 2015

These regulations, which fall under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, are a statutory obligation with which all construction works must comply. In summary, the regulations require that works are designed, constructed, used, maintained and demolished safely, as far as is reasonably practicable. Under these regulations there are specific duties placed upon the relevant KCC officer as the Principal Designer (PD), and as such that officer needs to be satisfied that the work they deliver meets the requirements of CDM.

There will be examples of requests from third parties, including parish councils, where delivery of that scheme would mean KCC officers are unable to fulfil their obligations under CDM. In these circumstances it is incumbent upon that officer to advise that the scheme cannot be delivered, but of course alternative options will always be sought, if possible. There may be times when a request cannot be accommodated, but given the PD has the required skills and experience to make this decision it would not be acceptable to deliver something that the PD does not believe is appropriate.

Annual HIP Review

KCC has been asked why parishes are not able to request a HIP review more frequently than on an annual basis. The reason for this is one of resourcing the officer time required to administer the HIPs and deliver the schemes when agreed. For example, in Tunbridge Wells (the borough for which this briefing note has been prepared) there are 16 parish councils, of which 11 have active HIPs. There is no dedicated team within KCC employed to carry out this work, meaning the two officers covering the borough (one Project Manager and one Engineer) are required to deliver all the work generated from the HIP programme in addition to the core responsibilities undertaken by the Schemes Planning and Delivery Team. These two officers are also solely responsible for many other areas of work, including but not limited to:

- Crash data analysis
- Design and delivery of the Crash Remedial Measures programme
- Design and delivery of the Local Transport Plan programme
- Design and delivery of Combined Member Grant schemes
- Responding to all public, County Member, Borough Member and MP enquiries, and complaints, relating to changes to the highway
- Preparation of JTB reports
- Delivering developer Traffic Regulation Orders
- Providing technical advice relating to developer planning applications
- Design and delivery of private signing requests (such as tourism signage)
- Design and delivery of active travel schemes
- Ordering of work (including the individual pricing of all schemes)
- All contractor liaison relating to these schemes
- Assisting the KCC Operations Team with sign designs when replacements are needed
- Provide assistance to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council on highway matters

It is hoped that this list illustrates the volume of work undertaken by only two officers, with parish HIPs being just one area of an extremely wide-ranging and challenging workload.

KCC officers understand the frustration that sometimes arises from HIPs only being reviewed on an annual basis, but with the volume of other activities they are also responsible for it is simply not possible to resource more regular engagement or deliver in excess of two schemes per year per parish council (with the exception of some very small schemes as mentioned above, which may be possible if funding and resources allow).

Officers strive to provide the best service they can in all areas of the work they undertake, and it is hoped that this briefing note will provide some context in this regard.

Summary

All parish councils can request a review of their HIP once per year, which will be resourced by the appropriate KCC officer.

Each parish council can generally request up to two main schemes per year, which will be designed and delivered to the same standards, rules and regulations as all projects undertaken by KCC. Any schemes listed on a HIP are to be promoted and funded in their entirety by the parish council requesting the work. It may be possible to deliver very small improvements using KCC's own budgets, subject to funding and staff resource being available.

The Principal Designer needs to be satisfied that they can meet their obligations under the CDM Regulations 2015. Anyone making a technical assessment as to what is/is not appropriate to be installed on the highway network is taking on the role of a Designer under CDM, and as such is required to have the appropriate skills and experience to carry out their duties in accordance with that legislation.

Parish councils must use the HIP template provided by KCC officers to ensure continuity across the county.

Current HIP Status (as at 14/03/22)

Parish	Active?	Last HIP Review Meeting	Next HIP Review Available After	Latest HIP Received	Outstanding HIP Awaiting Review by KCC?
Benenden	Yes	09/02/2021	09/02/2022	09/02/2021	No
Bidborough	Yes	28/08/2020	28/08/2021	28/08/2020	No
Brenchley & Matfield	Yes	02/10/2021	02/10/2022	02/10/2021	No
Capel	Yes	29/04/2021	29/04/2022	29/04/2021	No
Cranbrook & Sissinghurst	No				No
Frittenden	No	20/12/2019	19/12/2020	20/12/2019	No
Goudhurst	Yes	10/02/2021	10/02/2022	04/10/2021	No (awaiting correct format)
Hawkhurst	No	07/10/2019	06/10/2020		No
Horsmonden	Yes	09/02/2021	09/02/2022	21/09/2021	No (awaiting correct format)
Lamberhurst	Yes	03/09/2019	02/09/2020	11/03/2022	Yes
Paddock Wood	Yes			11/03/2022	Yes
Pembury	Yes	03/06/2021	03/06/2022	03/06/2021	No
Rusthall	Yes	26/06/2019	25/06/2020	26/06/2019	No
Sandhurst	No				No
Southborough	No				No
Speldhurst	Yes	14/05/2021	14/05/2022	14/05/2021	No