

HIGHWAYS COMMITTEE

Date: 28th June 2011



Stanhope Ford

Report of Corporate Management Team

Terry Collins, Corporate Director for Neighbourhood Services

Councillor Bob Young, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Strategic Environment and Leisure

Purpose of the Report

1. To appraise Members of safety issues surrounding the continued use of Stanhope Ford and the responses received to a statutory public consultation exercise linked to the publication of a traffic order to permanently close the ford to vehicular traffic.
2. To inform the committee of a proposal to hold a non statutory public inquiry to consider the objections and representations received during the public consultation exercise and to receive the committees views on this proposal.

Background

3. Stanhope Ford is an unclassified road forming an optional crossing point on the River Wear in Weardale, linking the B6278 with the A689 (Appendix 2). The B6278 crosses the river upstream of Stanhope Ford by a road bridge known as 'Stonebridge' which has been assessed by Engineers as being suitable for typical 'B' road classification traffic flow.
4. The B6278 has a recorded 'Annual Average Daily Traffic Flow' (AADT) of 724 vehicles per day. In contrast, from surveys undertaken in January 2007, at the southern approach ramp to the ford, the 7 day average traffic flow for that particular week of vehicles using the ford is recorded as 60 vehicles per day. It is generally accepted that summer months will have increased traffic flows across the ford, but no traffic flow data is available to show this comparison.
5. The ford consists of a reinforced concrete slab bed 4 metres wide and some 50 metres long including approach aprons. It is one of only a few fords within the country which traverses a main river and is known to be a popular attraction to both locals and tourists during the summer months. To some extent, Stanhope Ford was utilised

by the local residents as a 'shortcut' between the A689 and B6278, saving the need to travel approximately three quarters of a mile if they were to follow the designated B6278 route. (Appendix 2)

6. Over the past ten years, this being the extent of the information available, there has been 23 reported incidents at the Ford. Motorists have become stranded when attempting to traverse the ford during adverse weather conditions. In some cases, this has necessitated rescues by the Emergency Services.
7. In 2007, following representations from the Emergency Services, the County Council considered the reports provided by them. It was possible to link these incidents with the hydrological (river flow) data supplied by the Environment Agency (Appendix 4). Following a number of management team meetings and public consultation, a report was taken to the Council's Highways Committee in 2007 to confirm a Traffic Regulation Order which would seasonally prohibit the use of the ford by vehicular traffic between the period of 1st October to 31st March each year. Based upon the historic incident/flow data research, this seasonal road closure period was aimed at significantly reducing the number of incidents that the Emergency Services were called to attend. During the "closed season", lockable barriers are brought into operation on both riverbanks and motorists continue their journey on the B6278 to cross the river bridge upstream of the ford.

Recent Incidents

8. The Ford was closed under the seasonal closure order and re-opened on the 1st April 2008, to traffic. At this time, the river was in spate (flood condition following heavy rainfall) and unfortunately, once again, a motorist attempted to traverse the ford that same day, becoming stranded in rising water levels. This resulted in the Emergency Services attending and actioning a rescue of the vehicle's occupants. A number of previous Emergency Services rescues, have necessitated the assistance of an RAF helicopter the most recent of which was reported in the national press with TV coverage.
9. At the time the incident in April 2008 unfolded, the Police used their emergency powers to re-impose a road closure of the Ford, arising from their road safety concerns. The ford has remained closed to vehicular traffic since that incident. During this 38 month period of closure, that has now elapsed, there has been very few complaints from the general public other than representations by Stanhope Parish Council who have continually opposed the closure of the ford.

Current Situation

10. In recent years, there has been a significant build-up of rocks and gravel downstream of the ford which has effectively acted as a natural dam to the rivers flow, causing increased water depth levels across the ford. The increased river depth combined with the velocity of the rivers flow across the ford is considered to be one of the primary reasons why vehicles are becoming stranded in the river. In particular, water enters the air in-take pipes on vehicle engines causing the engine to stall as it fills with water. It is further known that river levels can rise quickly as a result of “cloud breaks” up on the Pennine Hills which are known to create river bores at any time of the year.
11. It has become clear in recent years that the incidents are not confined to certain times of the year. Therefore, the seasonal traffic order does not afford the protection of the public. Following the concerns of the Police arising from the continued incidents at Stanhope Ford, and two recent fatal incidents elsewhere in the Country involving 4x4 vehicles being swept from fords, it has in the circumstances become necessary to implement a temporary road closure order which remains in place to this date.
12. The Police and Fire Services remain seriously concerned about overall public safety due to the behaviour of some motorists who continue to ignore warning signage regarding the ford conditions and proceed to cross the ford in spite conditions. Such behaviour not only puts motorists lives at risk but also the lives of emergency services personnel attempting to rescue stranded motorists and vehicles from the ford.

Consultations

13. The County Council have published a traffic order to revoke the Seasonal order which closes the Ford between 1st October and 31st March each year and is proposing to implement a permanent ‘Prohibition of Driving’ Traffic Order. The existing lockable barrier either side of the ford would therefore be in its closed position permanently.
14. Arising from the statutory consultation, we have received thirteen responses of support, which have included support from the Police, the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service, the Environment Agency and some residential properties located near the ford access road.
15. Twenty-one objections, which include responses from members of the public, Stanhope Parish Council and Weardale Area Action Partnership were received.

16. In addition, we have received objections from three specialist motoring organisations including the organisers of The Beamish Reliability Rally who together with other motoring organisations have historically utilised the ford as a 'special stage' in their car rally routes.
17. A handwritten petition to 'Save Stanhope Ford' was received containing 82 signatures.
18. We also have non-statutory representations made via a 'Facebook' website created by campaigners that recorded 1,007 members resulting in 350 objections when viewed on 18th November 2010, being the end of the statutory objection period.
19. The Local Members, Councillor Shuttleworth and Councillor Savoury were both consulted and offered objections to the proposals believing Stanhope Ford to be essential to Stanhope's heritage and tourism.

Conclusion

20. In the light of the volume of objections to this published traffic order, and the complexity of the evidence and legal issues involved, it is considered to be good practice to hold a non statutory public inquiry. In such circumstances an Inspector with expertise in these matters will be appointed. The inspector will produce a report and recommendation, having considered all the evidence, to the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services to implement.

Recommendation and Reasons

21. It is **RECOMMENDED** that the Committee endorse the Director's proposal to appoint an inspector to hold a Public Inquiry to consider the objections received and thereafter provide a report and recommendation for the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services to implement.

Background Papers

22. Traffic & Community Engagement – Area 2:

- a. Stanhope Ford correspondence files.
- b. Stanhope Ford consultation files

23. Structures Office

- a. Inspection files
- b. Maintenance files

Contact: Steve Keetley, Head of Technical Services 0191 383 3465

Appendix 1: Implications

1. Finance

There will be a cost involved appointing an inspector to hold the public inquiry and also staffing the public inquiry.

2. Staffing

A number of staff from Neighbourhood Services and Corporate & Legal Services will be directly involved for the duration of the public inquiry.

3. Risk None

4. Equality and Diversity

Equality Impact Assessment completed

5. Accommodation None

6. Crime and Disorder None

7. Human Rights None

8. Consultation

Completed in accordance with the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984

9. Procurement None

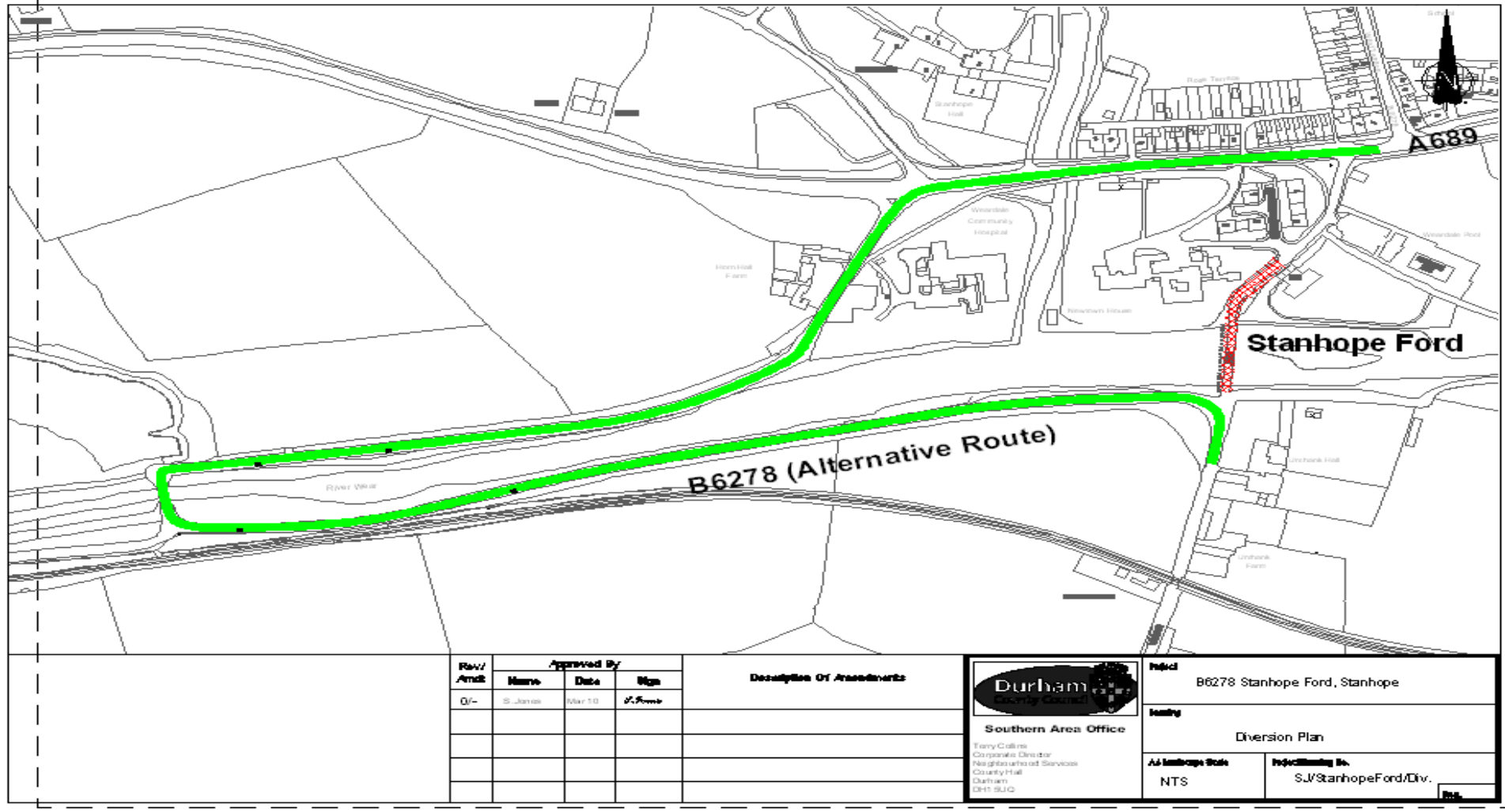
10. Disability Discrimination Act

Equality Impact Assessment completed

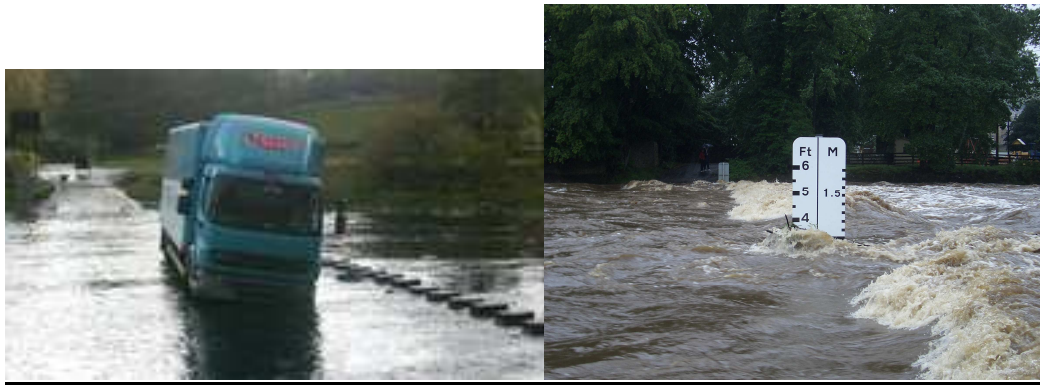
11. Legal Implications

The non statutory public inquiry is a recognised means of dealing with Traffic Regulation Orders and is considered a democratic means of determining the number of objections and representations received during the public consultation exercise.

APPENDIX 2 – Location Plan of the Ford



APPENDIX 3 –Photographs of the Ford



APPENDIX 4 – INCIDENT LOG & RIVER FLOW DATA ANALYSIS

Durham Fire & Rescue Service provided the County Council with a list of incidents they had attended covering the period from 1st October 2001 to 31st December 2006, giving dates and times. The Council was made aware of a further two significant incidents post 2006, which have been recorded in the table below. The Council have been able to match the above incident data against Hydrograph records provided by Northumbrian Water / Environment Agency, who have a gauging station upstream of Stanhope Ford.

For the purpose of the exercise, the Mean Average Annual Flow Rate of the River is recorded as 3.72cubic metres per second at Stanhope Gauging Station.

Maximum Recorded Flow Rate reading 2001 to 2004 = 136 cu. m. per sec.

Incident Date and Time	River Flow Rate (cu.m per sec)	Comments
1 October 2001 : 1524hrs	20.30	
3 October 2001 : 1259hrs	5.61	
26 October 2001 : 0638hrs	4.37	
27 November 2001 :1348hrs	20.18	
29 December 2001 : 1631hrs	2.66	
17 January 2002 : 1739hrs	4.90	
16 March 2002 : 2014hrs	9.15	
24 May 2002 : 1844hrs	11.20	
29 December 2003 : 1511hrs	Vehicle Stuck on Ice	
19 January 2004 : 1228hrs	23.3	Mercedes Van Incident
18 August 2004 : 2050hrs	27.2	Mitsubishi 4x4 Incident
24 October 2004 : 1345hrs	17.12	Audi Car Incident
22 November 2004 : 14.22hrs	6.3	Flooded Engine
21 January 2005 : 1245hrs	5	Stand-by call
30 January 2005 : 1637hrs	No data available	4 people stranded in car
9 April 2005 : 1918hrs	No data available	Stand-by call
4 December 2005 : 1108hrs	4.8	Recovered with Landrover
17 December 2005 : 1302hrs	No data available	
17 February 2006 : 1934hrs	3.7	Recovered with Landrover
22 October 2006 : 1243hrs	11.7	RAF Helicopter Rescue
23 November 2006 : 1321hrs	10.5	Landrover & winch used
30 October 2007 : 0913hrs	>20	Argos Delivery wagon (Before TRO imposed)
01 April 2008 : 1027hrs	>20	Peugeot Car

It is known that increases in water depth on the River Wear can be rapid. For example, on 19th March 2004, during a typical period of rainfall, a depth reading at the ford taken at 7.50 a.m. measured 250mm. A further depth reading taken that same day at 1400 hrs measured 600mm.