

Highways Committee

10 October 2007

Consideration of Prohibition of Driving, Seasonal Gating Scheme, Stanhope Ford



Report of John Richardson, Corporate Director, Environment

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To consider the installation of two lockable forestry type 'boom' gates either side of Stanhope Ford, to prevent vehicles from using the ford during the winter months between 1 October and 31 March and to advise Members of objections to the above scheme.

2.0 Proposal

- 2.1 The proposed scheme consists of installing 'boom' gates to the north and south of the ford, as well as upgrading the existing signage to accommodate the seasonal closure. Details of the scheme can be found on the attached plans.
- 2.2 Two objections to this scheme have been submitted during the formal consultation. This report is to provide Members with relevant information to make a decision with regard to these objections.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 Durham County Council, Durham and Darlington Fire Service and Durham Constabulary are concerned about the number of emergency call out incidents relating to vehicles becoming stranded on Stanhope Ford.
- 3.2 Between 2001 and the present date there have been 27 recorded incidents at Stanhope Ford, 80% of these occurred between the months of October and March, some of which required the assistance of an RAF Rescue Helicopter.
- 3.3 Despite numerous attempts to increase driver awareness through the erection of additional signing, drivers still choose to cross the ford whilst in spate conditions.

- 3.4 Various options have been considered to mitigate the risk, such as automated barriers. These would require Durham County Council to determine what is an acceptable depth and velocity for vehicles to cross, however this would vary greatly from vehicle to vehicle and driver to driver. By automating the barriers we would in effect be giving motorists a 'green light' to use the ford, which is felt, would leave Durham County Council open to litigation should an incident occur. In addition the initial installation and ongoing maintenance costs of such equipment would be greatly increased in comparison to a manual barrier. In order for such a system to operate, the County Council would not only need to install automated barriers and depth/velocity gauges, but also a warning system for when the barriers are closing and a vehicle monitoring system so that the barriers do not close while a vehicle is crossing. An appropriate turning area on the north side of the ford would also need to be provided.

4.0 Objections

- 4.1 The objectors listed a number of reasons why they were opposed to the scheme. These reasons were:

Representation

The closure of the ford will be detrimental to a Historic Endurance Rally Organisation which runs from Land's End to John O'Groats and utilises the ford during this event in December.

Response

The rally can be dealt with as a Special Event by the Safety Advisory Group (SAG) on a yearly basis using powers available to rescind the Traffic Regulation Order. Arrangements could be made to open the ford on a specific date to the rally vehicles (provided the river was not in flood at the time) and the costs recharged to the event organisers.

Representation

Rescues look farcical and use unnecessary expensive methods when standard equipment could be used "with firemen getting their feet wet". This is "health and safety to its extreme".

Response

Durham and Darlington Fire Service have commented previously on such statements: "The Fire & Rescue Service have put risk assessments in place to cover all operational eventualities. The Fire & Rescue Service do not have the necessary training and resources to undertake rescues from water. They would stabilise any incident and liaise with the other emergency services to consider an appropriate and safe means of rescue, even to the extent of mobilising the RAF helicopter."

Representation

People who disregard the warning notices should be prosecuted and made to pay the cost of any public service used in their rescue.

Response

This is a matter for the Emergency Services to consider but this in itself does not prevent motorists from taking the risk.

Representation

The ford would have been open during the past months and the river levels have been high. With global warming we can surely expect an increase in these adverse conditions during summer months.

Response

Whilst the ford would have been open in the Summer months, the weather experienced could be classed as a freak occurrence, however we will continue to monitor the river and any incidents. Durham County Council and the Emergency Services accept that it is impossible to eliminate all incidents with a seasonal closure, although statistics show that 80% of incidents occurred during the proposed 'closed season'. Should future climatic changes indicate that a seasonal closure is no longer viable, we would have to reconsider other options.

Representation

Automated barriers should be installed to prevent drivers from using the ford in dangerous conditions.

Response

This was considered as an option, however was discounted for various reasons. Please see Background item 3.4.

5.0 Consultations with Emergency Services and Other Bodies

- 5.1 All of the Emergency Services were consulted during the initial consultation exercise. All have given their full support to the proposed scheme.

6.0 Consultations with Local Member

- 6.1 The Local Member, Councillor Shuttleworth, has been consulted and has offered his support towards the proposal.

7.0 Consultations with the District and Parish Councils

- 7.1 Both Wear Valley District Council and Stanhope Parish Council have offered their support for the proposal.

8.0 Recommendations and Reasons

- 8.1 Members are recommended to endorse the proposal to set aside the objections and proceed with the scheme.

Background Papers

Correspondence in Office File

Copies of correspondence have been placed in the Members' Resource Centre.

Contact: Peter Graham

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance

LTP 2 Area Programme, Road Safety Budget.

Staffing

N/A

Equality and Diversity

N/A

Accommodation

N/A

Crime and Disorder

N/A

Sustainability

N/A

Human Rights

Prevents vehicular right of passage during closure.

Localities and Rurality

Known Tourist Attraction during summer months, although Order will only close between 1 October and 31 March.

Young People

N/A

Consultation

Durham Constabulary, Chief Fire Officer, Chief Ambulance Officer, Parish Council, District Council, County Councillor, RHA, FHA, AA, RAC, Head Postmaster, Public Transport, Development Control, Public Utility Companies, Local Residents / Businesses, Notices on Site and in Local Press.

Health

Potential benefits to public safety.

