



Atworth Traffic Action Group (ATAG)

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TRAFFIC IN VILLAGES

An examination of the local effects
of a Nationwide problem

Kenneth A Spencer

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If there is one key issue that is affecting residents in rural communities it seems to be the level of road traffic, and the associated problems which this causes. This was highlighted recently in Atworth, when approximately a hundred residents staged a roadside protest at the speed at which so many vehicles travel through the village.

We have seen traffic in residential areas of *urban* communities tackled quite effectively in recent years: there have been 20mph Zones and 20mph speed limits; more widespread use of various traffic calming measures; limits to the permitted weight of vehicles and access restrictions so that local-only traffic is allowed. But it seems to residents of *rural* areas that it has been forgotten that they too are communities, and they are becoming increasingly angry and frustrated at being ignored by those whom they elect to ensure their safety, well-being and an equitable quality of their lives.

The present root of this problem lies at least partially in a failure of authorities, at both local community level and at county level, to recognise adequately that like urban streets, rural roads are actually community streets, with pavements for pedestrians, mothers and fathers with children; not simply roads for the uncontrolled use of any kind of traffic which may choose to pass through the community. And almost all of these roads are actually classed as rural routes, intended primarily for local traffic (justified by a statement of the DfT¹); these roads are neither trunk roads nor highways; which are the types of road intended to provide for regional and national traffic routes (DfT statement¹).

But we must also consider the history: rural communities are suffering from the results of decisions taken some decades ago by UK national governments, (agreed, in some cases under the direction of European Communities, later to become the European Union). Consider the time for example, when the UK was directed to permit 38- and 44- tonne heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) on our roads, when there was insufficient consideration of the future effect that this would have in a rural community where such traffic would travel only inches from pedestrians walking along narrow pavements - there were no restrictions placed on where these vehicles might be permitted to travel: hence they can go almost anywhere. (The discussions on new 60-tonne dual trailer HGVs are frightening²). Furthermore, although the UK government at the time tried to have the European Union adopt "lean burn" petrol engines in our vehicles it was in the end unsuccessful and we were obliged instead to accept the then more widely German-favoured diesel engines, with a resultant very large increase in hazardous exhausts, about which I will say more later.

The demonstration in Atworth was principally focussed on the speed of the traffic. If you doubt the validity of the view of the protestors, consider this: a MetroCount measure conducted just a few yards outside the 30mph zone on Atworth's A365 western approach revealed that of the 53,400 vehicles counted, 31,261 vehicles were travelling at 50mph or more. Granted, the point of measurement was outside

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the 30mph zone, so some were not technically speeding, but could they slow down in view of the fact that they were only yards from 30mph zone? In any case, the figures get worse: 14,181 vehicles were travelling at 62mph or more. 670 were travelling at 75mph or more. The MetroCount device is capable only of measuring speeds of up to 99mph, but it indicated that 107 vehicles were travelling at speeds between 87 and 99mph, half of those being at over 90mph³. This evidence proves that the concern of Atworth residents is fully justified. Indeed at one meeting of the Neighbourhood Police Tasking Group quite some time ago, I made the comment that if over the few days of this measurement, the police had evidence that several tens of thousands of Atworth residents (if that were Atworth's population!) were smoking cannabis, or beating their wives, that would result in droves of prosecutions.

Some of the rules regarding the use of signage of 30mph limits seem to be against natural justice. Why for example can repeater 30mph signs and road-painted 30mph roundels not be used to emphasise the presence of the speed limit? The Bath Road through Atworth is especially long, and if one is magnanimous towards speeders, one could say they would not speed if they had such reminders. And why oh why are B&NES permitted to put 30mph roundels all along the A4 through Bath, yet Wiltshire Council will not do the same for, Atworth, claiming that they invalidate the limit. If that is true, and would, as Wiltshire's Senior Traffic Engineer, Mark Stansby has stated, invalidate any charge of a speeding offence along our road, it surely indicates a seriously misdirected policy by central government acting against pedestrians and cyclists and in favour of irresponsible and downright aggressive drivers. Is there proof that the roundels along the A4 in Bath have invalidated any speeding offence prosecutions on that road? When those frustrated and angry residents in Atworth placed their own 30mph signs along the A365, to reinforce the two signs at the entrances to the village, they were informed that their action had negated the effect of the official 30mph signage for the duration of the presence of the extra signage. How can that be justified, when these regulations are primarily directed at Highways and Local Authorities to ensure consistency, and perhaps to limit expenditure? I appeal to our newly-elected MP to take up these issue with the Department for Transport. These restrictions on repeater signs and mindless legal implication of one resident's independent action in the face of Atworth's traffic issues are both ludicrous and extraordinarily vindictive towards residents who are absolutely and rightfully concerned for their safety in the village.

Whilst speeding traffic is often a great cause for concern, it is far from the only reason why our community is worried about traffic.

In our location, both Atworth and Shaw are blighted simply by the volume traffic on the A365. When I wrote to the Department for Transport (DfT) on this subject an official stated¹ that this road is classed as a " ... primary rural route ... and ... providing a route for local traffic between Bath and Devizes ...". Yet residents know that this road carries much more than that, but nothing is done to persuade other traffic to stay on the regional and national routes in the area, in line with the DfT statement of the main function of the road. (Note that during the recent A36/A4 diversion, HGV drivers *were* instructed to turn off navigation systems and to follow the signed route, which excluded the A365. Did they do that, I ask?). The very large volume of traffic through Atworth and Shaw produces many other

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serious problems. Some (although not all) of these, including traffic noise (especially from HGVs and seriously speeding performance cars) may be judged as "quality of life" problems, which have a tendency to be dismissed by officials - after all why should rural residents expect to be able to sit in their gardens and converse without overpowering traffic noise, or to walk along the pavements without having HGVs speed by only inches from them and their children, or not to be soaked to the skin by water splash from large water pools during wet weather. Other problems are very much more serious: these include vibration damage to buildings (some of which are protected by listed status), damage to underground water pipes, and serious threats to health caused by the effects of vehicle exhausts on local air quality.

We spent a little time recently in New York, on Manhattan Island. The traffic volume throughout that part of the city is very considerable, certainly as heavy as any busy city in England. Yet we noticed something quite striking: there was none of the usual smell of traffic fumes. When we thought about it we came to realise that this was because the roads in New York were missing something which we have in abundance here in the UK: diesel engined road vehicles. Indeed there is a far, far smaller proportion of diesel vehicles in the US compared with nearly all of Europe - the reason for this lies in the unfortunate outcome of the "lean burn versus diesel" debate referred to earlier. Diesel engines were selected because they then generally produced less CO₂ emission per mile than the less-efficient petrol engines (of the time of the debate), a veritable feature in itself, but one which must not be considered in isolation, especially today, when petrol engines have moved closer to the "lean burn" philosophy. But diesel engines do, however produce large quantities of very harmful micro-particulates, and oxides of nitrogen, which are deposited into the local atmosphere. There has been much debate about this issue recently, in connection with air quality, and premature deaths associated with poor air quality, made more relevant by the revelations relating to the alleged violations of fuel efficiency and exhaust content declarations by some German (and other) motor manufacturers. Everyone should realise that these exhaust components are very hazardous: they damage the respiratory systems of adults and children alike, and the particulates may be absorbed into the respiratory system and cause damage elsewhere too. I am certain that Atworth residents have walked through the village and become aware of the smell of diesel exhaust: if that has happened to you, then you and your children have indeed been exposed to these materials - probably time and time again.

Those readers of a certain age will remember the Campaign for Lead Free Air (CLEAR) which persuaded the UK government of the necessity of reducing (and eliminating) lead as a component in petrol. Lead had been known to cause harm to children and young adults by damaging brain function and development, and even producing behavioural change in mature adults. The CLEAR Campaign eventually played a very important part in the legislation emanating from the European Union which enforced the removal of lead from petrol. The health and social benefits of that change are still being measured even to this day. I am convinced that we need a similar very high profile campaign to get rid of through-traffic in towns and villages alike, but especially to eliminate HGVs from all communities. This should be coupled with either improvements in diesel vehicles or their reduction as a proportion of vehicles sold.

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None of these issues are of course unique to Atworth nor to Shaw; nor are they unique to Wiltshire (although I consider Wiltshire Council to be somewhat lacklustre, out-of-date and unimaginative in its approach and commitment to resolving these problems). They are problems experienced by so many rural communities across the country. Resolution of some of the issues requires consideration, planning and action at national level. Personally I have had conversations with our previous MP and with the present incumbent. But I understand well that one MP has somewhat limited influence. Nor do individual MPs have spending power. It is our county council which holds the funding which could be used to provide help to solve these problems. Such local authorities also hold considerable power to determine traffic policy, and to enforce it. Rural communities will have to unite so as to speak to their local authority with a more forceful voice if progress is to be made. I have tried repeatedly to get traffic issues raised to a higher priority level, including, including for example the making of better use of the £m116 which Wiltshire have reported as the cost of road traffic incidents each year⁴ without success.

There are many actions which can be taken to improve all aspects of traffic in villages.

The use of effective and permanent speed indicating and controlling measures, including the installation of Speed Indicating Devices, but also the provision of Automatic Number-plate Recognition ("speed") cameras where MetroCount measurements show an unacceptable degree of excessive speed. It has always seemed odd to me that these so-called speed cameras are placed on the open road, on dual-carriageways and motorways, but hardly ever placed in communities where the residents feel much more at risk (although they do exist if rarely, in villages - see the eastern A4 approach to Saltford). The forcible slowing of vehicles by the provision of more chicanes for traffic calming at the entrances and exits of villages would also help.

Community Speedwatch (CSW) exists in many of the villages in Wiltshire, but like the provision of crossings without pedestrian control, it is a half-hearted affair in terms of its fitness for its purpose. Even extreme repeat offenders are most unlikely to be prosecuted as a result of a CSW report, and many drivers know that. Ask your friends who live in towns about their attitude to speedwatch and I have no doubt that this opinion is what you'll find - at worst, was the reference to CSW as "*oh - those old chaps with time on their hands standing around in high visibility jackets*". On the other hand, a police officer with a radar gun or a police camera van has a very definite effect indeed on traffic passing through a village. In the days when Atworth was blessed by the regular presence of a police camera van on the A365, it was known that Atworth should be approached at a safe speed, as the van would not be seen over the brow of the hill until it was too late! At that time, I was working in Devizes in the then Wiltshire Health Authority offices, and so many of my colleagues had been "caught" by the Atworth camera *en route* between Bath and Devizes that everyone approached Atworth with care.

Pedestrian crossings, which are supposed to provide a safe point for children and adults, including the elderly, are simply not safe when drivers feel that they can drive over them regardless. The provision of pedestrian controlled lights at these

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crossings is an essential feature as only a very tiny proportion of drivers will ignore a red light on a pedestrian crossing. The cost of such lights for pedestrian control, which, at about £30,000 seems to most people exorbitant at the least, could be very significantly reduced if the county council were to use an intelligent annual contract plan for crossings rather than a piecemeal approach. Better scrutiny of how contractors arrive at their prices would also reveal any unacceptable costing practices.

Many villages have very narrow pavements: when this is so, and there are significant traffic volumes with many HGVs in the mix, pedestrians are put at increased risk of injury. Some of Atworth's pavements are under 0.75m wide in places⁵, when the DfT *recommends* 2m, and an "*extreme minimum*" of 1m⁶, (and then only at pinch points). Furthermore, it is unsurprising that parents drive their children to school, in the face of concern for their safety in walking. This is a vicious circle, which has many detrimental side effects on children's health and fitness. Any parent who does brave the traffic with her/his child will also fear the effect of the significant air pollutants already discussed. The same traffic volumes and HGV numbers also render it unsafe for a child to cycle to school. All of this increases congestion and parking anger at school premises when so many large four-wheel drive and sports-utility vehicles arrive at the school gates together.

The recent debate between Wiltshire Council and Bradford-on-Avon resident groups relating to the provision of 20mph zones illustrates the apparent reluctance of the county council to bite on the bullet and respond to local demand for better traffic control. Eventually, even if not in my lifetime, I am confident that all this will change, and in the future our councils will have been shown to be so wrong in their lack of initiative and forward-thinking!

More careful signing of routes that avoid communities and encourage traffic (especially HGVs) to remain on regional and national routes using trunk roads assigned for the purpose would help reduce rural traffic volumes, and reduce the health threat and hazard to local residents. It is a peculiarity of traffic law in the UK that any vehicle can travel on any road unless it is specifically indicated that it may not. It would require a change to the law, if signing were to indicate permitted routes for longer distance traffic and heavier vehicles, but it would generate great benefit to our blighted rural communities. National mapping could include permitted or advisory guidance by encoding traffic classes in road data, which would then be shown in satellite navigation systems. In any case it is certainly possible to argue that this should have been done properly from the moment it was agreed to permit larger vehicles to travel on our roads in the first place.

In the medium term, the dearth of bypasses around Wiltshire villages must be addressed. So many villages all along the east coast of England have been bypassed, and I fail to understand why this has not been done for our villages in Wiltshire. In this respect, Beanacre suffers from the volume of traffic along the A350. This road provides a much longer route (regional, north-to-south) than does the A365 (rural, north-west-to-south-east), and all that traffic is obliged to pass through Beanacre village. The situation will be exacerbated by the (welcome) dualling of some of the A350 route by Wiltshire Council. One hears mention from time-to-time of an "eastern bypass" around Melksham: if this is not still under

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active consideration then it should be, and its design should be carefully done so as to relieve traffic volumes through all the nearby villages, including both Beanacre and the short-cut along the A365 through Atworth and Shaw from Box to the A350.

In conclusion, may I suggest that if local rural communities feel the same way as those demonstrating Atworth residents do, namely that they have serious issues with traffic levels and behaviour through their village, that they make contact with each other to form a common voice which may be able to influence the authorities more successfully than has been done hitherto.

[References:

¹Personal correspondence with an official of the DfT;

²See: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn00654.pdf>

³See MetroCount report:

http://atag.atwebpages.com/20130111_metrocount_a365_20120612_denley-farm.pdf

⁴See Report: http://atag.atwebpages.com/2010-11_road_casualty_joint-report.pdf

⁵See Report: http://atag.atwebpages.com/201308_narrow_pavements.pdf

⁶See:

<http://www.ukroads.org/webfiles/LTN%202-04%20Adjacent%20and%20Shared%20Use%20Facilities%20for%20Pedestrians%20and%20Cyclists.pdf>

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Kenneth A Spencer, Atworth, August 2015

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