

SMART

South
Maidstone
Action for
Roads and
Transport

SPRING 2015

2

North Loose
Residents
Association



SUPPORTED BY



Valley Conservation
Society



Table of Contents

About SMART	1
Introduction	2
Our solutions	3
Park and Ride.....	3
Changes and improvements along the A229 Loose and Linton Roads.....	3
Buses, Bus Lanes and Bus Stops	4
Air Quality Management (AQM)	5
Southern Relief Road	5
Traffic on country lanes and residential roads (Rat Runs)	5
Speed Limits.....	6
School Traffic.....	6
Parking.....	7
Cycling	7
The Future	9
An Agenda for 2015	9

A great deal of the evidence for this report has been based on a series of traffic surveys conducted in the SMART area between October 2012 and January 2015.

These have confirmed that many roads and all the major junctions have already reached capacity or are near it. This is creating long queues which are causing air pollution above European Union limits as well as potentially having an impact on the health of local residents.

About SMART

South Maidstone Action for Roads and Transport (SMART) was formed in early 2013 to campaign and offer positive suggestions for improvements to road transport infrastructure in the South and Loose wards of the Borough of Maidstone.

The SMART committee consists of District Councillors Sue Grigg of Loose ward, Derek Mortimer, one of the South ward councillors and representatives of Loose Parish Council, North Loose Residents Association, Valley Conservation Society and Loose Amenities Association.

From its beginnings SMART has committed to offering suggestions and solutions that are credible, cost effective and offer benefits to the whole community.

To contact SMART

email: david@northloose.co.uk



A Maidstone Corporation trolleybus at The Wheatsheaf, c1959

Introduction

SMART published its first report in November 2013 which was well received by local government bodies, service providers and various voluntary organisations within its area. This second report seeks to build upon and refine some of the proposals contained in the first report and to offer new suggestions for improvements to infrastructure and services.

Most traffic and transportation issues in the SMART area have their origins with the A229, the primary traffic route that bisects the area north to south.

In the absence of a southern orbital link to the M20 the route carries all of the heavy goods vehicle (HGV) traffic travelling between the motorway, mid Kent and the Sussex borders with much of the traffic originating outside of the United Kingdom.

The SMART area has high levels of private car ownership. The Loose ward, for example, having over 90% of households with access to a car or van, according to the 2011 national census. Public transport is concentrated along the A229 with no direct service to the extensive housing developments either side of the route or the historic centre of Loose.

All routes through the area terminate in Maidstone town centre and do not serve the railway stations directly.

A large number of the northbound private car journeys through the SMART area continue beyond the Maidstone centre toward the M20 for London, Gatwick, the Thames Valley and the Channel Tunnel; the M2 for the City, Docklands and the Dartford and Blackwall Crossings.

The section of the route passing through the SMART area suffers from congestion over most of its length at peak times, the situation being exacerbated by the introduction of Automatic Traffic Signals (ATS) at the Cripple Street and

Wheatsheaf junctions. At both of these locations the road layout and signal phasing have extended journey times and resulted in “rat running” through rural lanes, narrow village streets and residential roads by those attempting to avoid delays.

Pedestrians also suffer due to these problems. On the A229 which has only two locations with pedestrian crossings between Linton Crossroads and the Wheatsheaf, just one of these being controlled and also on the narrow country lanes and residential streets many of which have no pedestrian footways.

These roads cannot sustain this volume of traffic and despite sterling efforts by KCC Highways during 2014 in repairing damaged road surfaces and installing new road drainage this situation must change.

Given the proposed Maidstone Local Plan housing allocations for Staplehurst, Marden and Coxheath to the south of the SMART area (900 additional homes in Staplehurst alone) the situation can only become worse.

During the past year SMART has met:

Kent Highways

Maidstone Borough Council

Arriva Buses

Kent CC Head of Transportation

Kent CC Highways Officer

Kent CC Cycle Route Planner

Kent CC Rights of Way Officer

Maidstone BC Cabinet Member for Planning, Transport and Development

Kent CC Traffic Management Centre

Loose Primary School

Cornwallis Academy

Our solutions

Park and Ride

Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) has proposed a Park and Ride (P&R) site at Linton Crossroads. The lack of any road space to provide bus lanes or other priority measures along Linton Road and Loose Road, the congested junctions at Cripple Street and The Wheatsheaf - the perceived unsuitability of the site and the admission from MBC that P&R ridership is declining at its other P&R sites has resulted in strong opposition from residents, parish councils and ward councillors along the route.

SMART suggests that a P&R scheme off the B2163, between Linton and the Parkwood/Langley area and using the A274 towards Maidstone might provide a better option and could serve those approaching from both the A229 and A274. There is evidence that drivers approaching from the A229 already travel via the B2163 to reach the P&R site at Willington Street suggesting that a solution serving both routes might find favour with those approaching Maidstone on the A229.

Changes and improvements along the A229 Loose and Linton Roads

The Automatic Traffic Signals (ATS) at the Cripple Street junction on Loose Road have no turning filters and consequentially have long queues at peak times and at other times throughout the day.

SMART has previously suggested changes to the phasing of the ATS and the addition of filter lanes. These could be achieved by using small areas of land set aside for road widening over seventy years ago.

The filters would remove the need for traffic from all directions to be stopped at the same time to allow pedestrian phases on the signals.

The Wheatsheaf Junction of the A229 and A274 has been the source of congestion on both routes for many years and was not improved by the introduction of ATS during the 1980s.

This large junction is not only a congestion point for road traffic but also presents a barrier to pedestrians, with 4 traffic lanes and several turning movements across the junction.

SMART believes that the junction could be improved by a shared space scheme, similar to that introduced at Poynton in Cheshire¹, freeing traffic flow and providing a safer environment for pedestrians using the shops, South Park and other facilities in the area.



Shared space in operation, Poynton, Cheshire

The Automatic Traffic Signals (ATS) at the Loose Road, Armstrong Road junction suffers from the lack of a dedicated right turn lane for southbound traffic which causes delays during most of the day. During recent works at Sheals Crescent the northbound Loose Road was reduced to one lane between Armstrong Road and Sheals Crescent with no discernible impact upon traffic flow. SMART suggests that this situation could be made permanent and the road space freed up could be used to add a dedicated right turn lane for southbound traffic into Armstrong Road immediately ahead of the traffic signals. Appendix 3

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vzDDMzq7d0

contains a diagram illustrating this proposal.



Traffic queuing towards the Cripple Street/Boughton Lane junction with Loose Road, viewed over 200 metres from the junction.

Linton Crossroads at the extreme southern end of the SMART area has recently been the subject of a minor remodelling. However, peak times still see unacceptably long delays. SMART believes that a more extensive solution is required, possibly replacing the ATS with a roundabout.

Buses, Bus Lanes and Bus Stops

The nature of the A229 route through the SMART area does not make it possible to create dedicated bus lanes without reducing the capacity for other traffic; an attempt to create a bus lane on the northbound A229 between the Wheatsheaf and Sheals Crescent became a major election issue in recent County Council elections with the candidate campaigning against the bus lane taking the local seat from the incumbent.

The bus lane on the A274 approach to the Wheatsheaf junction carries about 10 buses per hour which does not warrant a 12 hour designation. The SMART suggestion for a new Park and Ride site could make use of the A274 route and consequently add justification to the 12 hour status of the lane.

A major issue along the length of Loose Road in the SMART area is the delay caused by poorly sited bus stops, in particular the stop at the Cripple Street junction which is immediately in front of the

ATS, leaving other traffic unable to proceed through green lights due to the presence of a bus at the stop.

SMART suggests that this stop and others at Wheatsheaf Close, the Wheatsheaf junction could benefit from a partial bus layby. These could be half the width of a full layby but sufficient to allow other traffic to pass stationary buses in safety and reduce queues.

Such a layby at the Cripple Street junction could incorporate some of priority signalling for buses allowing a bus at the stop to proceed ahead of other traffic held at a red signal. Appendix 2 contains a diagram illustrating this proposal.

A resited bus stop north of Armstrong Road could be created if the single lane option for northbound traffic suggested previously was to be adopted. In this case a full width layby, out of the traffic flow could be provided from the unused road space.



A low emissions bus on route 89 between Maidstone and Coxheath / East Farleigh.

At present there is no bus route through the centre of Loose village leaving many people with no alternative to the car, particularly for journeys into the centre of Maidstone, SMART has raised this issue with ARRIVA, the local bus operator and suggested that one number 89 bus per hour be routed through the village centre.

KCC is now looking at a new design for the junction of Loose Hill and Loose Road which, in addition to improving general access would also allow buses to pass along the route without obstruction.

Air Quality Management (AQM)

The busiest junctions on Loose Road, such as the Wheatsheaf, have some of the highest levels of air pollution in the Maidstone area with readings well above the European Union (EU) air quality standards.

A survey conducted by SMART regarding AQM along the A229 route received a 15% response (regarded as particularly high for this type of survey) which highlighted concerns among local residents about the high levels of pollution along the A229 corridor. The report may be viewed on the NLRA website at www.northloose.co.uk.

Whilst measurements are taken at the roadside, it must be borne in mind that airborne pollution is not static, the wind carries the pollution into the adjacent residential areas and beyond, small, windborne particle emissions have been found to travel up to 30 miles.

All of the situations referred to in the previous section have an adverse effect on air quality. The improvements suggested would go some way to improving air quality but cannot resolve the problem. Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council must put into place a practical AQM strategy for the A229 corridor to bring pollution back in line with EU standards or lower.

The strategy should take a holistic approach looking at road design and travel options as well as the impact of all vehicle types - cars, heavy goods vehicles and buses; in this last category some newer vehicles have been introduced on the bus routes along Loose Road but both Arriva and Nu-Venture are still using some vehicles in excess of 12 years old, often vehicles that have been cascaded from other parts of the country due to their high emissions not being acceptable elsewhere.

SMART suggests that the A229 be designated a public transport low emission route, (similar to the A20 London Road)

with all buses used on the routes meeting the EU 5 standard.

Southern Relief Road

Much of the HGV traffic that uses the A229 route through the SMART area has arrived in Mid Kent via the M20 motorway; the lack of a suitable direct route from the motorway to the south of Maidstone means that the traffic has to use the A229 to reach the areas to the south of Maidstone. This is not only causing increased noise in homes along the route, but is now resulting in reports of severe structural vibration in properties close to the road.

There have been numerous options put forward over the years for a relief road from Junction 8 of the M20 linking to the south of Maidstone; at present the only formal plan forms part of the Kent County Council (KCC) response to the Draft Maidstone Local Plan. This route would also service an area of residential development at Kingswood which is also suggested in the KCC response.

SMART believes that a Southern Relief Road is essential to reduce the volume of heavy traffic along the A229/A274 corridor and to improve the lives of those living along and close to the route who presently suffer from the noise, vibration and air pollution that this type of traffic generates.

Any plans for such a route should not be solely dependent upon new residential development in the Kingswood area, but instead driven by the existing traffic situation, SMART calls upon KCC and Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) to restart the design process for a Southern Relief Road as a matter of priority.

Traffic on country lanes and residential roads (Rat Runs)

In order to avoid the delays on the A229 route many drivers are taking to the lanes through the Loose Valley and to other residential streets. These roads are unsuited to any purpose other than local

access and in places are less than 3 metres wide.

Damage is being caused to the road surface, adjacent buildings and other structures by HGVs and sometimes smaller vehicles when trying to pass on narrow stretches of road or by the sheer size of some vehicles trying to negotiate narrow lanes and village streets.

A 7.5 tonne weight restriction is in place on many of the roads through the Loose Valley but is widely ignored. It is thought that this is in part due to the positioning of the signs at the boundary of the restriction which seems to be defined by the positioning of solar panels rather than visibility to drivers. In addition to resolving this issue SMART believes that further options need to be explored to restrict access for both HGVs and passenger cars in the area backed by an enforcement regime from Kent Police.



Narrow lanes with no formal passing places abound in the SMART area.

Speed Limits

At present the lowest speed limit in the SMART area is 30MPH, and whilst this is appropriate for much of the road network there are still many areas where a lower limit would be more appropriate, such as residential streets, narrow village streets, country lanes and areas around schools

and shops where there is a high number of pedestrian movements across roads.

The issue of enforcement has caused local authorities to resist the imposition of mandatory 20MPH limits; however, the approval of the SafeZone™ system, from Siemens², by the Department for Transport (DfT) makes the 20MPH limits over wide areas and for short distances a practical and enforceable option.

The system uses Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) to measure the average speed of vehicles passing through the area covered by the SafeZone™ equipment. The equipment can be solar powered and uses the 3G/4G mobile telephone networks to connect elements of the system thus requiring no expensive street works. The system can be connected to the standard fixed penalty back-office systems to completely automate the issue of penalty notices.

Additionally the minimum length for speed restrictions monitored by this equipment has been reduced making the implementation of short, mandatory restrictions near schools and other sensitive locations practical.

SMART would like to work with KCC to put in place a pilot scheme in the SMART area, possibly covering an area of either country lanes or residential streets and a short main road restriction such as around Loose Primary School or the shopping area at the Cripple Street junction.

School Traffic

With two very large secondary schools and three primary schools in the SMART area the A229 and many side roads become heavily congested each morning and afternoon, parking restrictions are ignored, pavements obstructed and access to some homes is blocked.

²

<http://www.siemens.co.uk/traffic/pool/documents/brochure/58187-safezone-4pp.pdf>

SMART believes that school travel plans need to be revisited to include more options for non-car related travel such as walking buses, car-share schemes, an increase in the number of buses serving Cornwallis Academy, both service buses along the A229 as well as dedicated services into the school grounds and cycling to school (a new cycle route is presented elsewhere in the document). There is funding available within the KCC Integrated Transport Strategy budget to finance cycle routes and facilities for the safe storage for cycles on school grounds. Appendix 4, at the end of this document, has a diagram illustrating the proposal for bus services into the grounds of Cornwallis Academy.

At Loose Primary School where the problem is most acute a Drop-off/Pick-up point within the school grounds should be explored to relieve the situation along the Loose Road and the adjacent residential roads, Loose Parish Council supports this proposal and has included it as a possible project in the planning for the Loose Neighbourhood Plan.

Parking

With new developments being permitted with densities of up to 33 homes per hectare and greater the design standards for residential parking need to be reviewed. New developments such as Leonard Gould Way and The Farrows have become clogged with parked cars as soon as they were completed.

SMART has commented previously that in the face of a threefold increase in the number of road vehicles in the last 40 years the off street parking requirement for new developments has actually been reduced, SMART believes that given the high level of car ownership in the Maidstone area that an off street parking requirement of two cars per dwelling is realistic and that the area set aside should be of sufficient size to accommodate typical family cars without obstructing pavements or causing

incursions into gardens or other common areas.

Cycling

SMART wishes to encourage cycling for travel to work, school and leisure. However, the main roads in the south of Maidstone do not present a safe or welcoming environment, particularly for young people.

Over the past year SMART has been working with KCC and MBC promoting its proposal for a cycle route from Lancet Lane to the town centre via upgraded public footpaths and existing cycle routes along the River Medway and quiet residential roads.

In the autumn of 2014 KCC announced that funding from the Integrated Transport Strategy had been made available for the scheme with the first phase from Cripple Street to the river bank cycle route via Tovil due to commence in the 2015 financial year.

Furthermore KCC suggested that following the second phase of the route from Cripple Street to Lancet Lane a third phase from Lancet Lane to Loose village via Kirkdale could be added.

On this third phase parts of the route are in private ownership with some complex access rights for residents and utility operators, as well as conservation area and Article 4 Direction status. KCC has now commenced negotiations with landowners and access rights holders to establish agreements to upgrade the route to bridleway status whilst maintaining the rural nature of the existing path, protecting wildlife habitats and ensuring that residents in Kirkdale do not suffer loss of amenity.



The map shows the route from Loose village, at the bottom of the map, in red, it then follows the blue path from Lancet Lane to Cripple Street, from there it follows Broadoak Avenue, Richmond Way taking the route shown in green via the existing path toward Postley Road and then following Gleneagles Drive and Caernarvon Drive toward Tovil. A more detailed map is included in Appendix 1 at the end of this document.

The new cycle route represents a major step forward in the provisioning of safe routes for cyclists, taking away the need to use the busy and dangerous A229 from Loose and the south Maidstone suburbs into the town centre.

In particular it will transform the opportunities for cycling to school for children travelling to Loose Primary School and to a lesser extent Cornwallis Academy (where cyclist would have to use Salts Lane for the final part of their journey. When coupled with safe storage facilities on the school sites, which can also be funded from the Integrated Transport budget, these routes are a realistic option.

In addition to supporting these plans SMART will continue to press for additional facilities for cyclists such as the provision of new access routes linking in to the currently planned cycle route, safe road crossings for cyclists with the ultimate aim of a cycle network for the SMART area.

The Future

In the last two years SMART has established itself as an effective, voluntary, non-government organisation for the promotion of transport issues in the south of Maidstone with several other areas around Maidstone now considering following the SMART model.

During the coming year SMART will build upon its achievements and step up the pressure on local authorities to implement the changes and improvements suggested here and in the previous SMART Report.

Key in the challenge is Air Quality Management - almost all of the issues raised by SMART have an impact upon air quality, whether it is the provision of cleaner buses, redesigning traffic signals or dealing with rat runs.

The issue of poor air quality around the Wearsheaf junction has been raised in the European Parliament and both MBC and KCC must take measures to ensure that air quality is brought within EU standards.

Many of the smaller works suggested by SMART during the last two years could have been implemented at relatively low cost. Unfortunately the lack of an approved Local Plan for Maidstone means that monies from the Community Infrastructure Levy, which could fund activities such as bus layby measures and minor junction changes, cannot be made available.

As it enters its third year SMART will continue to keep this and all of the other matters it has raised to the fore and press all government bodies to bring about the changes.

To this end SMART is establishing an agenda for 2015, a challenge to all bodies, both government and voluntary to help to push forward the solutions contained in this document.

An Agenda for 2015

- Improve public transport
 - bring buses back to Loose village.
 - Better bus links to railway stations.
 - a workable and realistic Park and Ride Plan.
- Drive forward opportunities for safer cycling.
 - including the new route from Loose to the town centre.
- Improve access to bus services from Cornwallis Academy and New Line Learning.
- Reduce the impact of traffic on country lanes, residential streets and around our schools through traffic regulation and new technology.
- Get the traffic moving on the A229
 - review the design and layout of the major road junctions in the area.
 - introduce a pilot of the SMART bus layby plan.
- Reduce airborne pollution, both through implementation of the suggestions from SMART and through direct action to create an Air Quality Management Plan that will bring air quality in the area within the limits set by the European Union.
- Continue to carry out surveys into air quality and traffic movements during 2015 to inform and validate the solutions offered by SMART.

What SMART is saying in the Press.



Some Facts and Figures to cause concern

Since 2012, eleven separate Traffic Surveys have been organised and carried out. The first in October 2012 was the most comprehensive to date. It was undertaken by 56 of our residents positioned at five locations along and adjoining the A229 for 12 hours each day on two different days of the week. One of the memorable facts revealed by this work was that there was on average, a traffic movement every 2.5 seconds on the Loose Road.

In May 2013 a survey in Cripple Street at the junction with Broadoak Avenue and Westwood Road showed that in excess of 3500 vehicles were passing in and out of this small area between 7.00 am and 7.00 pm.

In response to a claim from residents in Paynes Lane that their narrow road was becoming “a traffic nightmare”, a special survey was undertaken. We had to report back that 323 vehicles in a 12 hour day could not, in the wider context, be regarded as a serious problem. Two years later this lane – which at one point is so narrow that a bicycle cannot pass a car travelling in the opposite direction, now has to cope with 732 vehicles – an increase of 125%, during the same period and the numbers are increasing daily.

One of the biggest concerns for our area is the traffic in Boughton Lane. Figures produced by Wards in July 2011 showed a total of 2503 traffic movements and in October of the same year 2693. Modelling for the new school campus predicted that traffic movements would increase by 11% during the morning peak and 4% during the afternoon peak.

Exactly a year later our survey showed that over a 12 hour period, traffic movements were now 3125 – a 25% increase. By November 2014 this had risen to 3623 - almost 45% greater than the July 2011 base figure. It should be noted that these huge increases are solely attributable to the schools in Boughton Lane (there have been no other significant new developments in the immediate area) and are greater than predicted.

Two further surveys in 2015 suggest that a new trend in traffic movement is emerging.

It was noted that the number of vehicles passing through the Boughton Lane/Loose Road/Cripple Street junction during the peak periods between 7.00 am - 10.00 am and 4.00 pm – 7.00 pm had hardly increased in two years. Similarly, the traffic movements in Cripple Street appeared

to have reduced between the first major survey in 2012 and the next less than a year later.

It seemed unlikely that drivers were taking different routes to avoid this area as there are few, if any, alternatives.

Further work was carried out which showed that the hourly traffic movements between 6 and 7.00 am and between 7 and 8.00 pm were the same and even greater than the generally accepted peak times. Effectively, North Loose now has eight hours of peak time traffic.

During the last two years, scientific research has produced data which shows conclusively that more people die due to carbon dioxide poisoning – the fumes from vehicles, than in traffic accidents.

The next SMART report will include an investigation into this aspect of our environment.