

OTFORD SOCIETY ROAD SAFETY SURVEY 2007-8

Background

Residents of Otford have regularly expressed concerns about traffic and especially road safety issues in numerous meetings of the Otford Society and elsewhere. Some in public positions as well as residents have spent time and energy trying to get things improved over time, with some successes. It was already clear from meetings and from a survey on community safety carried out by Sevenoaks Council that traffic, and especially its speed along local roads, was a major concern. So rather than asking very basic and general questions, it was agreed that residents should be invited to give views on quite specific matters. They would also be asked for their ideas and suggestions about what might help to make the village a safer place.

The survey

A two-page questionnaire was drawn up and checked by a number of local residents to see if it was a realistic and useful exercise. A copy was sent to all 1300+ households in the village, thanks to the distributing team of RADIO (Residents Against Development in Otford). The survey was designed and the analysis carried out by village residents who have no particular experience in the traffic and road safety fields. They also have no axe to grind other than that of helping to make the village a safer place.

The responses

299 responses were received: 22.1% of the households in the village with all roads represented – a good response for a survey of this type. The many detailed comments and suggestions were most welcome. Percentage figures are given to show how many people think what. This gives a better picture than the basic numbers. The % figures are a percentage of the 299 responses, not of the village as a whole. Not all respondents answered every question. Only the main responses are given in this report, but all responses were carefully analysed and full figures and details are set out in a set of tables available on request.

1: Main worries

274 respondents - 91.6% - were most worried about the speed of traffic and speeding drivers. **67% were worried by HGVs (lorries/vans), 60% by cars, and 43% by motor bikes** – many by some or all of these. Figures for vulnerable groups were even higher: **82% were especially concerned for the elderly or disabled, 82% for children, and 75% for parents with young children.**

These figures suggest serious levels of worry among respondents about the speed of traffic – actual or perceived – and on behalf of the many residents who are especially at risk.

2: Other worries

29% listed dangerous locations. 11% mentioned aspects of the roads themselves: things like poor footways, visibility, and lack of road and roadside maintenance. **10% listed poor driving, 9% parking problems, and 8% the absence of street lighting.**

3: Most dangerous roads

Pilgrims Way East was judged a dangerous road by 66%. Figures for the other main roads were: **High Street – 53%; Shoreham Road – 42%; Station Road – 39%; Pilgrims Way West – 37%; Rye Lane – 37%. Sevenoaks Road was judged dangerous by 11%** - especially the stretch immediately south of the pond. The east-west route through the village (High Street/Station Road/Pilgrims Way East) is seen as particularly hazardous and of course almost impossible to avoid whether moving by car or on foot.

4: Reasons for roads being dangerous

Of the suggested factors which can make roads dangerous, **speed of traffic was identified by 87%, lack of footway by 73%, width (or rather narrowness) of road by 61%, and narrowness of footways by 37%.** The main village roads are affected by more than one of the above factors, and this is a key point as a number pointed out. This combination of factors means there is very little margin of safety if a mistake is made.

5: Traffic signs

“Traffic signs” was taken to mean any signs, markings or road features designed to control traffic, including traffic/speed cameras and similar. **12% said there are too many signs; 41% said there are too few.** Some commented that no more are needed but that the important thing is to have the right ones in place and to have them observed.

23% mentioned the value of vehicle activated signs (VAS) such as the 40 mph flashing sign on Sevenoaks Road. A small number mentioned speed cameras specifically. **14% mentioned physical features** such as speed humps, pedestrian refuges, width restrictions, rumble strips/change of surface, mini-roundabouts, and gateways at village entrances and key points through the village. **11% favoured more of the standard road signs** such as better or clearer 30 repeaters/roundels, slow – children, no HGVs (for specific roads). **5% stressed the need for better sign maintenance** including cleaning and removing if ineffective. Other ideas included: speed limits to be reduced near the school at busy times; a series of mini-roundabouts through the village linked with refuges and/or raised road surfaces for pedestrians.

6: Speed limits

91% responded. 71% want speed limits changed in some way. There was clear support (**64%**) for a **20 mph limit in the High Street**. For the other roads listed, **50% or more said that 30 mph is acceptable** if observed by drivers or enforced by authorities. **10% mentioned other roads** and locations (reflecting comments on dangerous roads in questions 3 and 4).

7: Pedestrian crossings

59% said more crossings were needed, while 31% said not. The need for a crossing near the parade of shops on **Sevenoaks Road was mentioned by 28%**. The station approach exit on **Station Road was mentioned by 18%**, and **the pond area by 15%**. Some pointed out that at peak times it is impossible to cross Pilgrims Way West to the safer footway on the north side.

8: Pelican crossing in High Street

With regard to changing the zebra crossing near the primary school to a pedestrian-controlled one, **40% were in favour, 54% were against.** A number of comments mentioned the need for pedestrians, especially at peak times, not to assume that the existing zebra crossing allows stepping off the pavement without waiting and watching.

9: Otford 30 car sticker

Residents were asked if they would agree to display a sticker in their car window (or elsewhere) reminding other traffic of the 30 limit in Otford. **66% agreed to do so, and 19% did not.** The aim of the sticker would be to remind all drivers – including residents - of the 30 limit in the village and encourage them therefore to act as a positive influence on others.

10: Some final thoughts

The traffic and road safety problems in Otford are complex, and some of them are of long standing. Traffic weight and speeds have increased, though the roads seem much as they were decades ago. Even traffic travelling within the legal limit can seem to be moving very fast indeed to the pedestrian cowering against the hedge – and fear of being hurt is as real as the statistics of actual injury or worse. The level of concern among residents who responded to this survey is clear, as is their commitment to helping with improvements.

Some work is clearly called for at particular locations, especially with regard to reviewing and updating signs and lines. The next stage must involve serious measures to reduce speeds and risk at key points and times, perhaps involving village gateways, variable limits and road widths, and vehicle activated signs, as has been promised. Some of these measures, especially when tackling the vexed question of footways, will entail

negotiations and decisions about making space for them. Some suggestions – such as speed humps or a range of different speeds through the village – are unlikely to be accepted. However, a series of mini-roundabouts – as suggested in one clearly argued letter – could help a great deal to slow traffic through the village and provide extra road crossing points. This will mean pressing for careful analysis of actual traffic weight and speeds as well as highway engineering input. Meanwhile we all do have to be careful as we move around Otford.

But longer term the worries raised by residents in this survey will need much larger scale thinking about the village as a whole and how it can reflect the needs and wishes of its residents. Can we really think big time about – for example – whether a new car park is needed outside the centre? Or whether school entrances should be moved? Or whether the High Street and the Pond and Green can be shared by pedestrians and slow-moving traffic, reliant on good sense and good manners instead of signs and lines? Can the soon-to-be-published Village Design Statement point the way forward here? If so, enough people have to care, and enough energy and funding have to be found. And people then have to start walking more around their village...

It is hoped that this survey has raised awareness among residents and the authorities about traffic issues in Otford. The findings will be sent to bodies such as the Parish Council, Sevenoaks District Council and Kent Highways for their information and – one hopes – consideration and action. The Otford Society will continue to work for the benefit of the village and its residents, not only from the point of view of safety but mainly to ensure that the village does not continue to turn into a main road with some houses along and around it. The fabric of the village must not be further eroded.

11: Further information

29% of respondents (88 people) gave their contact details as an indication that they would be willing to help further. About 20% included additional comments on the form, and 7 respondents sent detailed statements and ideas in the form of separate letters or notes. All these comments have been logged. Thanks are due to all who took the trouble to respond to this survey.

The full range of information provided is too great for this short report. But an extended version is available on request from the Otford Society (contact: Jeff Lee, Tanglewood, Shoreham Road, Otford TN14 5RW, telephone 01959 525225, email jeff.lee@waitrose.com).