

Cabinet

Report Title:	Funding for Changes to Speed Limits
Meeting Date:	13 September 2016
Lead Councillor(s):	Councillor James Finch, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Local Councillor(s):	All Councillors
Director:	Geoff Dobson, Director for Resource Management
Assistant Director or Head of Service:	Mark Stevens, Assistant Director Operational Highways
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Brief summary of report

1. This report describes the process for considering and implementing new, or changes to, speed limits. It identifies that no budget was allocated for this work when the policies were originally approved by the Cabinet and recommends that, in the future, Councillors' Local Highways Budgets should be used to fund all work associated with changing or creating new speed limits.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

2. To agree that all requests for speed limit changes from communities are directed to the local County Councillor and, if they are supported, that all costs of developing the changes, including preparations for the Speed Limit Cases Panel, be funded from Councillors' Local Highway Budgets.

Reason for recommendation

3. When the speed limit policies were approved, no budget was allocated for the associated work. Henceforth, all speed limit work undertaken by Suffolk Highways needs to be on a fully cost recoverable basis so a funding source is now required.

What are the key issues to consider?

4. If changing or creating new speed limits is to continue, should all such work undertaken by Suffolk Highways be funded from local Councillors' Local Highways Budget?

What are the resource and risk implications?

5. At present, each local Councillors' Local Highways Budget only funds the work undertaken by Kier representatives associated with changing, or creating new,

speed limits after a request has been assessed and considered by the Councillor Speed Limit Cases Panel.

6. Under the Highways Transformation Programme, integrated teams (comprising both Council officers and Kier representatives) will deliver a more streamlined highway maintenance and improvement service under the Suffolk Highways banner. Funding must therefore be in place for both the preparatory and post-decision work. It is inappropriate for this to be funded from the Operational Highways revenue staffing budget so another source is required. Given that part of the cost is already borne by the requesting Councillor's Local Highways Budget, it would be more practical for Local Highways Budgets to be the funding source for all such work i.e. from start to finish.
7. If funding were to come from a separate funding source, up to £50,000 per year would be needed just to fund the assessments and preparation of reports for the Speed Limit Cases Panel, based on the current volume being presented. However, as there is a sizeable backlog of assessment work, this sum is understated. In addition, the post-decision (i.e. works implementation) costs for Council officer involvement are not currently accounted for but need to be in the future – given that it would be unfair for one Local Highway Budget to be charged for Kier representative involvement but another Local Highway Budget not to be charged for Council officer time, just because of an arbitrary split of Suffolk Highways personnel workload.
8. For any requests for changing or bringing in new speed limits that are already submitted but not progressed and for which the County Council has no or insufficient Local Highway Budget available for 2016/17, preparatory work could potentially be funded from the overall Local Highway Budget underspend.
9. Unless the funding issue is resolved, no current requests for changes or new speed limits can realistically be progressed, given the resources available and other higher priorities that are funded.
10. As the Council will not be introducing a new policy, but looking at the mechanisms of existing policies, an EIA screening is not required

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

11. If the Cabinet agrees to support the recommendation then all future assessment work, preparation of reports and all aspects of decision implementation work can be charged to the relevant local Councillor's Local Highways Budget with immediate effect.

Alternative options

12. Do not consider any changes to existing speed limits or consider any new speed limits.
13. Alternatively, all changes already identified could be funded from the existing overall underspend on Local Highway Budgets and, in future years, a proportion of the current level of Local Highway Budget be set aside as a stand-alone budget for speed limit review work.

Who will be affected by this decision?

14. County Councillors who will need to individually decide if they wish to fund speed limit work and all road users who would be affected by changes or no changes to speed limits.

Main body of report

Background

15. The Suffolk Speed Limit Policy for 20mph and the Speed Limit Policy for other limits were developed by a Policy Development Panel and approved by Cabinet at its meetings on the 25 February 2014 and 9 December 2014 respectively. These policies include a set of criteria that need to be met before a speed limit is changed or introduced. Inevitably, some of the criteria require a degree of interpretation and, to assist with this, Cabinet agreed that a 'Councillor Speed Limit Cases Panel' should be set up to decide whether the criteria are adequately met.
16. Prior to the introduction of the policies, requests for new or changed speed limits had been deferred for some time pending the introduction of the policies. The introduction of the current policies has led to many requests for new or changes to speed limits.
17. In adopting the policies, no dedicated budget was identified to enable the requests to be considered and introduced. Some County Councillors have chosen to fund the introduction of the speed limits from their Local Highways Budget. However, this has only covered the implementation costs incurred through the Highway Services Contract with Kier once the Councillor Speed Limit Cases Panel has agreed a speed limit is needed or should be changed.
18. The cost for all the work needed to be undertaken by County Council officers to assess requests for speed limits and prepare reports for the panel has not been funded but been a sizeable, unmonitored cost on the Operational Highways revenue staffing budget. Officer time spent overseeing the post-panel work implemented through the Highway Services Contract has also not been charged to Local Highway Budgets, even where, in a small number of cases, officers in area highways teams have undertaken the work required.
19. The assessment and report writing work undertaken by officers in the area highways teams has therefore been an unfunded workload (and therefore no alternative resource to progress such work could be secured). This is not a sustainable approach given the competing demands for officer time, particularly towards implementing an asset management-led approach to highway maintenance.
20. Since the policies were introduced, there have been a total of 53 requests for changes to existing, or new speed limits. Of these, 18 have been subject to an assessment and considered by the Councillor panel which supported 15 requests and decided that three did not adequately meet the criteria. The requests that officers have taken to the panel have been those that they thought adequately met the criteria or were ones that the local Councillor strongly supported.

21. Of the remaining requests, the local Councillor has chosen not to provide funding for three and, as a result, no further work is planned – irrespective of whether a change in speed limit is warranted or not. Officers have identified eight requests that clearly do not comply with the current criteria and this situation subsequently explained to the local Councillor - in most cases, no further work is planned. However, one Councillor has referred the matter to the Cabinet Member to consider whether officers should irrespectively prepare a formal assessment for the Councillor Speed Limit Panel to consider.
22. Of the remaining 24 requests, a coarse review at this stage suggests that 10 will not meet the criteria and the other 14 will either meet the criteria or be close to meeting the criteria. There is therefore concern that progression of all of these requests will result in a significant proportion of abortive work for which there must be some degree of accountability. Abortive work does not represent value for money, particularly at a time when expenditure has to be increasingly justified, prioritised and yielding clear benefits.
23. Prior to this report, an assessment of a speed limit request and the preparation of a report to present to the panel has typically taken an entire week of an officer's time. Some requests have covered roads through a number of parishes and over several miles. For these, the amount of officer time has increased considerably.
24. Moving forward, the focus of the Highways Transformation Programme is on creating the 'integrated team' approach identified in the wording of the Highway Services Contract, thereby streamlining activities, reducing delivery timescales and costs. In that respect, there will not be the same split between the activities undertaken by a County Council officer and the activities undertaken by a Kier representative. All assessment and reporting work will be undertaken within Suffolk Highways and therefore all costs will need to be covered.
25. Although there is no definitive cost detail (as officers' apportionment of time to activities is not currently formally recorded), the estimated cost for each speed limit review request is thought to lie between £1,500 and £2,500. Price variation arises from the length and number of roads included in the request. A request that is considered by the panel and is considered not to be consistent with the Speed Limit Policy will still incur a minimum cost of £1,500.
26. It is recommended that all necessary funding for the assessment, report writing and implementation work comes from the requesting Councillor's Local Highways Budget. There are currently no alternative budgets available to fund this work although there is significant underspend on the overall Local Highways Budget as many County Councillors have identified no or very few schemes that they would wish to see locally progressed over the period that such budgets have existed.
27. As reported to the Cabinet on 14 July 2016, in order to progress the backlog of projects proposed to be funded by Local Highways Budgets, a specific team was established earlier this year (drawing resources from the area highways offices and Kier personnel). That report identified that an initial list of 101 such schemes grew to a total of 139 schemes, of which 37 had been delivered, no further action was to be taken on a further 14, whilst design was ongoing on 42 schemes and 46 were scheduled for delivery.

28. By mid-August, the total number of schemes stood at 153, of which 72 had been completed and no further action was identified for 15 schemes. Design was ongoing for 36 schemes and the remaining 30 were scheduled for delivery. A few schemes may not be fully delivered this financial year if Rights of Way Committee approval is required for contested traffic regulation orders. However, the entire Local Highway Budgets capital allocation is expected to underspend by £500k (much of which is attributable to a lack of requested schemes). So, where the relevant Councillor has insufficient personal Local Highway Budget left for 2016/17, consideration could be given to funding those current speed limit review requests from that underspend.
29. For 2017/18 onwards, though, consideration could be given to top-slicing the current level of Local Highway Budget allocation by £50,000 in order to separately fund future speed limit review cases and other forms of prioritised traffic management schemes. £500k was assigned to Local Highway Budgets in 2016/17 (equivalent to £6,666 per Councillor) - this proposed top-slicing would reduce individual allocations to £6,000. This funding allocation would be a legitimate use of the Integrated Transport capital allocation (from which the Local Highways Budget is currently drawn).
30. Based on experience to date, requests have been made at a rate of around 20 per year, some of which will fail to meet the criteria. However, if the entire cost of a speed limit change were to be funded in the future from an individual Councillor's Local Highways Budget, this number might fall.
31. To ensure that all requests have community support and all work will be funded, it is recommended that all requests have to be made to the local Councillor before Suffolk Highways personnel are involved. Personnel would only start to work on an assessment after the local Councillor has confirmed support for the request and is prepared to pay all of the costs that are likely to be incurred.
32. By implementing the integrated team philosophy, the Highways Transformation Programme is setting Suffolk Highways on a more business-like footing. In that respect, the previous split between what activities an Operational Highways officer might fulfil and what activities a Kier representative might fulfil will become far less defined so as to optimise the use of all Suffolk Highways personnel's time.
33. In that respect, whilst this report has focused on correcting the charging of time for work on speed limit review cases, the same principle of charging for time must also apply to other forms of work – be this externally commissioned (e.g. by developers or parish/town councils) or internally commissioned (e.g. for medium and major Local Transport Plan projects and other forms of Local Highway Budget schemes).

Sources of further information

No other documents have been relied on to a material extent in preparing this report.

