

Highland Council Letter of 27 February 2014

Response to Public Petitions Committee – Petition PE01503

In response to the question posed by the Public Petitions Committee as to “What are your views on what the petition seeks and the discussions that took place at the meeting on 28th January”, I consider that it would help to set out the background to the group and outline its aims with reference to the petition and the evidence presented by Mr Burns and his comments.

The A9 Safety Group was re-formed by Transport Scotland in July 2012 and comprised multi-agency partners representing diverse groups from road safety engineering, enforcement, education and the professional road user. The main aim of the group is to work together to positively influence driver behaviour in a way that helps to reduce road casualty figures on the route before and during the A9 dualling programme.

The Group progressed a number of actions to help achieve this aim. The initial action involved the development of an ‘evidence base’ to help to understand the current issues on the route affecting road safety. This evidence base was then used to provide a robust basis from which the Group identified and targeted appropriate measures to improve driver behaviour and improve road safety. This included modelling different scenarios to simulate the effect of different actions such as increasing the speed of HGV’s and providing average speed cameras. This work was completed by outside professionals with expertise in traffic micro-simulation modelling using national guidance parameters and was validated against current conditions.

The evidence base showed that while the average speed on the single carriageway sections of the A9 was slightly under the posted limit, there was a lot of speeding recorded on the road with 20% - 50% of cars exceeding the 60mph speed limit and a majority of HGV’s exceeding their speed limit of 40mph. There was a similar scenario for the dual carriageway sections of the route. This was further confirmed by the level of vehicles caught by cameras exceeding the speed limit. The statistics show that the main offenders were from the central belt and the centres of population such as Inverness and Aberdeen which bound the A9, although there were localised areas recorded in England.

From the accident analysis, it was found that 5.4% (58 incidents) (Not the 50% (546) as quoted by Mr Burns) of the incidents on the A9 involved overtaking while “exceeding the speed limit” showed about 2% of the total. However this 2% is probably quite low as it is difficult for the Police Officer attending the accident to determine categorically that the vehicle was exceeding the speed limit at the time of the incident unless it is a fatal collision where a full investigation is carried out. Therefore the “Exceeding the speed limit” causation factor is often not included in the police report where there is uncertainty. The action of overtaking on the other hand is a definite action that can be determined and recorded as a fact in the accident record.

From these various factors about vehicle speeds and accident causations it was determined that the speed of vehicles played a significant role in the severity of the recorded accidents whether or not it was the primary cause. This related to overtaking accidents as much as, or possibly even more than other accident types as to be able to overtake the vehicle travelling

at the mean recorded speed, the overtaking driver would inevitably have to exceed the speed limit.

It was this evidence base that brought about the concept of using average speed cameras to slow down all the traffic on the route and give drivers more time to react to any developing incident. From the experience gained in using average speed cameras on the A77 as a permanent installation and from their use in temporary roadworks situations, it was found that they had a significant calming influence on traffic. The A77 example in particular showed that there was an **immediate** lowering of speeds and accidents which has been sustained throughout the life of the scheme.

I can understand Mr Burn's reticence, as well as all his facebook correspondents, in having average speed cameras along the whole A9 corridor and to a degree I share this concern, as most drivers do not like to be impeded in their travel. However there is irrefutable evidence to show that from a road safety point of view, the average speed cameras will reduce overall speed on the A9 and reduce accidents, which is the main aim of the Group.

Another issue on the A9, which related to the installation of speed cameras, was the existing speed of HGV's and the lobbying from the haulage representatives to increase the speed limit of the HGV's from 40mph to 50mph to better reflect the speeds their vehicles were already doing. Various scenarios were modelled to see what effects changing the HGV speed limit would have on both journey times and the size of the platoons that would be created. A final decision was reached to permit a 50mph HGV speed limit pilot as this would reduce the speed differential between the vehicle classes and have the least effect on journey times as well as minimising platoons. However analysis showed that this pilot had to be in conjunction with the installation of the cameras to benefit from the controls on speed and the accident reduction they provide. As Mr Burns alludes, the majority of HGV's already travel at 50mph but to permit the pilot 50mph limit without putting other safety measures in place to control overall speeds would be contrary to the aims of the Group and would not improve road safety and could possibly be detrimental to it.

The above proposals when implemented will be closely scrutinised and there will be monitoring to ensure that they are effective and meet the criteria set out for their operation. I would expect Transport Scotland will undoubtedly publicise these outcomes to keep the public informed of their effect on the safety of the route.

However the average speed camera and the HGV speed limit increase pilot were by no means the only topics considered by the Group in its endeavour to improve safety on the A9. Dangerous overtaking manoeuvres and their impact on safety have also been high on the Group's agenda. While incidents on the A9 involving overtaking are nowhere near the level outlined in the petition, it is still an aspect that required to be addressed. While banning overtaking could be considered as a means to reduce accidents on the route, it would seem a very radical step to reduce quite a small proportion of the overall accident total. It would also be very difficult to enforce and would likely lead to a measurable increase in driver frustration when for instance a driver cannot overtake a slower moving vehicle ahead even if the road is clear of any approaching vehicles. This in turn could lead to an increase in accidents once drivers exit the controlled areas and try to get past slower moving vehicle ahead. The group deemed that driver education was a more measured approach to the issue. To gain information, road user surveys were carried out to find what caused frustration amongst drivers and scenarios were set to ascertain when a driver felt it was safe to overtake. The information gleaned was taken forward into a "Safe Overtaking" campaign

to be augmented by radio ads, posters etc. to help improve driver awareness of the risks of overtaking and inform them on how to manoeuvre safely on the road.

There are also going to be a series of public information exhibitions to raise driver awareness of the route and inform them of the proposed road safety works being carried out. These exhibitions will also allow the public to bring forward their views and ideas on the route.

The ongoing maintenance of the route has also been discussed at the various group meetings and, while it is accepted that this should be done as a matter of course, the focus of it was aimed more to take account of identified road safety issues such as visibility splays, lining and signing etc.

Mr Burns has referred to a 20 point plan in his presentation and has outlined some of his ideas to the committee. These ideas are always welcome and will be given due consideration by the Group. However some of the references made about driver behaviour are not unique to the A9 and are more about the individual driver rather than an issue with the road. For instance the absence of 60mph signs is common to all single carriageway roads in Britain and not just exclusive to the A9. The sign that should be used, if signing is required, is the "National speed limit applies" sign which is a black diagonal bar on a white background. Drivers using our roads should be aware of "the rules of the road" and the speed limits appropriate to their vehicle.

Finally I would comment on the opinion expressed that "50% of drivers would divert to other routes if average speed cameras are put in place". If there was an alternative parallel route available then I would agree but with the alternatives being via the A82 or the A90 and A96 through Aberdeen, either of which will significantly increase journey times, then I consider this unlikely in the long term especially as drivers do not seem to have been deterred from using the A9 at present with its reputation as "The killer A9".

With regard to the question about whether other organisations were invited to be members of the Group; they did discuss inviting the IAM and consideration was given to inviting Mr Burns. As far as I can remember the AA was not specifically discussed although there was general talk about the general membership.

The Group was set up with a specific task to review road safety on the A9 and members of the various organisations with boundaries to the A9 were invited who had specific expertise the various aspects of road safety that would contribute to the aim of making the A9 safer. Mr Burns's aspiration to have members of the public who regularly drive the A9 to sit on the group would be difficult to achieve as no matter who was chosen there would be another group who would bring evidence that they also were not representative. I personally drive on the A9 every week-day as do other members of the group although we attend as road safety representatives.

I hope this assists you with your debate on the petition.

Hugh Logan