

Op Reconsider Report

Op Reconsider was conceived as response to the problems of goods vehicles contravening weight and width restrictions on roads in the Maidstone Rural Area. In particular the problems on B2163 between Leeds and Langley and the bridges across the Medway at Teston and East Farleigh have been highlighted as local priorities through PACT meetings.

The first Op Reconsider was run on 24th and 25th September 2008.

Police Officers and PCSOs from the Maidstone Rural Team conducted checks of vehicles at Leeds Castle entrance, Langley Heath, Teston bridge, East Farleigh bridge, B2015 at Nettlestead and Bottlescrew Hill, Boughton Monchelsea. These officers were joined by officers from the BCU Motorcycle Team who conducted checks at Langley Heath and Teston bridge and generally supported the officers from the neighbourhood team.

In addition, due to low volume of heavy traffic at Nettlestead a speed check was conducted here on the second day.

Media attended on the first day and reports were included on Meridian TV, BBC South East Today, Kent Messenger and Invicta FM. Local councillors and residents were also interviewed by the media.

Checks were run from 0730hrs until 1430hrs and the following results were obtained:

Teston

- 36 non-endorseable fixed penalty tickets (£30) issued in relation to width offences.
- 1 non-endorseable FPN issued for a seatbelt offence
- 1 endorseable FPN for failing to stop for police.
- 1 arrest for drink driving

Leeds/Langley

- 19 non endorseable FPNs for weight offences
- 10 foreign HGVs turned around and given alternative route
- 6 tachograph checks

Nettlestead

- 3 FPNs issued for weight offences
- 5 endorseable FPNs (£60 and 3 points) for speeding
- 1 summons issued for speeding

East Farleigh

- The check on the first day indicated that the problem here is not as severe as at Teston. Only two vehicles were warned and these had only just entered the restricted area and then turned round.

Boughton Monchelsea

- The check on the first day indicated that the problem here is very sporadic and no overweight vehicles were seen during the check.

In addition to the above, six illegal immigrants were arrested at junction eight services by the motorcycle team and a male suspected of facilitating illegal immigrants was stopped and questioned by officers on the second day as a result of information given to us verbally by a member of public at the Leeds stop check.

In relation to weight limits, six drivers were following SatNav systems and two others were following route maps printed from the internet. Most drivers were either unaware of the law in relation to the gross weight of their vehicle or believed they could use the road a short cut. Many drivers believed that as they were empty or under their gross weight that they could use the road. The restriction signs include the words "Except for Access" which drivers believed meant they could use the road as an access route to the A274/A20.

In relation to the width restrictions it is apparent that most drivers are unaware of the restrictions and the width of their vehicles. They were also confused by the "Except for Access" element of the sign and again believed they could use the road to access the Tonbridge Road or Lower Road.

Conclusion

In short, driver ignorance was the cause of the majority of the offences committed. It is clear that the road signs are confusing to motorists who assume "except for access" gives them carte blanche to use the road subject to the restriction. I still maintain that an informational element to these signs such as "no access to the A274" at the Leeds end of the B2163 or "no access to A26/Lower Road" at Teston would indicate with better clarity the extent of the prohibition to drivers. A road improvement form has been sent to Highways twice in the last two years in relation to this request and action in this respect has been refused.

Foreign drivers are committing offences at Leeds/Langley and were responsible for a third of offences detected during this operation. A system of on-the-spot fines would enable the police to deal adequately with these infringements.

What is clear is that drivers are confused, unsure of legislation, do not notice or fail to observe road signs and follow SatNav or routemaps blindly.