6. Road Safety

Objective 3 – Reduce casualties and the dangers associated with travel

Road safety continues to be a core priority both nationally and locally reflecting the very high human and others costs of road accidents, valued at over £200 million per year in Oxfordshire.

Road Safety Policies

Policy RS1 **Oxfordshire County Council will develop a programme of education and engineering measures to reduce the number of road accident casualties, focusing on high risk groups and responsible use of the highway.**

Policy RS2 **Oxfordshire County Council will seek to reduce the casualty rate of motorcyclists by working closely with interested groups to encourage more responsible motorcycling.**

The Nature and Type of Accidents

Car users

6.1 Drivers comprise the largest category of road-user casualties. The long term trend has stabilised to some extent, in part due to a recent decrease in the number of casualties from the highest risk age group (17 to 24 year olds). In recent years there has been very little change in the number of older car drivers involved in accidents, even though there are more (and older) senior-citizen drivers.

6.2 A major concern is that a third of fatal injuries are sustained by car drivers not wearing seat belts - in over half of these incidents, the driver would have probably survived if they were wearing a seatbelt. Of the nearly 500 people have died on Oxfordshire's roads over the past ten years, it is likely that a significant number would still be alive today had they taken the simple step of wearing a seat belt.

6.3 Improvements to car design have helped improve safety by reducing the risk of collision and offering better protection to occupants in the event of an accident;

6.4 Passengers form the second largest casualty group after car drivers. Recent trends in casualty numbers appear to have been generally downwards after a long period of relatively stable numbers. As would be expected, the circumstances of accidents where car passengers are injured are very similar to those for car drivers, i.e.

* the majority of the injuries are sustained on non-built up roads.
* the majority of severe injuries occur on high speed roads.
* around 30 percent of front seat passengers and 65% of back seat passengers who died were not wearing seat belts.
* dangers posed when young drivers (under the age of 25) are accompanied by their peers, which appears to significantly increase accident risks; due to a combination of increased potential for distraction and peer pressure to drive at speed or more aggressively.

Pedestrians

6.5 Long-term trends for both adult and child pedestrian casualties are downwards. However some of the reduction is likely to be due to reduced levels of walking over this period. The highest numbers of pedestrian casualties are sustained in the town centres and other busy shopping streets. Most residential areas have, by comparison, very low densities of pedestrian casualties, as do areas close to schools, with only a minority of child pedestrian injuries being sustained on a journey to or from school. Although the numbers of pedestrians injured on rural roads is a very small proportion of the total, the risk of fatal or serious injury on such roads is very much higher due to the greater speeds.

6.6 Behavioural factors such as failure to look or crossing where visibility is restricted feature in many accidents, particularly involving early teens (12-15 year olds), while alcohol impairment is a significant factor among adults. Older pedestrians are especially vulnerable because of reduced mobility and higher risk of serious injury.

Cyclists

6.7 Long-term trends in overall injuries are downwards, mainly due to the reduction of close to 60 percent in child cyclist injuries since 1999 (whilst the numbers of adult cycle casualties have dropped by only eight percent). This decrease occurred against a background of a marginally increased cycling rate of 0.5 percent over the past four years.

6.8 The great majority of cycle accidents occur in built up areas; Oxford in particular has a tradition of very high cycle use and comparatively high cyclist casualties compared to many other areas. However the risks to individual cyclists appear to be appreciably lower than the national average. This may be due to the extensive provision of cycle facilities, but there is also evidence that in areas with high cycle use, drivers become more accustomed to sharing the road with cyclists.

Motorcycles

6.9 Motorcyclists are a key target for casualty reduction in Oxfordshire. Motorcyclists are disproportionately vulnerable to being injured with riders of large motorcycles in particular having a high average injury severity. Reducing motorcycle casualties has proved challenging as accidents are extremely dispersed. For this reason motorcyclist safety is dealt with separately below.

Road Safety Strategy

Measuring and understanding the road safety problem

6.10 Understanding the road safety problem is the essential first step in developing effective measures to improve safety. The core resource is the reporting of injury accidents compiled by Thames Valley Police (TVP) in accordance with the national accident reporting system overseen by the Department for Transport (DfT). We play a major part in the process by entering and validating the police reports. This includes identifying accident problem sites and routes, trends in accident numbers both in aggregate and for specific road user groups, and exploring behavioural and other factors (including for example links between accident risks and social deprivation). We will continue to process and analyse this data, and will also continue to contribute to the ongoing review of data quality and effectiveness of data analysis.

6.11 It is however recognised that many accidents are, for a variety of reasons, not reported and that the police data only provides a partial picture of serious and slight injury accidents. Some work has been carried out with local NHS hospitals to compare police data with their records on road accident casualties treated, and there is some evidence that the police data has shown a stronger decline in road casualties.

6.12 Road safety problems are however not just measured by reported casualties. Concerns over poor road safety have a major adverse impact on the quality of life and feature highly in the list of community safety concerns in all of the rural District Council areas in the county.

Safer for children

6.13 Children need to learn safe behaviour and skills for a life-time of road use. They progress from using our roads as passengers in cars and buses, to become pedestrians and riders of pedal cycles, and as adolescents they may drive motor vehicles. A wide range of activities and programmes are managed by us to minimise risks during their development. At many stages this work is supported by other departments and teams within the county council, including the Fire and Rescue Service, and also by a range of external partners including the Health Service and Police.

6.14 The safety, health and well-being of children is an important priority but it is important to consider this from a broader perspective. Concern is rightly growing that sedentary lifestyles among children appreciably increase the risk of a wide range of serious diseases. Activities such as walking and cycling are extremely beneficial in developing fitness and although they carry some risk, provided this is well managed, the overall benefits of encouraging these activities considerably outweigh the dangers.

Tackling high risk behaviour and actions

6.15 Most if not all road users have occasional lapses; however a minority exhibit more actively-persistent poor behaviour. The much higher probability of accident involvement seen amongst young adults (and males in particular) reflects not only the dangers due to inexperience but also the poor attitudes and risk taking which are more prevalent in this age group. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this high-risk behaviour is limited to the stereotype of a ‘bad’ driver. A major challenge is to get the message across

that large numbers of accidents and high injury severity, including fatalities, are due to behaviour such as failure to wear a seatbelt, following too close, moderate excess speed and driving when tired or being distracted. Many people may not see these as especially hazardous or blameworthy.

6.16 A large number of activities are carried out to address these problems, including a range of awareness-raising activities:

* 'Theatre in Education', and presentations to young people (mainly in Years 7-13) involving joint working with the Fire and Rescue service, police and the relatives of road-accident victims;
* preparation and circulation of information (including leaflets, posters and displays) on road-safety matters, typically with the assistance of schools, colleges, health centres, libraries and local businesses; and
* joint roadside operations involving county council and police to target behaviour such as speeding, fatigue and non-wearing of seat belts.

Safer road environment

6.17 While recognising that the vast majority of accidents involve a behavioural failure on the part of at least one of the parties involved, maintaining and improving roads has proved a highly effective way of improving safety. The County Council and the Highways Agency (HA) (for the M40 and A34 and A43 trunk roads) have a duty to:

* maintain public highways in a safe condition; and
* investigate road accident problems and introduce remedial measures to address problems, where practical and cost effective.

6.18 Nevertheless, with approximately 4500 km of public highway within Oxfordshire, the cost of carrying out all the maintenance and improvement work that could be justified far exceeds the available budgets, requiring all work to be prioritised on the basis of need and cost effectiveness.

6.19 All three emergency services play a vital role in assisting and treating those involved in accidents, and the timely arrival of emergency vehicles is essential. Responsibility for setting and meeting target attendance times lies with the respective services,

but traffic conditions and traffic management activities can clearly impact on attendance times for all types of emergency call outs.

6.20 We will liaise closely with the emergency services in respect of traffic management measures that are likely to impact on attendance times for emergency vehicles.

Safer speeds

6.21 Speed reduction measures have proved highly effective in reducing the number and severity of accidents. Even relatively small reductions in average speeds can bring worthwhile savings in accidents. Speeding also features very highly in the list of community safety concerns; it can prove a major worry, even at sites where there is little or no history of injury accidents. A balance also has to be struck between the need for our road network to allow reasonable progress and the provision of adequate safety. Procedures are in place, including public consultation, to ensure that new speed limits or traffic calming measures are reasonable and realistic.

6.22 A number of measures, for example, speed indication devices, vehicle activated signs and posters are used to help address these concerns. We will continue to support speed reduction measures to address community concerns with the assistance of the district councils, local councils and neighbourhood policing teams.

6.23 Oxfordshire County Council has recently decided to withdraw support for fixed camera speed enforcement in the county, principally for financial reasons. The effects of this on speed related accidents will be monitored. Where local councils or communities are willing to assume responsibility for cameras in their local area then we will be willing to discuss transfer of camera sites to them.

Motorcycle Safety

6.24 After a major and sustained fall in casualty numbers from the early 1980s through to the mid 1990s, largely attributable to a corresponding fall in use, motorcycle accident numbers increased slightly in the early 2000s, reflecting an increase in use, although recent casualty trends appear to be downward. Users of all sizes of powered two wheel vehicles are disproportionately vulnerable to accidents and have a high average severity of injury, while users of larger machines have an especially high risk of severe

injury. Motorcyclists account for 20% of road deaths nationally despite motorcycles comprising only one per cent of traffic.

6.25 While the 16-24 age group has the highest risk of accident involvement, older riders suffer an appreciably higher proportion of high severity injuries. Nationally there is a problem with riders being injured by drivers not seeing them, in particular when turning at junctions; in Oxfordshire 70 percent of motorcycle casualties occur at junctions.

6.26 Tackling motorcyclist casualties by standard road safety interventions is challenging. The accidents are typically dispersed on the network (this is especially true for high severity incidents) and so are less readily addressed by safety engineering measures which focus on accident cluster sites. Road safety education, training and publicity measures for motorcyclists need to take account of the motivations of riders, which in many cases will include and enjoyment of speed and some level of risk.

6.27 Motorcycles are more vulnerable to surface defects such as potholes and surface irregularities, and although accounting for only a small proportion of the reported accidents, improved maintenance will particularly benefit motorcyclists.

6.28 The County Council has developed a county motorcycle strategy, derived after extensive consultation with riders and partner agencies, to help implement the policies by focusing resources. It addresses the issues of information and communication, safety awareness and education, road conditions and facilities, and policy and planning.

6.29 Although motorcycle accident patterns are diverse, riders of larger machines do congregate in groups more than other road users. This provides opportunity to interact in order to promote safety and receive feedback although it is recognised that proportionally fewer riders of commuter machines join such forums. It is recognised that we need not only to investigate matters important to motorcyclists such as their use of bus lanes but also to ensure we communicate our discussions back to them.

6.30 Safety awareness and education will be enhanced by a running a pilot for free assessment rides for existing motorcyclists, establishing Operation Pit Stop which is a safety event hosted by ourselves and the Police to establish trust and rapport with years 12 and 13 students who use motorcycles and mopeds. We will attend bike meetings to promote safety messages and training opportunities.