

Birling Gap, East Dean and Beachy Head Traffic Issues

Minutes of a meeting held on 19th May 2025

Present:

Stephen James (National Trust), Ian Brown & Gerry Howitt (Beachy Head Chaplaincy), Cllrs Paul Seeley and Phillip Hill and Parish Clerk Phil Burgess (East Dean and Friston Parish Council).

Background

Following on from the meeting in May, all 3 organisations had produced risk and opportunity assessments.

Matters discussed

Ian Brown felt the risk assessment (RA) format circulated prior to the meeting helps to identify methods to reduce risk. He believes that Eastbourne Borough Council (EBC) should carry out a RA on the eastern part of the “loop” that fall under their responsibility, and they would then have to accept that deaths on the road will occur. The RA format shows known concerns and risks but does not suggest solutions.

Paul Seeley said that the RA would form a good discussion document to be taken to EBC. A joint funding approach is necessary as many authorities concerned would use absence of funding as a reason for not proceeding with any change. The funding can be arranged from various sources.

Gerry Howitt advised that the Police would love the road to be closed and according to a recent geological survey the road has a limited lifespan in any case. She feels that Darrell Gale (ESCC Director of Public Health) and Joe from the Black Robin Farm would also be in favour.

Steve James felt the NT building at Birling gap would need to move because of cliff conditions within 5 years. Their greatest visitor numbers now come from walkers rather than international tours.

Phillip Hill stated the need to be focussed at this level before the approach was made to other authorities.

Gerry Howitt Although there are 3 ANPR cameras around the area they are not surveillance-monitored.

Suicides Police had used the information from ANPR to identify regular taxi drivers visiting the area with one extreme example being a driver from Birmingham who had dropped 25 people at the site. Direct police contact with these drivers had reduced the incidence significantly.

There had been 12 suicides in the last year and BHC staff were present at 3.

BHC and Public health were pursuing a policy of “target hardening” (making suicide more difficult) in the area. There is a slight concern that this may shift suicides to Seven Sisters (which had previously been restricted to the more determined as access is very difficult).

Social media suicide forums were monitored by public health.

Speeding and Anti-social driving.

Operation Crackdown (speed recording which BHC take part in) and Operation Downs Way (combating anti-social driving) had also helped alleviate the traffic issues. Lottbridge Drove suffers similar problems.

Special Days of Action by the Police are an effective third type of deterrent. These include drone monitoring of the area, unmarked cars outside “the loop” to apprehend drivers and officers in flak-jackets on duty. The days have an appreciable effect and have seen a large increase in ticketing of offenders.

Motor bike “challenges” are circulated on social media with the current record speed of 142 mph advertised in this way.

Speed reductions on the roads in the area would require lighting to be installed and would therefore be a non-starter with SDNP.

Police action has a graduated fine system rising from £100 for first offence £1000 for the second and the car impounded on the third.

Three deaths had occurred last year on the roads. ESCC accident reporting tends to play down the issue. A speed analysis for the area was done during the day in November with poor road conditions and was not representative of the usual situation. However, this was used to rule out changes.

A yellow-line solution had been proposed by ESCC for parking on verges but they didn’t feel it merited the expense as WDC do not enforce parking issues.

Steve James favoured making tactical improvements whilst working on the long-term solution with EBC, ESCC and WDC.

Coach Parking The coach situation reached tipping point pre-covid and they already had problems with verge parking prior to the ban, even though parking charges were only £10 for 2 hrs and £20 all day. Coaches were causing significant danger to pedestrians within the car park prior to the ban coming in. All operators were informed in advance of the ban. The ban has made no difference to visitor numbers at Birling Gap.

Coaches from the continent with left hand drive also have the door in the middle of the road and because of verge parking, tourists have to walk along the road.

Phillip Hill We need to merge our RAs into the BHC formatted document to reflect points of view from all 3 organisations.

Ian Brown said we need to focus on road safety ready for the meeting with the other authorities. It is not our role to present solutions. That should be left to ESCC WDC and EBC. He will prepare a RA restricted to road safety.

Steve James warned that a temporary road closure was not cost neutral. It would still require a turning head.

Paul Seeley asked if the NT land was suitable for a potential park and ride. Steve responded that the level was a metre above the road and quite uneven, so the site is not ideal.

Conclusions

- Ian will refine and amalgamate the Risk Assessments with a focus on road safety
- Gerry Howitt will contact Cllr Neville of EBS and Darrell Gale (ESCC Public Health)
- Paul Seeley will contact Karl Taylor of ESCC and the Clerk will approach Cllr Greaves of WDC

After the initial contact as above, a further meeting involving the upper tier local authorities will be arranged for September by the Clerk.