

Farming around Stoke St Gregory and North Curry

Tractor movements – why and what can be done?

Introduction

This draft report is intended to promote discussion in the two parishes about an issue about which many residents are concerned. The days of an old tractor trundling down the road loaded with hay bales, cows out in the fields for most of the year and straw based manure being occasionally spread on nearby fields is largely over.

Whatever your views on intensive farming, it is today dominated by contractors' convoys of large powerful tractors hauling tanks of slurry or high sided trailers full of silage or maize travelling miles to distant fields and sometimes continuing for days at a time. In considering the impact of farming locally it is important to recognise its value to the local economy in terms of providing employment and producing food.

Background

Farming has changed radically and is continuing to change around our villages, as it is across the country. The small number of larger farms now operating, are gradually expanding their acreage by buying or renting the small farms nearby. Cattle are increasingly housed in large sheds for most or all of the year and the fields grow grass or maize which has to be harvested at key times over the summer, hopefully when windows of suitable weather appear. Silage and maize is cut by large specialist machinery and transported to the farm by fleets of tractors by contractors who charge by the hour or load. Piles of silage and maize built next to the indoor cattle units are gradually consumed over the year creating large volumes of slurry around the farmyard which is stored temporarily in pits or tanks. This needs to be transported back to the fields in large slurry tankers for disposal and to return organic material and nutrients to the soil.

The weather is crucial to all of the timing of all the activities and particularly to harvesting and slurry spreading. The Environment Agency have strict guidance on when and how much manure can be spread, the downside of this is that farmers often have to transport the farm waste further away.

The price of milk is so cheap (often less than a plastic bottle of flavoured water) that dairy farmers are hard pressed to make a reasonable profit and feel forced to increase production to try to create a decent income. If we paid more for our milk and supermarkets stopped using milk as a 'lost leader' to attract customers then there would be less pressure on farmers to intensify their production.

Farm ownership pattern and local geography

A simple analysis of which farms have expanded and which have sold up or rented out their land around the area shows that three of the largest dairy farms are located in Stoke while a significant area of the land they farm is on the West side of North Curry. The result is that large numbers of tractor movements take

place through Meare Green and through the centre of North Curry to many fields beyond. Counts taken in connection with the application to build 20 house in Knapp Lane showed over 100 tractor movements per day there at key harvesting /slurry spreading periods. This did not take into account tractor movements through North Curry to Moor Lane, to Hay Moor or over to the Walford Cross area which are considerable. Huntham and Broad lanes can be a particular problem as they are susceptible to flooding and so to mud accumulation if conditions are not dry. In 2017 operations also extended to Thornfalcon and beyond.

The problems as perceived by some local residents

The issues which this scenario creates are various, depending on which part of the road network are considered, where people live and whether more than one contractor is working at a particular time. The main problems are however:-

- 1) Speed of tractors and the danger this presents. The size of the vehicles means that they can appear to be travelling faster than they actually are. Some modern tractors do have speed restrictors fitted.
- 2) Drivers being inconsiderate and using mobile phones while driving. This is illegal and should not happen.
- 3) Spillage of material on the road causing slippery roads in wet weather
- 4) Road verges being churned up and roads becoming 'wider' by using the verge as well as the road. This results in a range of problems. Ditches can become filled, affecting road drainage, 'cliff edges' can be created at the edge of the road which are dangerous to smaller vehicles and verge mud can be spread on the road. These problems are exacerbated in wet weather conditions.
- 5) Impact of tractors on pedestrians, other vehicles, cyclists and horse riders. While this has improved in the past year or so, the position is variable and more needs to be done to reduce the threat which other road users feel, whether real or perceived.
- 6) The smell from spreading of slurry on fields nearby houses. Some residents find this extremely upsetting, especially in hot weather when they would like to be in their gardens which some find intolerable.
- 7) At key points such as the centre of North Curry parked vehicles make the situation worse as large vehicles can't get through and sometimes have to reverse causing danger to road users and traffic holdups. Some feel that the Parish Councils should consider parking restrictions at key points.
- 8) Tractor movements through the night at key harvest times can keep some people whose houses are near the road awake at night.
- 9) The scale of heavy traffic movement through the villages can cause damage to roads and houses which are very close to the road. Potholes

can be enlarged and cracks appear in some house walls. While this is difficult to establish definitely it is of great concern to some residents.

Impact on residents

While it has to be accepted that farming today has changed and the impacts above will not go away, there must be ways in which the impacts can be reduced by careful thought and management of the various activities, if agreement can be reached between the various parties involved.

People walking through Meare Green or along Stoke Road feel very vulnerable to tractor traffic. Skid marks on the road are evidence of the potential for accidents, although long skid marks can be caused by empty trailer wheels locking up.

Action taken in the past

Both Stoke and North Curry Parish Councils have discussed these issues over the past few years. The Police have been consulted on a number of times and some initiatives have been taken, including a visit by the Police's National farm traffic advisor to several of the key farmers involved.

The farm owners have taken several initiatives themselves to try to ensure that their contractors and employees comply with certain guidelines, including involvement of the NFU and attempts to provide better understanding between village residents and themselves. Some tractor drivers attended a Parish Council meeting to try to promote a better understanding of the problem. North Curry Parish Council has offered farmers space in the local newsletter to put relevant information in about current farming practice which might help local residents.

These initiatives have met with mixed success so far. Some contractors have got the message and drive more carefully through residential areas. There is however still a lot of scope for further improvement in various aspects of the problems. In some cases the speed of vehicles through the village has reduced but once out of the village (eg along Moor Lane) speeds tend to increase and other road user can feel intimidated by the size of vehicles on relatively narrow roads. Passing speed is the critical issue in these situations.

In an effort to reduce spillage most slurry is now transported in closed tanks, with open trailers only used for more solid material.

On some farms dirty water is spread from the main cattle buildings umbilically (through long pipes) to nearby fields and so reduce the number of tractor movements. Others are planning to do this.

Open farm open days are held on one farm to help people understand how modern farms are run and it would be helpful if more people took advantage of these.

Potential solutions:- The business model which these farms have adopted would be difficult to change in view of the size of the investments made by their owners. There needs to be a better understanding by the farmers and

contractors of what residents see as the main problems and a better understanding by residents of the farmers' perspective. Some possible solutions are:-

Traffic issues - Some arrangements are in place for tractors to use a circular route for full and empty loads and the potential for this to be extended could be explored. If the issues are identified in advance then contractors would need to allow for any increased costs involved, where these are justified by the local circumstances.

There should perhaps be a standard written 'Code of conduct' for contractors and employees created which farm owners could help produce and sign up to. This could include suggested term of employment for contractors which could include, for example, the speed of tractors, guidance on interaction with other road users, use of mobile phones etc. There could be commitments, for example, to limit the hours of slurry spreading and have an agreed method to identify contractor's vehicles.

As the contractors used by farm owners will change regularly (as will their drivers) a carefully worded written note to individual drivers could be produced which residents could hand out when they feel that an agreed code of conduct was not being adhered to and tractors are stationary. This would help to avoid excessive and unhelpful verbal disputes between residents and drivers. Equally, a written note for badly parked cars could be provided for the tractor drivers to politely attach to offending vehicles.

Smell - This is a problem in particular areas, rather than throughout the whole farmed area. A more carefully thought through system of slurry spreading could be evolved. Some possible solutions:- Avoid spreading the worst smelling slurry on fields near houses. Where there is an option perhaps use straw based solid manure in the more sensitive areas rather than spraying slurry which creates more smells. Some of the slurry tankers used by contractors already have injection pipes on the outside of their tanks. These could be used in more sensitive areas (at a small increased cost) to inject the liquid slurry into the ground. The reduction in smell from this method is however variable and may not make a huge difference. Avoiding spreading smelly slurry at times of very hot conditions or over holiday weekends are other issues which could be addressed.

Timing - It has to be recognised that more movements in the quieter hours of traffic does mean less congestion in busy periods. When tractor movements have to carry on through the night, speeds past houses near the road should be reduced especially when trailers are empty. Activities such as silage cutting and maize harvesting only happen in the right season and the right weather conditions and when these occur all farms will want to make maximum use of them. This accounts for the, sometimes frantic, activity at the key times.

However avoiding use of roads near schools at times when they are opening or closing would be a sensible move for contractors as traffic is worse and delays can occur. Perhaps tractor driver breaks could be timed to make use of those periods. Timing operations to avoid road works and traffic lights would also be helpful.

Local knowledge

While some of these suggestions may appear complicated, farm owners and contractors often have a detailed knowledge of the areas in which they operate, how busy the roads are, how many local residents there are and some idea of where there are concerns about smell and traffic. Making sensible adjustments about which areas are dealt with at what times should be possible without causing chaos to either the farmers operations or the contractors' schedules. The proposed consultation should help everyone understand why the present situation has developed and what the key concerns are in the two parishes.

Long term planning

This sort of analysis could help farm owners to plan the way they expand or change their operation in the medium or longer term. It could, for example, influence which farms they rent in future, what sort of crops they grow where and even where they locate new buildings or which existing ones they use.

Proposed actions suggested by farmers at a meeting with Parish Councillors in December 2017 which could be agreed.

All recognised the need for better communications and understanding between local residents, farmers and tractor drivers. It was agreed that if residents were informed of when to expect periods of tractor movements that this could help. To achieve this 2 of the 3 key farmers will aim to provide forecasts of tractor movements annually for a calendar to be available on the Stoke St Gregory website which can be updated if and when changes occur, if weather conditions change drastically for example. North Curry may be able to have this on their website once it is updated.

It was agreed that slurry spreading could be limited to 7.30 am to 9pm whenever possible. It would be much more difficult to restrict hours of harvesting of silage and maize as these are more time critical, although limited to key periods during the year.

It was agreed that slurry spreading on fields near housing areas could be avoided at weekends whenever possible to reduce the impact on residents. Slurry injection techniques could be considered but the cost of this by contractors is higher and the smell reduction may not be very significant. Efforts are being made to do more separation of solids, from slurry and reduce the bulk of material to be spread. 2 farms are intending to also separate sand from the slurry, dry it and re-use it in due course. This would reduce sand delivery trucks and the bulk of material to be spread as slurry.

All trailers belonging to particular farm owners or contractors should carry the same registration plates so that they can be identified. Contractors will be encouraged to carry the name of their business on their trailers, as some already do.

A code of conduct for tractor drivers will be written and circulated to make it clearer exactly what they should and should not do. This would include a 20mph limit for tractors within the built up area of North Curry village.

Damage to verges tends to occur as the loads are too wide for the road when they meet traffic. Farmers expressed a willingness to repair damage but this creates consent issues with the Highway Authority which could make it difficult.

Farmers were prepared to give an email address to PC clerks who could be used for complaints about any specific incidents with all details provided so that they could be followed up.

Existing environmental protection measures – this document has intentionally not addressed the legal requirements or guidelines associated with spreading slurry near water courses or measures associated with growing maize to reduce run off and soil erosion but it is expected that local farmers are already aware of such measures and are hopefully complying with them.

Is a bio-digester a possible solution? – It has been suggested that a bio-digester, perhaps jointly financed by three or four of the largest farmers would reduce dramatically the number of long tractor journeys required to deal with farm waste. We in the UK are a long way behind the German model of Community ownership of heating and electrical generation on a medium scale it seems unlikely that the required support from Government agencies would be available.

Next steps – the above is an initial analysis of the position intended for public discussion and adjustment to achieve realistic solutions to the range of issues identified. It is hoped that the farm owners most concerned will continue to take part in this discussion and help to evolve a series of measures which are workable and will improve the position in cooperation with local representatives.

Perhaps "Drive a Tractor" sessions, where a light hearted invitation to villagers could be extended to gain the Tractor driver's view of the world as they see it could be offered. Such initiatives would help promote mutual tolerance and understanding.

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