

Subject: Request for Review of Road Classification, Data and Navigation Routing Across the New Forest National Park

Dear XXXX,

Minstead Parish Council is writing jointly with the undersigned to request Hampshire County Council's assistance in addressing the growing and increasingly harmful consequences of satellite navigation routing across the New Forest.

Earlier this year, Minstead's Parishioners made a representation to the Parish Council, pleading that it look into reducing the increasing volume of traffic that is being diverted by sat-navs off the A31 and through the village's single track roads: this is having a significant and negative impact on residents' lives and damaging the environment: this is not confined to Minstead and is a Forest-wide problem.

As you are aware, the New Forest is one of the United Kingdom's most important protected landscapes. It is a National Park, an internationally recognised wildlife habitat, a living commoning landscape with free-roaming livestock, and a nationally significant tourism destination. Its network of lanes and minor roads evolved to serve local communities, agriculture, forestry and access to dispersed rural properties. They were never designed to carry substantial volumes of through traffic.

Increasingly, however, navigation systems are directing motorists away from strategic routes and onto narrow rural lanes in pursuit of negligible journey-time savings, often as little as one or two minutes. What may appear insignificant at an individual level is creating a significant cumulative impact across the Forest, as huge amounts of traffic are being diverted onto small rural roads. This is not the drivers' fault: they do not want to be diverted onto unsuitable roads any more than communities want them there.

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This issue was brought into sharp focus during the recent closure of the A31 following the Forest fire. Despite signed diversion routes being in place, large numbers of drivers continued to follow sat nav instructions onto local roads. The result was severe congestion, dangerous conditions for people and livestock, and extensive damage to miles of verges, many of which form part of protected Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

For many communities, however, the traffic problems caused by the A31 closure was not an exceptional event. For our community in Minstead for example, it is a regular occurrence. Whenever congestion develops on the A31, large volumes of motorway traffic with no destination in our community is diverted onto our small roads: the situation is duplicated in parishes close to the A31, and indeed across the whole New Forest.

The consequences of diverted traffic are increasingly evident:

- Large volumes of traffic on single-track roads with limited visibility and passing opportunities.
- Congestion and gridlock on roads never intended for high traffic volumes.
- Diverted drivers are negatively impacted by a journey that is more difficult and rarely any quicker.
- Aggressive driver behaviour arising from frustration and delay.
- Damage to verges, highway edges in the form of large pot holes, and environmentally sensitive habitats.
- Increased risks to pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders and wildlife.
- Increased danger to the New Forest's free-roaming ponies, cattle, donkeys and pigs.
- Difficulties for residents, agricultural traffic and emergency vehicles accessing their communities.
- Inappropriate routing of large vehicles, including articulated lorries, onto unsuitable roads.

Beyond these direct impacts there is a less tangible one: the diversion of traffic undermines the very qualities that make the New Forest special. The Forest's appeal to visitors is founded on tranquillity, wildlife, traditional villages and the unique commoning system.

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Rising levels of rat-running traffic create noise, pollution, congestion and safety concerns that diminish the visitor experience and erode the character of the area.

These concerns are increasingly recognised nationally. Research and industry discussions have highlighted the impact of navigation apps in funnelling traffic onto roads never designed to accommodate it. All the navigation providers have themselves acknowledged the problem and are starting to explore changes to routing algorithms to reduce inappropriate use of residential streets and rural communities. However, nothing impactful has yet been done, and we would like them to be pushed further.

We recognise that physical highway interventions, traffic regulation orders and significant engineering works can be costly and resource intensive. For that reason, we believe a more proportionate and cost-effective first step would be for HCC to review how roads within the New Forest are recorded, classified and represented within highway and mapping data used by navigation providers.

We are also aware that major navigation providers already have mechanisms that allow highway authorities to influence routing decisions where there are demonstrable safety concerns. For example, Waze operates a formal partnership programme, *Waze for Cities*, through which local authorities can share road network data and request routing adjustment for traffic management and public safety purposes.

We therefore ask Hampshire County Council to investigate whether its existing relationships, data sharing arrangements and digital highway management processes can be used to ensure that roads unsuitable for significant volumes of through traffic are appropriately represented within the datasets used by major navigation providers. In particular, we request that HCC explore whether specific New Forest lanes can be flagged within relevant digital road network databases as **“unsuitable for through traffic”**, **“unsuitable for diversion routes”** or equivalent classifications, so that routing algorithms more accurately reflect the realities of the New Forest’s roads.

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We would welcome the opportunity to meet with Hampshire County Council officers to discuss the scope of such a review and to explore how local evidence can support this work. Minstead Parish Council has already collated a substantial body of evidence regarding traffic problems, safety concerns, verge damage and community impacts, and we are encouraging parishes that haven't yet started this process to do the same: we have photos, videos, map screenshots, and a live spreadsheet recording when traffic is diverted off the A31 and through the village. In view of the fact that Minstead has a very specific problem with some very specific roads, it would, I believe, be beneficial to use the village as an initial case study or feasibility study; the parish council and the roads sub-committee would be very willing to help in any way that we can.

The issue extends beyond routine traffic management. It concerns the protection of a nationally important landscape, the safety of residents and visitors, the welfare of the New Forest's free roaming livestock, the resilience of emergency access routes, and the preservation an internationally important natural and cultural heritage. We therefore ask Hampshire County Council not only to review the suitability of classifications of rural roads within the New Forest, but also to work proactively with digital mapping and navigation providers to ensure that unsuitable roads are no longer routinely promoted as alternatives to the strategic highway network. Addressing the problem at source, through the data that powers modern sat nav systems, offers the most cost effective and potentially the most impactful solution available. We look forward to working constructively with you on potential solutions, and are willing to help and support in any way that we can.

Yours faithfully,

For and on behalf of the undersigned Parish Councils and supporting organisations

- **Minstead Parish Council**