



Cutting Speed in the Countryside

Getting speed under control on rural roads is a major challenge

Speed management measures that work well in urban areas often don't work in a rural setting. Fewer vehicles spread over a wide area make traditional enforcement by traffic police difficult. On many roads, the majority of vehicles may be driven within the legal limit — it's just that limits have historically been set too high for the type of road. Where efforts are made to reduce speeds, the obvious methods rely on signs, lighting, road marking and humps — all of which can be unwelcome and look out of place. However, with some innovative thinking and community action, the challenge of rural speed management can be met. This briefing is a guide to how it can be done.

WHY SLOW DOWN?

In 2001 53% of deaths and 35% of serious injuries occurred on non-motorway non-built-up roads.¹ Taking traffic mileage and volume into account, rural roads have disproportionate casualties.² Speed is the single most important factor in road crashes. Reducing average speeds reduces the frequency of crashes and the severity of casualties. On rural single carriageway roads, a 1mph reduction in average speeds can reduce crashes by 4% to 9%. A 2mph reduction in average speeds across the entire road network would save nearly 300 lives a year.³

Rural communities can be severely affected by speed. Fast moving traffic makes roads difficult and dangerous to cross. People won't risk walking, cycling or riding. Children can't play outdoors and have to be driven to school. The noise of high speed traffic destroys tranquillity and can affect wildlife. Traffic on rural roads is predicted to grow by 50% by 2031. Without action, these impacts will get worse.

There are three main issues for managing speed — determining the right speed limits, letting drivers know what they are, and getting compliance. All of these need to respect the rural setting.

THE RIGHT SPEED LIMITS

The policy context for setting speed limits is changing. It is accepted that the national 60mph limit for cars is far too high for most country roads. The average speed of cars on rural single carriageway roads is 45mph. For goods vehicles it is also nearly 45mph, 5mph over their legal limit.⁴ Speed limits vary from one highway authority to the next as new local limits are substituted for the derestricted sign. Drivers say they are confused about rural speed limits.

A national framework for determining appropriate speeds

As a remedy, the government has promised a national framework for determining appropriate speeds.⁵ A model framework already exists.⁶ Speed limits are evaluated for their impacts on crashes, emissions, noise, journey times and a range of other factors. The framework can be adapted to reflect local concerns and can include qualitative assessments of impacts such as intimidation and quality of life. The framework provides a consistent and transparent basis for speed limits which reflect the wider impacts of speed on society, the economy and the environment.

Changing guidance

The government has also promised to issue revised guidance to local authorities on setting speed limits on local roads. The new guidance is to 'reflect, as far as possible, the needs of all road users on different classes of roads' and 'will help authorities to take sensible measures, including lower speed limits where necessary, to achieve safer vehicle speeds.'⁷

percentile' speed. This is the speed at or below which 85% of cars are travelling. The circular 'commends' the use of the 85th percentile. It does not impose it.

A 30mph limit should be the norm for villages

In 1994, Suffolk County Council decided not to follow Circular 1/93. They listened to local concerns about the impacts of speeding traffic and existing speed limits in villages. To achieve consistency and widespread awareness, they introduced a 30mph limit for all villages that wanted one. Suffolk's example has been followed by other local authorities and has helped to bring about a policy change. The government now expects that 30mph limits should be 'the norm' for villages.

How to define a village can be a problem. In Somerset, a village suitable for a 30mph speed limit is defined as 'a length of road with a minimum of 10 properties per 1300m length'. Precise boundaries are determined in consultation with the local community. Stretches of road less than 800m can also have a 30mph if they link other 30mph limits. Buffer limits of 40mph are used where there is sporadic development. Areas of less than 10 properties can be considered 'under exceptional circumstances' such as a serious crash history.⁸

20mph limits are encouraged

Local authorities are also being encouraged to introduce 20mph limits for residential areas and outside schools. 20mph is the speed at which 95% of pedestrians will survive a collision with a car. 20mph limits, when enforced with traffic calming, can reduce all casualties by 60% and child casualties by nearly 70%.⁹ 20mph limits are seen as key to meeting the national child casualty reduction target of 50% by 2010.

Quiet Lanes and Home Zones

Under the Transport Act 2000, local authorities can now designate roads as 'Quiet Lanes' and 'Home Zones' with speeds as low as 10mph.

Quiet Lanes are networks of minor rural roads which are appropriate for shared use by cyclists, walkers, horse riders and cars. To be designated a Quiet Lane, the road should already have low flows of traffic and low speeds. A clear procedure set out by the Countryside Agency involves local communities in developing networks and supporting the designation through appropriate use.¹⁰ A signing strategy re-routes traffic and indicates that a road is part of a Quiet Lane network.

Demonstration projects in Norfolk and Kent have strong local support. Up to half of drivers say they are more careful

along the Quiet Lanes. 85% drove at less than 40mph even though the speed limit remained unchanged at 60mph.

In a Home Zone the street environment is extensively redesigned to slow traffic to a walking pace and allow friendly and safe community interaction. Typically the footway and carriageway are on the same level to create a larger, shared space. Some rural Home Zones are being developed. One of the pilots is in the heart of the village of Magor in South Wales.

Local transport plans and speed management strategies

The context for speed limit reduction, traffic calming and speed management policies is the Local Transport Plan (LTP). Local Transport Plans are drawn up in consultation with communities and set out proposals for schemes and budgets over the lifetime of the plan. They also contain targets and performance indicators for monitoring progress.

Although still awaiting the speed assessment framework and new guidance, many local authorities are already developing speed management strategies and reviewing existing limits.

LETTING DRIVERS KNOW THE SPEED LIMIT

CORNWALL'S SPEED HIERARCHY

shopping streets	20
residential streets off major routes	20
near schools at school times	20
villages	30
	sometimes 20 or 40
arterial routes in towns	30
	sometimes 40
minor country roads	30 or 40
non residential primary roads	60 or 70

Road hierarchies to indicate the speed limit

Some authorities have created a road hierarchy for setting limits and managing speed. The hierarchy is a way to achieve consistency and reduce driver confusion about limits. A hierarchy can also contribute to more appropriate use of the rural highway network.

Signed only limits

Speed limits are necessary to let drivers know what is expected of them as well as providing a guide to the maximum safe speed. While a new, signed only, limit on its own is unlikely to get strict compliance, experience from around the country shows that speeds do come down. The highest speeds come down the most. Crashes are reduced by more than would be expected by small reductions in average speed.

30mph limits where there are no streetlights require repeater signs at recommended intervals of 200m. 20mph sign only limits also require repeater signs. Legislation would be needed to create a new default limit without repeater signs.

GETTING COMPLIANCE

Devon introduced a 20mph limit in Hemyock, a village of 1800 people. Before the limit was introduced, about 60% of vehicles had travelled at speeds over 30mph with 30% travelling between 40mph and 50mph. In the first year after introduction of the 20mph limit, speeds over 40mph were virtually eliminated. The majority of vehicles were travelling at speeds below 30mph.¹¹

Suffolk's 30mph initiative got the greatest speed and crash reductions where the speed limit reduction was the greatest, from 60mph down to 30mph. Reduced speeds within the new speed limit areas resulted in 20% fewer crashes compared to roads on which there had been no change of limit.¹²

Somerset is introducing 500 new speed limits — including both 20mph limits outside schools and 30mph for all villages that want one — over 5 years. The schemes are based on signs and road markings only. Consistent and very conspicuous designs are used to ensure 'maximum driver recognition'. An agreement on enforcement with the local Safety Camera Partnership means that initially no physical measures will be used in the villages. (See 'Enforcement' below). But it also requires conspicuous signing that enforcement will be carried out. Entries to villages are marked with 30mph and speed camera signs on yellow backing boards, with roundels and yellow transverse bar road markings. Repeater signs in the villages also carry the combined 30mph and camera logo. The speed limit policy is backed up by a high profile publicity campaign including a 'Kill Your Speed' pledge.¹³

Vehicle Activated Signs

The speed limit can now be displayed on a Vehicle Activated Sign (VAS) which lights up only when a driver is exceeding the speed limit. Trials of VAS speed limit signs have reduced speeds by between 1mph and 14mph with higher reductions accompanying a reduction in speed limit. Where there was no change in speed limit the average reduction in speed was 4mph.¹⁴



In Norfolk where VASs were trialed as speed limit, hazard warning and safety camera repeater signs, crashes were reduced by a third. Drivers like them and their effectiveness has not decreased over time. Vehicle Activated Signs are now approved for use and government guidance is expected soon.

TRAFFIC CALMING

Until drivers have greater respect for speed limits, traffic calming may be necessary. It is required by regulations for the designation of 20 mph zones, where no point in the zone can be further than 50 metres from a traffic calming feature.¹⁵ Traffic calming may be unavoidable where 30mph limits are consistently flouted and police enforcement is rare.

The standard treatment

The problem for rural areas is a general rule that the greater the visual and physical intrusion, the greater the speed reduction. Typical measures fall into three stages of increasingly severe intervention:

A. Gateway signing accompanied by significant markings, coloured road surface and/or minor narrowing, and occasionally one-way working through narrowings.

B. Road markings, coloured surfaces and traffic islands in the village, with some with gateway features.

C. Significant physical measures within village, involving horizontal and/or vertical deflections, usually in conjunction with gateways.¹⁶

Village traffic calming schemes with gateways alone reduced speeds by up to 2mph and casualties by 10%. Schemes which used physical measures and high impact marking and signs slowed drivers by an average 8mph and reduced casualties by nearly 50%.

Deflections (humps and chicanes) must be accompanied by warning signs and illuminated. Humps, pinchpoints, chicanes and road narrowings should take cyclists into account so they are not forced into conflict with cars.

Traditional measures can be used sympathetically. A 20mph zone was introduced in Occold, Suffolk, with a minimum amount of low-key intervention: one-way working at scheme entry points, coloured surfaces, road narrowings and junction realignments. This slows the traffic on average by 5mph to speeds just above 20mph. The build-outs used to narrow the road have cycle bypasses.

Natural traffic calming

Standard traffic calming measures 'urbanise' the countryside. Some safety measures such as warning signs, white lines and concrete kerbs can encourage higher speeds by giving visual cues to drivers. Visibility splays which open up junctions damage countryside character and can lead to higher approach speeds, making conditions more dangerous for vulnerable road users. Narrower junctions can reduce speeds and discourage rat-running.

Natural traffic calming protects and enhances rural features that slow traffic. Trees and hedges, walls and buildings with frontages close to the road edge can help to keep speeds down. Verge management can also have an impact. Bends, narrow roads and rough surfaces are rural variants of urban traffic calming measures. The presence of people and activity along the roadside have been found to be the most powerful natural deterrents to high speeds.¹⁷

Norfolk has pioneered the use of sympathetic rural traffic calming. Their approach has been to:

- remove excess signing
- reduce the size of signs where appropriate
- use local stone as a surface dressing for village roads
- mark village entry points with bespoke gateways and signs
- place speed limit signs on sturdy wooden posts
- remove roadmarkings, including centre lines
- replace bend chevrons with reflector posts
- make the road appear narrower, for example by introducing a different coloured surface to mark out a footway

These treatments have been used in villages with a maximum 3500 vehicles passing through each day with average speeds already near proposed new 20 or 30mph limits. Speed reductions were slight but even minor speed reductions bring crash and casualty reduction benefits.

Highway maintenance

Sensitive road maintenance has a lot to offer. Kent has used logs, instead of kerbs or tarmac patching, to protect verges on rural lanes. Many of the elements of Norfolk's approach can be accommodated in maintenance cycles.

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

The issue of speed can divide communities. It can be local drivers who are caught when a police blitz on speeding takes place. Inadequate consultation can lead to inadequate or even inappropriate measures. Local authorities with ambitious speed management strategies also place a strong emphasis on partnerships and community initiatives.

Driving speeds down in Devon

Devon's 'Driving Speeds Down in Devon' campaign provided communities with a template for action. The starting point was showing local consensus on speed through questionnaires and public meetings. By investing time and a nominal amount of parish funds, communities demonstrated their commitment to successful outcomes. In some cases, the grassroots awareness-raising process on its own was enough to resolve problems. In others it led to more acceptable measures to slow traffic.

Oxfordshire SpeedWatch

Oxfordshire also helps communities to help themselves. Their 'SpeedWatch' expanded a pledge campaign —



Before and After - Natural traffic calming in Norfolk At Starston, signs and centre lines were removed and a bespoke gateway sign introduced.

'Make the Commitment' — to include whole communities. The campaign was started to coincide with new 30mph limits for villages. Local councils signing up to the scheme get access to a range of resources. These include temporary 'Watch Your Speed' signs, free standing displays and a mobile 'smiley' VAS which flashes up a driver's speed and then makes an appropriate face. SpeedWatch member councils get higher priority for traffic calming and enforcement.

Avon and Somerset Community Speed Watch

Avon and Somerset Constabulary have taken community engagement an important step further in their Community Speed Watch. They discovered through their Crime and Disorder Audit process (see below) that rural speeding was a major issue. But traffic levels and casualty rates did not put communities on track for regular police enforcement or traffic calming measures.

Community Speed Watch is Avon and Somerset's response to this widespread dilemma. Communities willing to purchase their own speed detection equipment work in partnership with the police to monitor speeding. A formula provided by Avon and Somerset ensures that the scheme is supported within the community and is responsibly structured and accountable.¹⁸

Action teams have at least six volunteers, each prepared to commit one hour a week. Volunteers take down registration numbers of vehicles exceeding the speed limit and pass the details to the police who send warning letters to the registered keepers of the vehicles. Persistent offenders are considered for targeted intervention and prosecution by the specialist Road Policing Unit. (See 'Information' for further details.)

ENFORCEMENT

Safety Camera Partnerships

The majority of police force areas have established Safety Camera Partnerships under new legislation allowing speeding fines to be invested in speed limit enforcement. The Partnerships involve the police, local authorities and local magistrates and other agencies, such as the local health authority. Partnerships operate according to a business plan approved by government and are subject to strict criteria on camera siting and visibility.

A high casualty requirement for fixed cameras of 4 or more deaths or serious injuries along a 1km stretch in the preceding three years makes many rural areas ineligible for this type of enforcement. The casualty requirement for mobile enforcement is 2 or more deaths or serious injuries along a 1km stretch in the previous three years.¹⁹ Where these criteria are not met, a limited amount of enforcement may be carried out in response to community concerns. At least 20% of the traffic must be exceeding the posted limit and 85th percentile speeds must be 10% plus 2mph above the speed limit (i.e. 68mph for roads with the national limit). This is a problem for stretches of rural road subject to the national speed limit where cars travelling below the speed limit are still going at inappropriate speeds. Enforcement should normally be highly conspicuous, but exceptions for both mobile and fixed cameras are allowed, including for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Crime and Disorder Strategies

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 requires every police force to have a strategy for reducing crime in their area, drawn up in consultation with local communities and implemented through local partnerships. The strategies, with targeted priorities for action, are based on an audit which identifies local problems. They are reviewed every three years. If community concerns about speed are reflected in the strategy they become a priority for the police as well as for local authorities. A crime and disorder audit led to Community Speed Watch.

FUNDING FOR SPEED MANAGEMENT

Local Transport Plan

The Local Transport Plan is the main source of funding for speed management measures. Safety camera partnerships now also bring resources to solving the problem. In both cases the obstacle is getting past the casualty requirement for local interventions. Traffic calming in aid of other objectives, such as Safer Routes to School, increased walking and cycling, regeneration or tourism, may help to do this. It may also make additional resources available.

Community-funded traffic calming

The Local Government and Rating Act 1997 (s30) enables town and parish councils to fund the introduction of traffic calming measures.

Hampshire County Council has adopted a partnership approach and provides matching funding for town and parish councils for traffic calming schemes. In 2000/01 a total of 30 schemes were allocated funds ranging from £1,000 to £10,000 (typically between £2,000 and £3,000).

Buckinghamshire County Council has created a £250,000 interest-free loan fund allowing councils to pay for traffic calming schemes over a three year period. For a standard charge of £3000, local councils who introduce traffic calming under 1997 Act can also fund a new speed limit related to the measures, as long as it has been approved by both the county council and Thames Valley police.²⁰

Countryside Agency project support

The Countryside Agency has a range of grants for rural community projects. While none of them can be used to pay for infrastructure or traffic management schemes, consultation work related to village quality of life or rural transport needs is eligible. As well as having general benefits, such preparatory work could be valuable in taking the first steps toward raising funds to spend under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, setting up a Speed Watch scheme, or a Quiet Lanes project.²¹

GETTING SPEED ONTO THE AGENDA

The lesson from progressive authorities is that political leadership is essential and must be backed up by clear popular demand for change. Communities who want something done about speed must get their local politicians, police forces and MPs on board, by writing letters, attending council committee meetings, organising public meetings and expressing consistent and representative messages. Well planned publicity stunts by communities are almost guaranteed coverage in local — and sometimes national — papers. Coalitions of local groups strengthen campaigns for individual neighbourhoods and help get beyond the traditional ad hoc approach. Increased priority on speed management is necessary to secure resources for a comprehensive policy with clear and achievable targets.

Find out what your local authority is doing about speed in the Local Transport Plan and their Annual LTP Progress Reports and the Crime and Disorder Strategy. These should be readily available from public libraries and many are on the internet. Local authorities must now also prepare Community Strategies, for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. Community strategies link up local transport plans, crime and disorder strategies and Health Improvement Plans, plus any local environmental and regeneration strategies. Speed is the sort of 'cross-cutting' issue that should be covered in a community strategy if local people make sure that it is.

See the information section at the end of this briefing for helpful contacts.

Now's the time to get speed under control

The difference that slower speeds can make to community, quality of life and transport choice is increasingly accepted. What is still lacking is the political will to apply resources *before* the casualties happen, *before* communities are frightened off their streets. All too often speed reduction measures are portrayed as anti-motorist and anti-car. But, because of the savings of life and injury, motorists, their passengers and families will gain the most from lower speeds on rural roads. A concerted effort — combining education, engineering and enforcement — will raise awareness that speed limits are there to benefit society. Speeding is socially irresponsible and must be made socially unacceptable. Everyone who presses to get speed under control contributes to making it so.

References

- 1 Department for Transport, *Road Accidents Great Britain 2002: The Casualty Report*, Table 24
- 2 Institution of Highways and Transportation, 2001, *Rural Safety Management Guidelines*
- 3 Taylor, Baruya and Kennedy, 2002, *The relationship between speed and accidents on rural single-carriageway roads*, Transport Research Laboratory Report 511
- 4 Department for Transport, *Vehicle Speeds Great Britain 2001*
- 5 Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000, *Tomorrow's Roads - Safer for Everyone*
- 6 Kallberg and Toivanen, 1998, *Framework for Assessing the Effects of Speed in Road Transport*, MASTER (Managing Speeds of Traffic on European Roads) Deliverable 8. See www.vtt.fi/rte/projects/yki6/master/master.htm
- 7 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000, *Tomorrow's Roads - Safer for Everyone*, para 6.16
- 8 Somerset County Council, 2001, *Speed Management Policy*
- 9 Webster and Mackie, 1996, *Review of traffic calming schemes in 20mph zones*, Transport Research Laboratory Report 215
- 10 www.greenways.gov.uk/site/qr_only/fund_qtrdfaq.htm
- 11 Devon County Council, 2002, *Annual Progress Report 2002*
- 12 Slower Speeds Initiative, 2001, *Killing Speed: A Guide to Speed Management*
- 13 Somerset County Council, 2001, *Speed Management Policy*
- 14 Winnett and Wheeler, 2003, *Vehicle Activated Signs — A Large Scale Evaluation*, Transport Research Laboratory Report 548
- 15 Department for Transport, 2003, *DfT Circular 02/2003 The Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD) 2002*
- 16 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2001, *Village Traffic Calming - reducing accidents*, Traffic Advisory Leaflet 11/00
- 17 Elliott, McColl, and Kennedy, 2003, *Road design measures to reduce drivers' speed via 'psychological' processes: A literature review*, Transport Research Laboratory Report 564
- 18 Avon and Somerset Constabulary, 2002, *Community Speed Watch — A Partnership Approach to Casualty Reduction*, Portishead: Avon and Somerset Constabulary
- 19 Department for Transport, 2003, *A cost recovery system for speed and red-light cameras — two year pilot evaluation*
- 20 www.buckscc.gov.uk/safety_schemes/traffic_management/speed_limits.htm
- 21 see www.countryside.gov.uk/ruraltransport

Photos Neil Mayhew (Stiffkey on cover, VAS, Starston)

THE SLOWER SPEEDS INITIATIVE was founded in March 1998 by the Children's Play Council, CTC (Cyclists Touring Club), Environmental Transport Association, Pedestrians' Association, Pedestrian Policy Group, Road Danger Reduction Forum, RoadPeace, Sustrans and Transport 2000.



We campaign for lower and better enforced speed limits, higher profile for speed reduction initiatives, development of speed control technology and changes in the law to reflect the seriousness of an offence which kills and maims.

Printed on recycled paper with soya based inks

© THE SLOWER SPEEDS INITIATIVE 2003

INFORMATION SOURCES

AVON AND SOMERSET CONSTABULARY

PO Box 37, Valley Road, Portishead, Bristol BS20 8QJ
Avon and Somerset produce a Community Speed Watch Information Pack on how to set up a scheme, includes a video; price £10.

BRITISH HORSE SOCIETY

Stoneleigh Deer Park, Kenilworth CV8 2XZ 0870 120 2244 www.bhs.org.uk

COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham GL50 3RA 01242 521 381
www.countryside.gov.uk www.quiet-lanes.gov.uk
The Agency's Handbook for the Quiet Lanes 'PACE' process (Plan - Activate - Enable - Check) can be accessed at www.quiet-lanes.gov.uk/site/shared/qr_tech.htm
See also www.quiet-lanes.gov.uk/site/publications.htm

CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND

128 Southwark Street, London SE1 0SW 020 7981 2800
info@cpre.org.uk www.cpre.org.uk
CPRE campaigns through county branches for lower speed limits and Quiet Lanes. It has published a survey, *Rural Traffic Fear*, free with an SAE.

CTC (Cyclists Touring Club)

Cotterell House, 69 Meadow, Godalming GU7 3HS 0870 873 0063
cycling@ctc.org.uk www.ctc.org.uk

HOME ZONES/CHILDREN'S PLAY COUNCIL

National Children's Bureau, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1Y 7QE
020 7843 6016
The Children's Play Council produces Home Zone News, with Sustrans and Transport 2000. homezones@ncb.org.uk www.homezonenews.org.uk

INSTITUTION OF CIVIL ENGINEERS

1 Great George Street, London SW1P 3AA www.ice.org.uk
The ICE with the Countryside Agency have produced guidance on 'Rural routes and networks' See www.quiet-lanes.gov.uk/site/pdf/Rural_Routes%20.pdf or £10 from the ICE.

LIVING STREETS/PEDESTRIANS ASSOCIATION

31-33 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ 020 7820 1010
info@livingstreets.org.uk www.livingstreets.org.uk

THE SLOWER SPEEDS INITIATIVE

PO Box 19 Hereford HR1 1XJ 0845 345 8459
info@slower-speeds.org.uk www.slower-speeds.org.uk
Killing Speed: A Guide to Speed Management, £10 + £1p+p, discounts for voluntary groups. 4pp summary available free with SAE. We are also purchasing speed detection equipment to lend to communities. Contact us to find out more or to make a donation to our **Speed Gun Fund**.

SUSTRANS

35 King Street, Bristol BS1 4DZ 0117 929 8893
info@sustrans.org.uk www.sustrans.org.uk
Sustrans publishes information about Safe Routes to School and Home Zones on their website.

TRAFFIC ADVISORY UNIT

Charging and Local Transport Division, Zone 3/23, Great Minster House, 76 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DR 020 7944 2478 e-mail: tal@dotditm3.demon.co.uk
Traffic Advisory Leaflets are essential guides to research and regulations on speed limits and traffic calming
www.roads.dft.gov.uk/roadnetwork/ditm/tal/index.htm

TRANSPORT 2000/STREETS FOR PEOPLE

The Impact Centre, 12-18 Hoxton Street, London N1 6NG 020 7613 0743
julias@transport2000.org.uk www.transport2000.org.uk
Transport 2000's Street for People network helps communities campaign for change. A briefing pack is available on their website; click on 'Change your streets'.

www.ukonline.gov.uk central & local government internet portal