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Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension - draft Masterplan consultation.

Implications and opportunities for the cycling infrastructure

Development on the scale envisaged in the Masterplan offers an opportunity to establish infrastructure of high quality for cycling, both within the new estates and in their access. The draft includes unexceptionable commitments to this end. It says all the 'right things'. Abstract aspirations like these are common: but it's rare for them to be realised. All too often well-meaning but half-hearted measures are adopted, without specialist advice or awareness of best practice, which cause as many problems as they are intended to solve. The references to cycling in the recent outline application by Waddeton Park don't inspire confidence that these mistakes won't be repeated here.

In the background papers both for the Masterplan and the application from Waddeton Park, there is evidence of detailed work on the analysis of current road movements in the area, and projections of the likely impact of the EUE on these. These studies, however, are almost entirely concerned with motor traffic. There appears to have been no comparable analysis of the current patterns of cycling traffic, or projections of future growth, and the impact on these of new demand from the EUE. In the absence of such analyses, it's essential that appropriate specialist advice is sought if mistakes are to be avoided. Urban planning for cycling is a rapidly developing field, and it is strongly urged that this expertise should be drawn upon.

Cycling in the Tiverton area, as in many other parts of the country, is growing faster than most other traffic categories: and sustaining that growth is implicit in the Masterplan's objectives. This is not a homogeneous group with identical needs. Cyclists are on the road for many different reasons: commuting into and out of Tiverton (including to Tiverton Parkway station), leisure, fitness and sport, local utility (shopping etc), through traffic from long-distance cycletouring, and travel to and from school or college. All need to be taken into account.

Early drafts of the Masterplan made an excellent start on this, proposing two complementary routes for cycling into Tiverton: the existing Sustrans NCN3 route on the former railway to the south, and from the centre of the EUE Blundells Road, which would be restricted to buses, cycles and pedestrians. This is no longer possible after the abandonment of the original proposal for an additional inner relief road to the centre of Tiverton passing to the north of Blundells. In consequence there are now severe potential difficulties in establishing a main artery into the town for cycling traffic from the East. NCN3, suitably improved, has the potential for this, but only for those in the southern sector of the EUE. For those in the north, such as those living in the recently-proposed Waddeton Park estate, to access NCN3 would require a long diversion in the wrong direction, almost doubling the distance into Tiverton in some cases: and it's unrealistic to suppose, even with other incentives, that this would be used by choice.

Blundells Road

This leaves the existing Blundells Rd and Post Hill as the probable route into Tiverton from the central and northern sectors of EUE. In considering this route thus far, most attention has understandably been given to the need to mitigate hazards to pedestrian traffic on the Blundells School campus, either by a 'Shared Space' area or by more conventional forms of traffic calming. Designing a solution to this which also avoids conflict with road users other than motor vehicles, and does not increase hazards to cycling, will not be easy. At the same time it will be necessary to 'cycleproof' the remaining parts of Blundells Rd and Post Hill, the junctions with the various estate access roads, and in particular the roundabout or other junction where the proposed new link to the A361 intersects Blundells Rd. On all of these there will be the pressure of significantly increased traffic volumes.

The Masterplan envisages a new school south of Blundells Rd. It will be necessary to provide safe cycling routes to this from all residential parts of the EUE, including a crossing of Blundells Rd from the north, adopting the standards of the CTC/Sustrans 'Safe Routes to School' guidelines. These will also need protection from the nearby major junction with the proposed new A361 link. The indicated location of the school and other community facilities presumably means that the stretch of land east of the West Manley Lane junction will come into public ownership. There could thus be an opportunity for using part of this land for through westbound cycle traffic also, away from the main Blundells Rd carriageway. It would be shortsighted to provide traffic calming for the Blundells School campus alone, without providing at the same time for these probable future requirements nearby.

To make sense of all these problems on or adjoining Blundells Rd, an integrated plan will be necessary for the management of all classes of traffic on the entire length of Blundells Rd/Post Hill, from Manley Lane to the Horsdon Roundabout. There could be nothing worse than the piecemeal provision exemplified by the existing painted-white-line cycle lane on Post Hill. This lane is typical of the 'something-and-nothing' approach which has characterised attempts to improve the British road infrastructure for cycling. It is short, perversely runs in the downhill direction only, begins and ends arbitrarily, is narrower than the recommended standard, and has no physical demarcation from the rest of the carriageway.

A better option?

There is an option which would greatly if not entirely ease these difficulties, and which does not seem to have been considered. This is the reinstatement, but as a cycle/pedestrian-only track, of a version of the discarded additional relief road into Tiverton passing north of Blundells, proposed in earlier drafts of the Masterplan. This much more modest alternative might well avoid most of the cost and other grounds for rejection of the motor road. I note that Blundells School, in its response to the earlier Masterplan draft, expressed its willingness to make land available for the road: and it's therefore reasonable to suppose that it would be similarly open to assisting the alternative of a cycle/pedestrian track. If this were feasible, then together with an improved NCN3 there would be excellent traffic-free routes into Tiverton from all parts of the EUE.

Sustrans NCN3 – the railway path

Since the Sustrans NCN3 route along the old railway trackbed already exists, there is a risk that with the addition of access points from the EUE estate this will be assumed to be adequate as it is. This is not the case, and its fortunate proximity should not become an excuse for giving no further thought to this southern route. Particularly towards its eastern end, before it briefly joins Manley Lane and then continues along the canal towpath and eventually to Bristol, it has a number of shortcomings. The surface is inadequate, it is poorly drained and maintained, and in winter its deep cutting is dark even in daylight. The ramp up to Manley Lane is poorly designed and hazardous. It's not surprising that in winter it tends to be avoided in favour either of Blundells Road or of the permissive cycle

path on the canal towpath further south, and there are understandable security concerns. To serve its intended function for the EUE, an improved surface, lighting, drainage and well-designed access points would all be needed. Attention should also be given to the redesign of the railway path's western terminus, where NCN3 rejoins the road network close to Horsdon roundabout. The marked routes for cyclists here are awkward, circuitous and hard to follow, and it's unsurprising therefore that they are little used, most riders preferring to go straight on to the road at this point.

Another route to the East?

Halberton Parish Council has recently created an excellent shared-use track connecting Halberton village with the swing bridge over the Grand Western Canal. In its response to the first Masterplan draft, the Parish Council referred to its ambition for a similar route connecting the Halberton Road bridge with Post Hill, and its hope that this could be facilitated by the Masterplanning process. This could provide a direct offroad cycling link from the northern sector of the EUE, connecting at Halberton with Sustrans NCN3 as it continues eastward to Tiverton Parkway Station and beyond.

The minor lane network

The network of minor roads and lanes radiating outward from the EUE area is already extensively used by cyclists, both for commuting and recreation. These include Uplowman Road, Manley Lane, Crazelowman Lane and Warnicombe Lane. They also have a good deal of equestrian and pedestrian use, such as for circular walks linking sections of the Canal. There are always hazards for vulnerable road users on lanes of this type. It is observable that these hazards are increasing as some of these lanes begin to be used as 'rat-runs' by through motor traffic, and pressure on them will inevitably increase with the advent of the EUE. It will be essential that access to these lanes is managed in such a way that it both encourages cycling by EUE residents and others, while inhibiting their exploitation as ratruns.

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