

What matters to Witham cyclists

A guide for elected representatives.

Presented by Witham Cycle Campaign

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Purpose


The purpose of this booklet is to inform councillors of what really matters to Cyclists in order to promote sustainable journeys in line with Government policy. Some of the points relate specifically to Witham and district issues while others are of a more general nature.

Further copies and more detailed
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Witham is just the right size for cycling.

Witham is about 10 minutes by bike across. This means that commuting by bike should be ideal for anyone who lives and works or goes to school or does other activities in Witham.

- There is a huge potential for increasing cycling.
- The big pay-backs are in the areas of commuting and local 'nip-to-the-shops' trips.

 Getting people out of their cars has far more to do with peoples attitudes than highway engineering


Cycle lanes

are the first thing most people think about as if they are the key to getting people out of cars onto bikes. This is not correct. Here are some important points.

- Research has shown that cycle lanes tend to attract existing cyclists rather than stimulate new ones.
- Lanes added to the side of the main carriageway need to be very carefully designed if they are to be successful. There is a growing weight of opinion that alternatives have fewer snags for cyclists and other road users.
- Some traffic management schemes are based on the idea that road space for cars should be rationed and putting in a cycle lane is a good excuse to do so. As you might expect from this solution-looking-for-a-problem approach, the real value to cyclists is likely to be poor, or cause more problems than existed previously.

- Hazard avoidance lanes can be very welcome if well designed.

- Cycle lanes on the roadside pavement are now regarded as poor practice.

 First establish the need then ensure that the solution is implemented properly

Off-road routes

for cyclists in Witham are a mixture of legalised footpath share and illegal use of other routes. The reasons for illegal use (research shows as much as 30% wrong-way cycling in one way streets for example) are that cyclists don't feel the restrictions are really serving any purpose, or have been put in place by town planners who have been perverted by the need for car control while forgetting the wet and vulnerable cyclist.

- The shared use river-walk paths are (a)useful and (b)work well. They have good visibility and lighting, can be ridden at 15mph and are well maintained. Some of the connections with the road network are over engineered and the restriction (ignored anyway) on cycling along Moat Farm Chase needs removing.


- There are pedestrian footpath cut-throughs that are used regularly by cyclists and footpaths which have an ambiguous status. For example the Spa Road underpass which is one of three exits from the Highfields Rd. estate onto Spa Rd. only one of which is technically a cycle-legal route and even then only serves half the estate. Given that cyclists and pedestrians seem to be able to co-exist safely on designated shared routes without fuss, and given the undoubted need for these cut-throughs, these

routes should be (a) identified, (b) accepted as a de-facto part of the cycling network and (c) assessed to see what (if any) alterations should be made [to benefit all users](#).

- Point to remember. Cars are now being diverted into convoluted routes. Bikes need direct routes. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater (eg Guithavon St. 1-way plan, No right turn from Braintree Rd to the railway station) is counterproductive.

- If the proposed housing developments in the south of Witham go ahead there should be established a direct-to-town cycle route which avoids Hatfield Rd/Bridge St. and Maldon Road. The obvious route for this would be from Maltings lane to the riverside route via Howbridge Rd. then a radial route through the park.


- Building the new Hatfield Peverel relief road is an ideal opportunity to close the good cycle route gap using the verge south of the Jack and Jenny. This would integrate beautifully with a Howbridge Rd. to town centre route.

 Hatfield Peverel is about 15 minutes cycle from Witham which is easily within commuting distance, but the speed and spray of traffic along Hatfield Rd is a major dis-incentive that ought to be removed.

Somewhere suitable to park

is essential. Security and convenience are the key points. On a visit to town a cyclist is likely to park-visit-move-park-visit-move...etc rather than park once and walk to various destinations. This is an entirely different way of thinking to (an able) car driver who parks once and does their rounds on foot.

- Out of sight parking is prone to vandalism and theft and should not be considered for future facilities.
- About half the bikes parked in the main part of Witham using public facilities are parked for the day. This might indicate that there is a role in public bike parking for commuters as well as visitors. A commuter will value a bike-bin (lockable box for bike storage) so it may be worth experimenting with some of these where all-day parking is currently observed.
- Parked bikes cluttering the pavement are not good for pedestrians so careful siting or regular 'bike pounds' incorporated into conventional on-street parking schemes are required.
- In the longer term all new dwellings and work places should have storage facilities incorporated at design time as a matter of course.

 A shopper can lean their bike against anything convenient for a while but a commuter needs proper parking.

Rural communities

should be pleasant and safe places to cycle, suitable for journeys to and from school and mucking-around-with-mates at the recreation ground.

- There is no substitute for detailed local knowledge: Where the road surface is rotten, where the pools of water accumulate, where the brambles slash out from the hedge. Addressing these tiny matters vastly improves the quality of cycling. Reporting and dealing with these matters is something that could do with improvement.


- Most drivers are considerate but there remain a minority who have no more respect for cyclists than the ditches into which they so often end up. More unenforceable speed limits are not really the answer, instead better enforcement and driver education to reduce reckless and careless behaviour.
- In Braintree District local fingerposts are well maintained. Recreational cyclists find these very useful.

Soft infrastructure

is a vital part of achieving the change-over from car to bike. There are plenty of unused bicycles in sheds and garages and that's where they will stay until people decide to decide to have a go, get them out, repair them, and get onto the road. One of the aims of Witham Cycle Campaign is to run public sessions that address these steps.

- For example the health benefits of cycling have been shown to be a good motivator.
- Simple cycle maintenance sessions can bring out unused bikes
- Although most cycling is for utility, recreational use is often the trigger to getting on and about.
- Safety is often uppermost in people's minds. People need convincing (a) that the dangers are not all that great (b) you don't need to spend huge amounts of money on safety gear (c) a small amount of technique is all you need to claim your road space with very little actual risk.

- The very local, often very small items of cycling infrastructure development need promoting and coordinating across the district. For example if “more parking at the village hall” was suggested to a parish council, who do they in turn contact to ask for advice about aesthetic and practical solutions?


 WCC would like to see regular, focussed and well publicised campaigns to (a) encourage and (b) support new cyclists. A lot of work remains to be done to trial, co-ordinate and resource this but no other scheme will be so effective in helping the car to bike switch.

Government policy

is to promote sustainable transport where possible. But what does this mean in practice?

- The DETR's National Cycling Strategy points out issues and how government at all levels can implement the strategy. We could have quoted reams from this document which on the whole is approachable, sensible and has a lot to say to local government.
- The Essex local transport plan is on the other hand a mish-mash of vague hopes and very little commitment to identifying, let alone committing resources to developing Short Sustainable Journeys.
- Essex's cycling strategy document (Now scheduled for “June”) won't contain anything specifically for Witham, but will almost certainly accept the Government's target of [quadrupling 1996 cycling levels by 2012.](#)
- The cycling segment of the District Transport Strategy


is supposed to be published “in the summer”.

 The aspirations of policy can only be turned into the essential nitty-gritty facilities and support at the parish/town level.

Summary

The Government is trying to get more people to cycle. Witham is the ideal size to build a cycling culture. Removing obstacles and providing better facilities is part of the solution.

- Care must be taken not to let old-fashioned car-control thinking scupper cycling. Highway engineering is as likely to hinder than help.
- People need to be persuaded and supported if they are to - ‘get out and go’. The County and District need to redirect resources from highway engineering to the soft infrastructure needed to create a cycling culture.
- In general a town like Witham should have a strategy and plans, while parishes will probably be better-off reacting to suggestions and passing them to the District for attention.

 The art of providing cycling facilities is continually developing. Policies of the last decade need overhauling in the light of experience. Success will come through good facilities and persuading individuals to try them out.