

Active Travel Proposals for Colchester

A response from Colchester Civic Society

July 2021

Colchester Civic Society is supportive of these proposals as a first step toward developing a cycle network across Colchester, in an effort to bring cycling into the mainstream as a mode of transport. We recognise this as being an important part of the efforts to promote a national shift toward more sustainable forms of transport which are beneficial on local, national and global levels, by reducing atmospheric and noise pollution in our urban environments, as well as reducing reliance on vehicles which use high levels of energy and finite materials in their production and day to day usage.

We very much appreciate having been given the opportunity for our committee members to meet with and question the Highways Engineers over the plans being presented for the Northern and Western cycle routes.

As the engineers were made aware at this meeting, the plans for Lexden Road were not met with enthusiasm by all of those members present and some remained unconvinced that the upgrading of Lexden Road cycle lanes was the best way forward. Preferring that investment be made in the upgrading and promotion of quiet back streets and pathways. An additional critical note offered was that the Scheme as a whole adds little to the existing network, except for attempts to readdress the failed scheme in Crouch Street. Also that the extensive changes proposed for North Station Road will not bring benefits which really justify the restrictions to be imposed on access and parking.

This was not however a unanimous view and others were inclined to be more supportive of the scheme overall, noting that these plans were developed in consultation with Colchester Cycling Campaign, who we acknowledge are the experts in this area.

We offer here the following observations and concerns over some details of these plans:

Cycle Lanes

The Department for Transport “Gear Change” and “Local Transport Note” documents make it clear that where cycle lanes are installed in areas of high volume motor traffic, Cyclists must be physically separated and protected both at junctions and on the stretches of road between them. However there is insufficient details on offer about the cycle lanes proposed for North Hill, Head Street, Crouch Street East and Lexden Road to assess whether this will actually be the case.

We understand from our meeting with the engineers that the cycle lanes in Lexden Road are to remain at the same level as the road used by motor vehicles. This effectively segregates the cycleways from the footways. However we would like to know how it is proposed to effectively segregate the cycle lane from the rest of the road in order to stop motor vehicles encroaching on it and also stopping in it and thereby forcing cyclist into the path of motor vehicles. We would also like

to know how they will be protected from the dangers currently presented by drain covers and kerbside gutters.

We would like to point out also that a significant improvement in road maintenance will also be required to continue to meet these standards if they are not to descend into the current appalling condition of many major roads in Colchester, which present major hazards to motor vehicles as well as cyclists.

North Station Road

We understand that a bus gate is proposed for installation at North Bridge and that there is a good case for doing so, given that 70% of vehicle entering North Station Road from Middleborough are through traffic. However this is very likely to be opposed by residents and businesses in this area as it will mean those returning to the area via Balcerne Hill will be obliged to do so by detouring through Westway and join the queues at the Colne Bank roundabout. This surely benefits no one and simply adds to the pollution and congestion on Westway and Colne Bank Avenue.

Given that number plate recognition cameras will need to be installed at the bus gate we ask that consideration be given to making it possible for residents and businesses to register their vehicles in order to be permitted continued access by this route.

North Hill and Crouch Street

We understand that a north south cycle route should connect with the town centre and that on the map North Hill is the obvious choice. However we question how useful this route will be to cyclists (with the possible exception of those using power assisted bikes and scooters) given that North Hill has a one in ten gradient. Currently many cyclists use a route along Westway, Sheepen Road and St. Mary's Field to reach the town centre and also to head south and west without having to ride through the town centre at all.

While we recognise that this is a route that cannot be upgraded under the specifications of the current scheme we ask that it is included for future upgrading.

No detail is provided for Crouch Street East. Are we to assume that this will be the same as Crouch Street West? If this is so then detail of how the bus stops will be integrated with the parking would enable us to comment on this. We can however make it clear that we would welcome a redesign which resolves the serious inadequacies of the existing eastbound cycle path.

One area of concern we have is that there is talk of looking at ways to extend shoppers parking into the residential parking bays in Rawston Road. While some short term parking and loading is essential in Crouch Street we are of the view that extending this parking into the residential areas would work against the stated aims of the project and should not be included in the final plans.

Lexden Road

As has been stated earlier we are concerned to see that the cycle lanes in Lexden Road are effectively segregated from motor vehicles and will not allow vehicles to block the cycle lanes. Large numbers of vehicle converge on this and neighbouring roads at school starting and leaving times and unless there is an effective barrier in place there will inevitably many encroachments on the cycle lane as parents drop off and pick up their children.

We also have concerns over the use of floating bus stops in the areas of Lexden Road where the large numbers of children using them at peak times could exceed their capacity and consequently block the cycle lanes. We ask therefore that consideration is given to this in the design of the bus stops in this area.

As the engineers were made aware at our meeting with them meeting, the plans for Lexden Road were not met with enthusiasm by some of those members present and they remained unconvinced that the upgrading of Lexden Road cycle lanes was the best way forward. Preferring instead the promotion of quiet back streets and pathways instead.

We ask therefore that active consideration be given to upgrading the bridleways in the area, particularly the Prettygate Road to Park Road route in order to effectively separate cycles and pedestrians and enable cyclist to cycle at speed without the danger of collisions with pedestrians. This is already a major route for children attending schools in the area, as well as an established cycle route to central Colchester from the Prettygate Area and would, in our view, complement the efforts to reduce the numbers of children being driven to school through the 'School Streets' Initiative.

We support the aims of the School Streets Initiative to discourage the practice of driving children to school and hope that effective measures can be devised which will have the support of residents in these roads. We would however like to point out that a large proportion of the children attending most of the schools in this area come from a catchment area covering a large part of North Essex and beyond. The only way to reduce the numbers of these children being driven to school is to improve the bus and mini bus services for them.

The High Street

We understand that the plans for the High Street will be presented under a separate formal consultation. We do however have serious concerns over one particular aspect of the proposals outlined here. This is with the Queen Street bus lane.

We understand that while traffic restrictions for the High Street will apply from 7am to 7pm, the Queen Street Bus Lane will remain 24/7. This anomaly means that there will be a resumption of a significant number of vehicles turning at Lewis Gardens in the evenings. Even under the current restrictions we estimate that in excess of 33% of vehicles leaving the High Street turn here to circumvent the bus lane and drive into Queen Street.

The introduction of bollards and the traffic island have made it difficult for drivers to complete a u-turn here. But this has not reduced the proportion of vehicles turning

In addition we would like to point out that in the evenings vehicles also circumvent the Queen Street Bus Lane by using Long Wyre Street and Short WYre Street. We anticipate this activity will increase significantly if the traffic restrictions in The High Street are lifted in the evenings and the Queen Street Bus Lane remains operative.

We contend that given the traffic entering the High Street will be controlled at the junction with Head Street and North Hill for twelve hours in each day and that this is deemed unnecessary in the evening and overnight, then the Queen Street Bus Lane will become redundant and should be removed in order to eliminate the hazards to pedestrians and cyclists created by turning vehicles at Lewis Gardens and pedestrians in Long and Short Wire Street.

Safety for pedestrians

A great deal of resources are being put into creating a safer and more workable environment for cyclists and we acknowledge that significant improvements are included for pedestrians in the plans for North Station Road, Crouch Street and Lexden Road. We are however concerned that much more needs to be done to create a safer and more comfortable environment for pedestrians in the town as a whole. we need to keep our footpaths and PROW's in good order. Wobbly paving slabs, uneven surfaces, footpaths badly lit, unnecessary pavement clutter, overgrown shrubbery, very narrow footpaths in new developments so parked cars block pavements. Footpaths to Nowhere etc, These issues don't encourage walking. Continued and improved 'housekeeping' is important.

In addition pedestrians have suffered a decline in their comfort and safety in recent years as a direct consequence of encouraging cycling on shared use paths and attempting to create a cycling network on the cheap.

While the schemes for North Station Road, Crouch Street and Lexden Road will improve conditions for pedestrians, a major part of the existing network, most notably along the riverside from Wivenhoe through to North Bridge, as well as those already mentioned in the Lexden Road and St. Mary's Field areas remain as shared use in these plans

We would like to see this situation addressed, with these major routes upgraded at the earliest opportunity. We also propose that the cycle route through Castle Park be closed as soon as possible, now that an alternative route is available via the new bridge leading to Pavilion View from the riverside path. (we realize this will be a decision for The Borough Council and the following paragraph is addressed to them)

There has been a significant increase in cyclists using the Castle Park as a through route to the High Street, since cycles were allowed onto the riverside path here. Cyclists are frequently to be seen riding down the diagonal path in the upper park at considerable speed. And recently this resulted in a small child being knocked down by a cyclist.

There has also been a noticeable increase in the use of roadside footways by cyclists, despite this being illegal and we would like to know what if any measures are being designed to curb this behaviour and enforce the law in this respect.

20mph limit.

We welcome the proposals for the 20mph limit being made permanent in most of central Colchester and would very much like this to be extended to all residential streets as soon as possible. We do question however why Roman and Castle Road have not been included in these current proposals, given that these road are located within the 20mph zone being created. Access to Roman and Castle Road is from the upper end of East Hill, which will become 20mph under these plans.

John Salmon - for Colchester Civic Society