

The Bike Report

Cllr. Mike Beadsley

Last year I bought a bicycle and since then have ridden the cycle routes on the Council's map. I found myself looking at the effects of the council's cycling policy from the saddle rather than the arm chair and I am sharing my observations with you. Although I have observed from a bike, many of the same routes are used by pedestrians, baby-buggies and powered chairs that are equally or more affected by some of the problems.

The Observations

The Council declares its support for cycling in the transport plan, by its continued development of the cycleway network and statements in publicity material. I was surprised to find it does not appear to have a document setting out its "cycling policy".

The borough has an extensive cycle route network that enables many journeys to be made in a traffic free or low traffic environment. Most parts of the town and areas of the surrounding parishes on its immediate outskirts are covered by the network. There are a number of routes that have no motoring equivalent e.g. from the Southern Industrial estate to Priestwood. There are breaks in the routes though, routes that end at busy road junctions and places that are surprisingly inaccessible.

Examples:

There is no route from London Road to Wokingham Road past the town centre. I can park a car at Princess Square but I have to walk from Coopers Hill with a bike. The plans for the new town centre do not do much to encourage cycle use.

There are lovely runs like the one from Lily Hill Park round to Coral Reef where the surface is good, the cycleway is wide and the route is not overgrown with vegetation and is not obstructed. The new cycle-ways around north Bracknell are good, with some signage, as are those around Great Hollands, the Southern and Western Industrial Estates.

Elsewhere routes have almost no signage and have been put together using various footways. It means that they are hard to follow and in places the path is not really wide enough for pedestrians and cyclists to share. This is a problem in Hanworth and Wildridings. In the older developments of Bullbrook, Priestwood and Easthampstead the roads have to be used but using quiet roads is not a problem.

A significant number of routes get overgrown leaving only a narrow track down the centre. This means that bikes can't pass each other or pedestrians. There is also insufficient room for push-chairs or a push-chair with a child beside it so children are brushed by nettles or scratched by thorns. In places, over-hanging branches and brambles hit or scratch cyclists in the face.

Examples:

Longshot Lane, beside the Bagshot Road opposite Sainsburys etc.

Annex 1

Some cycle-path surfaces are poor and very bumpy for bikes and push-chairs. This may be because the surface has broken up, or it may look sound but have been badly levelled, or in other cases it has been broken up by roots or heavy vehicles. Such surfaces are uncomfortable to ride.

Examples:

Outside the Hilton Hotel. The cycleway to Easthampstead Park School.

Obstructions put into the cycle-way can be dangerous. In places NEW bus shelters block most of the footpath/cycleway and invite collisions between pedestrians and cyclists as neither can see the other; re-arranging the layout could solve the problem.

Examples:

Western Road, Ellesfield Avenue, London Road.

Barriers are necessary to slow cyclists and stop children running into the road but the recent spate of "triple barriers" are very frustrating and difficult to negotiate for cyclists, buggy pushers and powered chair users. A different arrangement of the barriers would achieve the objective, reduce the irritation and cyclists would be less likely to defeat their purpose by riding round them.

Examples:

Rectory Lane, near Arncliffe, Moordale Avenue.

We use a variety of priority arrangements that are very confusing to both cyclists and motorists. The signage to support this is both hard to take in and unclear.

Examples:

On Ringmead cyclists have priority crossing SOME joining roads and SOME motorists understand this. There are signs but the motorist is more likely to see the pedestrian/cyclist before they notice the sign.

On Rectory Lane motor vehicles are given priority at minor roads, school gates, entrances to car parks etc, and "triple barriers" are used to stop pedestrians and cyclists – so the "kids" ride on the road or opposite pavement that is un-obstructed!

The number of road and cyclist signs is increasing considerably and they are distracting and in some cases confusing. There are too many text signs like "cyclists dismount". They are also obstacles to pedestrians and cyclists.

Cycle routes have extra hills! This is part of our heritage and a reflection of motor vehicle priority when the policy was to make a good level well aligned road so the traffic moved quickly and then keep pedestrians and cyclists out of harms way. The result is that pedestrians and cyclists are diverted down and under or up and over and around and about whilst the motor traffic that takes the direct route. This type of design is still happening.

Example:

From Coopers Hill the cycle route to Easthampstead House goes down to railway level to go under the roads, up to road height and on up to Mount Pleasant to cross the railway, then down to pass under Church Road and up to road level.

Annex 1

The Council sees bicycles as transport not just for recreation. There are more "transport" cyclists than I thought but putting the bike somewhere safe on arrival is sometimes difficult. Look at the number of bikes chained to the railings of St. Joseph's Church opposite Princess Square, the supermarkets need more places too.

Suggesting a way forward:

A cycling policy so we have principles on which to make clear and consistent decisions. (Appendix A)

Improved access, facilities and convenience to make cycling more attractive as transport and achieve the LTP target of a 20% increase in 5 years.

Think pedestrian, cyclist & public transport before car and traffic flow.

Promoting cycling as transport:

To attract people to bicycle use instead of using their cars our policy and practice need to deliver as many attractive benefits as possible. Whilst cycling is the "healthy option", non-polluting, environmentally friendly, a recreational activity etc., I suggest that as transport to replace cars it must combine a good journey time with convenience. It is quicker than walking, faster than public transport and at busy times quicker than a car for short journeys. It can combine the door to door access and directness of the pedestrian route with higher speed, there is no walking and waiting time nor the circuitous route of public transport, nor is there the traffic jam or time taken to park and walk with a car.

Making "transport" cycling attractive means:

- Direct routes that go right to the destination to save the parking and walking time, i.e. to the destination building not park and walk or "get off and push"
- Good surfaces with modest and where possible easy gradients
- Safe routes not shared with heavy and/or fast traffic
- Few obstructions, e.g. bus shelters, too many barriers, excess signs
- Maintenance, e.g. clear vegetation, branches & brambles, broken glass and repair surfaces,
- A safe place to put the bike at the destination,
- A place to keep the bike at home.

Think pedestrian, cyclist, public transport before car and traffic flow.

The present order of consideration appears to be traffic flow, junctions, parking, then public transport, pedestrians and others. A switch to what is right for pedestrians and cyclists then public transport and then the requirements to accommodate motorists, highlights a different range of issues so they are not overwhelmed by the focus on motoring requirements. The change highlights:

- 100 m matters to a pedestrian, so does a hill, they are of no consequence to a motorist.
- Straight roads invite motorists to speed.
- Routes for bikes need to go door to door with cycle parking on arrival and storage at home.
- Maintenance of footways and cycleways.
- First think about – buggies, toddlers, bags of shopping, bikes, powered chairs, 10-15s transport, senior citizens, Be Seen...

Annex 1

Recommendations:

Plan routes for bicycles that take them right into, maybe under, the town centre just as motorists have underground parking access and service vehicles can get right to the centre. Residents in the town centre and staff will also need this access if they are to use bikes.

Be consistent with road priorities

- motorists have priority on roads, pedestrians and cyclists give way,
- motorists give priority to pedestrians and cyclists if they leave the road and cross their route to enter gates or car parks.

Signs indicating differing motorist and cyclist priorities are overlooked, unclear, confusing and dangerous.

Use barriers to check pedestrians and cyclists if the risk is high. Adapt them to the site and circumstances to promote the desired behaviour not just following the standard pattern. Too many barriers mean users avoid them which completely defeats the object and possibly results in more risky behaviour. Barriers should reinforce the road priorities above.

Sign "through" routes for pedestrians and cyclists particularly, where the routes link cul-de-sacs, a very common situation in Bracknell.

Cut back vegetation about one metre either side of a footway/cycleway so it is clear for cyclists and pedestrians. The openness is also important for the security and confidence of women and children using the route. Pay attention to head-height over growth.

Look again at the way road signage is used and avoid unnecessary signs that state what is already obvious from other indicators like pavement markings or circumstances e.g. many end of cycle route signs where it moves onto the road. Use highway road signs rather than text to be read. Put signs on lamp posts not separate poles that make more obstructions.

Continue to develop the footpath/cycleway and cycleway network and continue to use quiet roads. Look for easy extensions linking quiet roads e.g. cul-de-sacs, or short breaks in the network. Look for easy gradients, maybe routes through parks e.g. Mill Park.

Seek to redress some of the heritage of diverting pedestrians and cyclists round traffic. This is being planned with more "at grade" crossings in the Town centre.

Plan an improved link from Peacock Farm to Amen Corner/Cain Road for bikes and pedestrians. (The present one has steps, an obstruction to bikes, buggies and powered chairs.)

Try to shift attention from traffic and motor vehicles and start with pedestrians, cyclists, public transport before considering motorists.

Appendix 1

A Cycling Policy

Bracknell Forest Borough Council actively supports and promotes the use of bicycles because of the benefits for all its residents.

Cycling contributes:

- to the reduction of motor traffic – as an alternative means of transport,
- to reducing parking demand – taking very little space when not in use,
- to the protection of air quality – as it generates no air pollution,
- to the efforts to reduce “global warming” – as it burns no fossil fuel,
- to the health of individuals – as useful health supporting exercise,
- to the quiet environment – as it makes very little noise,
- to low cost mobility and access for many, particularly young people,
- to fun for leisure cyclists.

To support this Bracknell Forest Borough Council will endeavour to:

- extend the network of dedicated and shared cycle-ways to provide good access to as many homes and destinations as possible,
- maintain the cycle-way surfaces in good condition,
- keep cycle-ways clear of obstruction by vegetation and broken glass,
- design road signs, bus shelters and other street furniture to minimise obstruction,
- provide safe cycling routes to schools,
- encourage cycling as part of business travel plans,
- ensure the provision of suitable cycle parking facilities.

The safety of cyclists, pedestrians and other road users is a high priority for the Bracknell Forest Borough Council.

It will therefore support or provide:

- Cycling proficiency training for children and young people,
- Highway and cycling education.

The requirements and benefits of cycling will be a consideration in the planning of all development, transport, environment, leisure, education, housing, access and other relevant service plans.