

# A STRATEGIC, INCLUSIVE, CYCLING & WALKING NETWORK FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS

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## PREAMBLE: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE TAKEN

This report accompanies my Notice of Motion to West Midlands Transport Delivery Committee welcoming the Government's pandemic guidance encouraging people to cycle and walk to work wherever possible, and providing funding to urgently create 'pop-up' routes in the first instance, to enable this. The Notice of Motion expresses the TDC's support for the efforts of TfWM staff in working with partners to win its share of that funding and make effective use of it, and calls on all partners to use this as the starting point for developing a permanent, truly strategic and inclusive West Midlands cycling and walking network for employment *and* recreational use

The key issue, I strongly feel, is how we move forward from this present time of crisis: of course the pandemic is truly awful, but it does provide an opportunity (in fact I think it underlines an urgent and absolute need) to achieve the necessary major, permanent, shift towards healthier, more sustainable, non-polluting, inclusive, and arguably long-overdue ways of getting from A to B locally, not to mention globally!

I don't expect the TDC at its first-ever remote meeting to be able to discuss the Notice of Motion in any depth, let alone this report, but I do hope that members and officers will consider the issues I raise and how I suggest we move forward, arising from what I have learnt on my recent travels out there on the ground, and do whatever you and colleagues can to promote the aims.

In this report, I first by explaining the background to the Notice of Motion and the report itself, stressing the primacy of providing a fully accessible, *inclusive*, strategic cycling and walking network for the West Midlands, and how that might be built up from the basis of walking and cycling paths and routes that already exist everywhere, but which need linking and developing.

I then list the routes I've covered over the past 9-10 weeks, and what I've learnt from the experience of 8-10 miles cycled daily (plus the occasional walk) round Walsall and parts of the other Black Country boroughs and Birmingham. As a long-standing Walsall resident (and cyclist!), my observations derive principally from my experience in Walsall and its neighbour authorities, but I think my recommended approach will equally apply in Coventry and Solihull.

I conclude with my suggestions as to how to make progress.

Finally, and most importantly: the views expressed in this report are strictly personal, and I take full responsibility for them - that said, I hope you find what I have to say is helpful.

## I. INFORMATION

### (1) CURRENT POSITION IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

**(a) The Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan:** there is a planned network for cycling and walking for the region linking up major routes and forming the backbone of the network. The Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) was endorsed by WMCA Board last year, and since then, Birmingham, Sandwell and Solihull have published their plans .Phase 1 LCWIP routes were allocated funding earlier this year.

**(b) The Big Bike Revival for Key Workers:** Cycling UK are currently running this scheme, and it is quite likely they will be able to expand this offer with additional DfT funding.

**(c) The West Midlands Cycling Charter** is an important piece of work which will underpin the planned developments over the coming years

### (2) PROJECT FOR A FULLY ACCESSIBLE CYCLE ROUTE BETWEEN PELSALL AND WALSALL

For some time now, as TfWM officers and some TDC members will be aware, I've been working with two inclusive cycling campaigners, Pete Hubbard and Andrew Moulton, to get a fully accessible, inclusive cycle and walking route where they can get their recumbent tricycles onto and off the existing NCN5 route between Pelsall and Ryecroft, where the existing route into Walsall town centre becomes hard to negotiate even for bicycles, and totally impossible for recumbent tricycles, so the plan is to provide a safe on-street, fully accessible route to the town centre, and a link into Walsall Arboretum which has plenty of suitable paths, albeit some need upgrading or repair to provide a fully-accessible safe-to-use network, with a potential accessible new link from the Arboretum Extension to the Rushall Canal, thence to the A34 Birmingham Road, and a possible link with Birmingham City Council's A34 Birchfield - city centre cycle route.

With the support of TfWM officers, Andrew and Pete were successful in getting a £150,000 'Better Streets' grant for Walsall Council to actually create this impediment-free, fully accessible, route between Pelsall and Walsall: Council officers are now working to develop a suitable scheme and implement it, using the said allocation.

### (3) THE IMPORTANCE OF FULLY INCLUSIVE, CYCLING AND WALKING ROUTES

What I and my two inclusive cycling colleagues want to see is that design and implementation of all cycle routes going forward is based on full inclusivity: this will mean that *everyone should get unimpeded access to the network and the routes that make it up, as of right* - walkers, cyclists, users of recumbent tricycles, mobility scooters, those with pushchairs and buggies, everyone. That is an awful lot of citizens and would-be users who are currently excluded!

What's out there at the moment is suitable in some cases, but a million miles away in others, and it only takes one impediment on an otherwise good, accessible, cycle route to disbar many of, and sometimes all, those needing full, unimpeded, access.

These impediments are everywhere: steps, not ramps; too-steep (non-DDA compliant) ramps; barriers to prevent un-authorized access (eg, motorbikes); even a single tree root undermining and raising the tarmac. Wherever I go, I find a patchwork of lots of good, user-friendly surfaces, punctuated by often short stretches of indifferent, poor or outright bad surfaces ... it only takes 200 metres of unmade-up towpath or bumpy towpath paving under road bridges between two lengths of excellent tarmac path, to make a whole route inaccessible!

#### **(4) INCLUSIVE LINKS WITH MAIN/LOCAL CENTRES AND WITH NEIGHBOURING AUTHORITIES**

In Walsall, completion of the fully accessible route from Pelsall into the town centre and the Arboretum should be the first step towards creating a fully accessible strategic cycle route network linking the town with its district centres and with main centres in neighbouring authorities, Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell and Wolverhampton in particular.

Indeed, our next project, now on hold because of the pandemic, is to do an on-site access audit of Birmingham's A34 cycle route between Birchfield and the city centre, and a discussion with portfolio holder Cllr. Zaffar about this, and linking Walsall and Birmingham, was diared when lockdown intervened. And I'm sure that Andrew and Pete, once their lockdown isolation is over, will be open to offers from Coventry, Solihull, anywhere in the West Midlands, to bring their recumbent tricycles over to you to carry out accessibility audits of your existing routes.

#### **(5) MY LOCKDOWN CYCLING AND WALKING RESEARCHES**

As a key part of my lockdown exercise activity, I've cycled many hundreds of miles along Black Country and Birmingham towpaths, a couple of railway paths, and green space and park paths: my idea was to use my daily (cycling) exercise time to look at the potential of existing paths (in particular of our region's towpaths) to form an important part of an integrated, fully accessible, strategic cycling/walking network, using all options available to us: on-street, existing tarmac footpaths, specially those across and leading to local parks and green spaces, disused railway formations (such as NCN 5 between Pelsall and Ryecroft), and including cycleways wherever possible along future Metro and Sprint corridors (where that may not be in the plan currently).

*I should say that my preference is to have off-road routes wherever possible if these can provide a reasonably direct off-road link between centres because it's basically safer: there should be more to a good 'national' cycle route than simply directing the occasional cyclist along circuit-ous side streets with blue direction signs!*

Here are the routes I've ridden to date (see attached map for an overview of the canal network):

- a) NCN5 Yew Tree Estate, Sandwell - Ryecroft, Walsall (mainly on-street);
- b) (Walsall) - Ryecroft to A5 Watling Street, Brownhills (disused rail formation);
- c) Walsall - Brownhills (NCN5 - street, rail formation, street , canal);
- d) A5 Watling Street - Brownhills (Anglesey Branch Canal);
- e) Brownhills - Walsall Wood - Aldridge - Rushall (Daw End Branch Canal) - Park Lime Pits - Walsall Arboretum - Walsall (footpaths and on-street);
- f) Brownhills - Pelsall - Little Bloxwich - Harden - Birchills (Wyrley & Essington Canal);
- g) Walsall - Darlaston - Ocker Hill (Walsall Canal) - Tame Bridge (Tame Valley Canal) - Rushall Junction - Park Hall - Walsall Arboretum Extension (Rushall Canal) - Walsall;
- h) Walsall - Oldbury (Pudding Green Junction [Walsall Canal]) - Coseley - Wolverhampton (Birmingham Canal [new main line]) - Wednesfield - New Invention - Bloxwich - Birchills (Wyrley & Essington Canal) - Walsall;
- i) Walsall via Walsall Arboretum Extension to Rushall Canal - Rushall Junction (Great Barr, M6 Jc.8) - Hamstead - Spaghetti Junction (Tame Valley Canal) - City Centre (Birmingham & Fazeley Canal) - Pudding Green Junction (Birmingham Canal [new main line]) - Walsall Town Wharf (Walsall Canal);
- j) Broad Street Basin, Wolverhampton - Oxley (21 locks) - Oxley - Tettenhall (Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal);
- k) Walsall - Ocker Hill (road) - Tipton (rail path and road) - Dudley Port - Brades Village (old main line) - Pudding Green Junction (new main line) - Walsall (Walsall Canal);
- l) Priestfield Metro stop to Wolverhampton City Centre (railway path, street, towpath).

## II. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. WE URGENTLY NEED TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGIC WEST MIDLANDS-WIDE NETWORK

Obviously, the development of cycling and walking paths and network has been very much in the hands of the District Councils and they have each dealt with the opportunities that exist within their boundaries. I was hugely impressed, for example, by the quality of the towpath and its environment between Wolverhampton City Centre down the 21 locks to Oxley, which must have taken a lot of partnership working with British Waterways, now the Canal and Rivers Trust.

You can also cycle, likewise on a high-quality made-up towpath, from the city centre to Wednesfield, but you then get a long gap of often very poor towpath between there, New Invention and Bloxwich, south of which, from Beechdale down to Walsall Town Wharf Centre, you now have new surfacing (and from

Walsall, you can get right down to the Tame Valley Canal at Ocker Hill, Sandwell, on good surfaces, before the next - fairly easily fillable! - gaps appear!)

So, if we want strategic, inclusive, towpath-based links that will attract more users onto the Wryley & Essington Canal between Wolverhampton, Wednesfield, and Walsall, or the Tame Valley and Walsall Canals at Ocker Hill, then we not only have to fill these gaps and provide adequate surfacing, but at the same time address the various impediments to full access that exist along these routes: these same issues will apply in dozens of locations across the region.

*If all partners in the region can co-operate in delivering a strategic, inclusive, network crossing District Council boundaries, with a timetable over a defined (limited) number of years for implementation, then that would produce a framework of key routes and corridors which smaller-scale local initiatives could feed into and out of, as determined by individual District Councils and the communities they serve.*

## **2. WE MUST MAKE A COMMITMENT TO, AND PROGRAMME FOR, FULL INCLUSIVITY**

*All partners need to be signed up to inclusivity, and this includes addressing existing situations where this is not achieved, as well as making sure it's part of the network plan going forward.*

For example, we have an excellent 15 miles of towpath surface between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, branded as a cycle route, but strewn all along the route are random barriers to inclusion. For example, I joined the new main line at Pudding Green Junction, Oldbury, to head towards Wolverhampton, only to find a few hundred metres on, where the branch to Brades Village leaves the new main line, that there's a hump-backed bridge - with steps. That, quite obviously, is difficult for some would-be users, and impossible for others.

Now I fully accept that, with canals, you are dealing with historic infrastructure which, with the best will in the world, isn't always capable of being adapted to modern accessibility standards, but at least we need to have a commitment *and a programme* to achieve the best we possibly can for everyone. *Where there's a will, there's a way!*

## **3. AND WHAT ABOUT THESE DISUSED RAIL LINES?**

*Are we looking at these systematically right across the conurbation to see where there could be scope to use some of them as part of a strategic network? For example:*

(a) Do the Metro plans for Wednesbury to Dudley and Brierley Hill include parallel provision for a cycling and walking route alongside? Is this the default position with all future Metro plans?

(b) In Walsall, the railway line from Lichfield to Walsall, closed in the 1980s, runs parallel to the increasingly busy and congested A461, NCN5 from Walsall town centre gets lost in the under-growth beside Ryecroft Cemetery before a 3-mile stretch of tarmac path takes you via Rushall to Pelsall, at which point the route meanders off on-street through Ryders Hayes Estate before rejoining, not the rail formation, but the less direct Wyrley & Essington canal, to Brownhills.

Meanwhile, volunteers working with Sustrans have cleared three miles of overgrown, often boggy, trackbed from north of Ryders Hayes, right through to the A5 at Watling Street to create a basic cyclable route (a brilliant job!): now, it cries out for investment in a proper tarmac surface or similar, and could be an important element in the creation of a fully-fit-for-purpose, direct, safe, healthy, commuter/recreational route from Lichfield via Brownhills to Walsall and beyond - a great opportunity missed to date. If we're really serious, it now needs realising!

(c) Over a mile of the former the Great Western rail line from Priestfield Metro stop to what was Wolverhampton Low Level Station was surfaced by TfWM fairly recently: its facilities are inclusive, except for several anti-motorcycle barriers and it is routed and signed via street and towpath (via steps only!) into the city centre: *time to address these blocks to full access?*

*These are just examples and potential opportunities I know about and have experienced and seen: there must be many more across the West Midlands, but has there been a systematic review of what's out there and what might be useful, and are there any contact with those who might be helpful, such as Network Rail?*

#### **4. AND FINALLY, PARKS AND GREEN SPACES**

On my lockdown exercise travels, I've seen loads of parks and open spaces in Birmingham and the Black Country. Many of them are blessed with excellent pathways, ideal for recreational use of course, but in some cases, they might just also have potential to become a piece of in the strategic network jigsaw. *Again, as with disused rail lines - has there been/will there be a systematic look with respective partner Councils at what's out there, and what might be of use?*

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