

Division(s): Abingdon East

CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT – 3 JUNE 2010

CONTRA-FLOW CYCLE LANE, EAST SAINT HELEN STREET, ABINGDON

Report by Head of Transport

Introduction

1. This report discusses the principle of introducing a contra-flow cycle lane on the northern most section of East Saint Helen Street in Abingdon; from the junction with Lombard Street to the High Street / Bridge Street junction and considers the results of an informal consultation undertaken in February 2010. The extent of the proposed contra-flow cycle lane is shown on the plan at Annex 1.

Background

2. In May 2001, a 'Preferred Strategy' report written by consultants Halcrow Fox was presented to Oxfordshire County Council, the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils and Abingdon Town Council. The report consisted of the work activities and results of the third and final stage of the Abingdon Integrated Transport and Land Use Study (AbITLUS) and comprised the refinement and development of the agreed approach from Stage Two into a preferred strategy. The overarching aim of the study was to *'identify practical and implementable measures as part of a strategy which will create a more sustainable transport framework and improve the environment of the town as a whole, and its historic centre in particular, without detriment to its vitality and viability'*.
3. One of the key objectives from the Preferred Strategy was *'to promote safer, more pleasant and more convenient conditions for pedestrians and cyclists'*. Particular emphasis was to be placed on improving conditions in the town centre, especially for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users and specific objectives set for the town centre were to be given high priority.
4. The Preferred Strategy included many proposed improvements for pedestrians and cyclists including a network of linked cycle routes in and around Abingdon. Initially, little support was indicated at the public consultation (held in September / October 2000) for contra-flow cycle lanes along one way streets in the town centre and was subsequently not included in the final proposals. However, after another round of public consultations in 2004, a proposed contra-flow cycle lane in East Saint Helen Street was included in the Town Centre Schemes.

5. East Saint Helen Street is situated within the town centre area of Abingdon encompassing a mixture of business and residential properties. The street itself has many issues with space as there are competing demands from traffic, pedestrians, cyclists, taxis and loading, as well as on-carriageway public and residential parking.
6. The northernmost section of East Saint Helen Street, from Lombard Street to its junction with Bridge Street, is part of the National Cycle Network Route 5 (NCR) and yet cyclists are currently signed to dismount and wheel their bicycle in a northbound direction. This is due to East Saint Helen Street being one-way southbound. Many cyclists currently ignore the cyclist dismount signs and cycle, illegally, in a contra-flow direction to the southbound traffic.
7. Many comments were received on the issues around East Saint Helen Street, in particular the lack of cycling facilities in the area which had been highlighted at a public consultation held in July 2004 on the Town Centre Schemes. At the AbITS Steering Group meeting on 2 September 2004, it was agreed that the contra-flow cycle lane would be incorporated into the Town Centre Scheme subject to the necessary safety audit and detailed design. The scheme has been debated on numerous occasions by the AbITS Members Working Group (MWG) which can be seen at Annex 2.

Public Consultation

8. An informal consultation on the East Saint Helen Street contra-flow cycle lane took place between Friday 5 February 2010 and Monday 1 March 2010.
9. Frontagers and key stakeholders (including emergency services, Town and District Councils, cycle groups and parking enforcement) were asked for their views on the principle of the contra-flow cycle lane.
10. During the informal consultation, 77 letters were sent to consultees. Of these, 3 were returned due to the addressee no longer residing at the premises and there were 15 responses in total. Of these, 4 supported and 4 objected to the principle of the contra-flow cycle lane. The remaining 7 consultees did not state a formal preference. A summary of the informal consultation responses is available at Annex 3, along with officer comments.
11. The main comments by informal consultees were:
 - If the contra-flow cycle lane goes ahead there will be a loss of five pay and display car parking spaces which residents can currently use.
 - Loss of parking bays will make it hard to justify the cost of a £100 parking permit which residents are charged to park on-street.
 - The pay and display system in Abingdon is in deficit. Officers from the Parking Enforcement Team at Oxfordshire County Council report that there is strong criticism of taking money with no benefits for residents;
 - Weekly complaints are received about lack of parking for residents in Abingdon.
 - There would be interruption of the historic view of the area with traffic signage.

- The contra-flow will not make it any less dangerous as a cyclist and may even create a greater hazard with pedestrians, cars and delivery trucks.
12. Although there were four respondents in favour of the principle of the contra-flow cycle lane and four respondents against it, of the seven that did not state a preference; the majority voiced concerns regarding the contra-flow scheme. However, a large number of those contacted did not reply to the consultation. Overall, of the comments received, there appears to be more concern than support for the contra-flow cycle lane.

Officer Comments

13. The principle of the proposed scheme is to legalise the current practice of cycling on East Saint Helen Street against the flow of traffic and to link the two sections of the NCR 5, thus encouraging more people to utilise the facility and cycle around Abingdon. Despite the lack of a cycle lane currently, there have been no reported accidents between cars, pedestrians and cyclists in the last five years.
14. Issues concerning the safety of the proposed contra-flow cycle lane have been raised during the consultation by both consultees and County officers and engineers. The taxi rank currently located at the northern end of East Saint Helen Street is due to be relocated to Queen Street / Broad Street. Although East Saint Helen Street will be subject to a decrease in speed limit to 20mph (as approved at the former Transport Decisions Committee on 11 February 2010), the freeing up of road space caused by the removal of the taxis may enable motorists to increase their speed on that section of road, thus posing more of a danger to on - carriageway cyclists.
15. The area in which the contra-flow cycle lane would be situated is susceptible to ponding when heavy rain occurs. This could force cyclists out into the middle of the road thus increasing the chances of a collision with vehicles. In order for the ponding issue to be rectified, the section of road will need to be re-surfaced and the drainage issues will need to be fixed. This will significantly increase the cost of the scheme.
16. East Saint Helen Street is a primary diversionary route when High Street is closed off, for example, to accommodate the fair during October. If prior warning is given, the contra-flow cycle lane could be suspended for the duration of the diversion. However, if there is an emergency which causes East Saint Helen Street to become the primary diversionary route, there would not be enough notice to suspend the contra-flow cycle lane and the risk of an incident could increase further due to the additional traffic that would be travelling down the road.

17. As detailed in paragraph 2, East Saint Helen Street deals with many competing spatial demands on a daily basis. To coincide with the works that will take place on the County Hall area by Abingdon Town Council in the 2010/11 financial year, Oxfordshire County Council will be implementing a footway to the front of County Hall, to enable access around the building. Due to this the informal loading / unloading that takes place at the front of County Hall, will be formalised with a new loading bay on East Saint Helen Street to the rear of the County Hall. Although the removal of the taxi rank frees up road space, the loading bay will place additional demands on the new road layout.
18. The implementation of the contra-flow cycle lane would result in the loss of five pay and display parking spaces which visitors, residents and disabled drivers can currently use. There are not enough parking spaces for residents therefore taking away five spaces in this area would be detrimental. In conjunction, residents pay £100 per parking permit for the ability to park on East Saint Helen Street (and surrounding area) and the removal of these parking spaces would make it difficult to justify the cost and value for money of the on-street parking permit.

Conclusion

19. Oxfordshire County Council officers fully support the aims and objectives of the AbITS strategy and continue to actively seek ways to promote more sustainable ways to travel and explore alternative options to support the aim of a sustainable transport network.
20. Officers are aware of the need for adequate cycling facilities in and around Abingdon. However, in the case of the contra-flow cycle lane in East Saint Helen Street it is felt that the overall impact would create more problems for residents and road users than it would solve as outlined in this report. Therefore, Oxfordshire County Council Officers recommend that the best course of action would be to remove the contra-flow cycle lane from the Abingdon Town Centre Scheme due to the safety, spatial and parking issues at this location as outlined above.
21. Road Safety Officers at Oxfordshire County Council state that, from experience, contra-flow layouts seem to work well in safety terms. Therefore, should a contra-flow cycle scheme be identified as a suitable scheme at another location in Abingdon or Oxfordshire each scheme should be explored on its own merit.

Financial and Staff Implications

22. If this scheme is not implemented, there will be a saving of £10,000.
23. There are no staffing implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION

24. **The Cabinet Member for Transport is RECOMMENDED to:**
- (a) approve that the contra-flow cycle lane be removed from the Abingdon Town Centre scheme;**
 - (b) authorise officers to continue to explore options of implementing other cycle schemes within Abingdon.**

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Background papers: Informal consultation documentation

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