

CHESTERFIELD AND DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

Proposed Chesterfield East–West Walking and Cycling Route

To the Rt Hon Grant Shapps
Secretary of State for Transport

1 **Introductory**

This paper embodies the Civic Society's latest views on this scheme, and has been prepared following the publication on 6 October 2021 by Derbyshire County Council of a report to be considered by its Cabinet on 14 October. In brief, the society remains very strongly opposed to the scheme, and (having failed in its earlier submission to the county council to dissuade it from proceeding) now wishes to appeal to the Secretary of State in the hope that he will intervene and halt proceedings. This will not only save £1.68m. of the public's money but will also avoid severe damage to the appearance of an attractive western suburb of Chesterfield and the inconvenience to residents of the eastern side of the Borough which would result from a road closure proposed as part of the scheme. In places, pedestrian safety and amenity will be severely compromised. We also believe that the county council's public consultation on the scheme was badly flawed and that it does not provide a safe basis on which to proceed.

2 Chesterfield & District Civic Society has been in existence since 1964, when it helped to stop the building of a shopping mall and persuaded the borough council to undertake a conservation-led development. This became a model for other historic town centres. The society has considerable expertise in planning, architecture and heritage within its membership, and its chairman has recently been elected a trustee of the national body, Civic Voice. It is strictly non-political, does not favour one part of Chesterfield over another, and always takes a balanced view of development proposals which it is asked to comment on. We support efforts to encourage more cycling in the town, but not at the expense of damaging the built environment or inconveniencing the great majority of local residents who do not cycle.

3 **Background**

Several years ago the county council created an off-road walking and cycling route through Chesterfield, known as the Hipper Trail, which runs from west

to east between Somersall Park and the railway station, using in part the trackbed of a disused branch railway. Casual observation suggests that the route has been little used by either pedestrians or cyclists, partly because sections are unattractive. In any case, set as it is amongst hills, Chesterfield is not historically a 'cycling town' and most people travel locally either on foot or by public or private motor transport. We do not believe that, however much of the public's money the county council spends, this will change significantly. The justification for the new scheme, set out in paras. 4.3–4.5 of the county council's cabinet paper is, in our view, facile and without merit.

- 4 As the cabinet paper states (para 4.2), in November 2020 the authority was awarded £1.68m., borne on the Secretary of State's Vote, to create what it describes as a 'new east-west walking and cycling route across Chesterfield'. Most of the route in fact already exists and so is not new. What is proposed is an upgrading of the existing route, to which little objection has been raised, and its extension at its eastern and western ends, to which there have been very substantial objections from local residents.

- 5 There has also been a significant change in terminology since the scheme was first announced as a 'cycle superhighway'. Drawings produced for a consultation exercise earlier in 2021 show that the county council proposes to extend the route at its western end by building a high-speed, two-way reserved cycle track along the northern side of Chatsworth Road, with a spur along a 1m x 20m well-walked footway which runs back from an unsafe junction. Omission of the medians will ensure that right-turners will block traffic movement. The well-used southernmost footway will be overrun by both HGVs and other vehicles, as this is the only way to allow emergency vehicles to pass when eastbound traffic is queuing, which it frequently is. As occurs in similar situations elsewhere, visitors and service vehicles will park on the footway clear of the carriageway and probably in places where inter-visibility is poor. The arrangements around Storrs Road junction favour cyclists and show little regard for the needs of pedestrians or a sense of place. This is intimidatory and cannot be described as a 'walking route'. It would be unpleasant and in places extremely hazardous for pedestrians to use. There is already such a route along both sides of Chatsworth Road in the form of the existing pavement.

A bogus and flawed ‘consultation exercise’

- 5 Earlier in 2021 the county council engaged outside contractors to conduct an online consultation exercise and to consult those whom it regarded as ‘stakeholders’. The consultants’ lengthy report is appended to the cabinet paper. We consider this consultation to be bogus in conception and fatally flawed in execution, and that its ‘conclusions’ are an unsafe basis on which to proceed.

- 6 The exercise was bogus in that the scheme was presented as a *fait accompli* to which there was no alternative in terms of route or design. That is not the case. The questions were designed, as so often in exercises of this sort, to elicit replies in favour of the scheme.

- 7 It was fatally flawed in execution because the consultants were, according to information obtained by the Civic Society under the Freedom of Information Act, contracted to deliver notices to 4,041 private houses on 117 streets which lie on or close to the route, inviting them to take part in the consultation. The Civic Society has been advised by residents of twelve of the roads on that list (at both the western and eastern ends of the route) that they did not receive this notice, and by a resident of Queen Mary Road, who has consulted neighbours via Facebook, of a further six roads in the same position. Most seriously, we have established beyond reasonable doubt that residents of the section of Chatsworth Road along which the new cycle track is to be built (who include the immediate past chairman of the Civic Society) did not receive the notice, nor did those living in cul-de-sacs off Chatsworth Road. The streets concerned are listed in an Annexe.

- 8 We have also been advised that, while canvassing in the 2020 county council elections, both the sitting Conservative member for the division that includes Chatsworth Road and the Liberal Democrat candidate discovered that virtually no electors living on or near the cycle route knew anything of the proposal. When told about it, most were strongly opposed. The Conservative member, Mr John Boulton, noted that, of 71 households from which he obtained a response, 64 were opposed to the scheme, five were in favour and two were indifferent, i.e. it was opposed by a majority of more than twelve to one. That is very different from the two to one majority in favour reported in the cabinet paper (para. 5.7) . We believe that if circulars had been delivered to all the 117 streets to which they were supposed to have been delivered, the overall outcome of the consultation would also have been different.

- 9 Mr Boulton lost his seat at the election and attributes his defeat entirely to hostility to the cycle route. The successful Liberal Democrat candidate, County Councillor Paul Niblock, does not dissent from that view. We consider that the candidates' findings confirm that the contractors did not distribute circulars to householders in accordance with their contract and that for this reason both the statistics and the conclusions in the cabinet paper (paras. 5.7–5.8) are worthless. We also consider that the county council has been negligent in using the public's money to pay the contractors' invoice without checking that they had done the work as agreed.
- 10 For all these reasons we consider that it would be grossly improper for the county council to go ahead with the scheme on the basis of the purported 'findings' of the 'consultation'. We do not accept the conclusion of the cabinet paper (para 5.12) that the exercise demonstrated 'overall broad support' for the proposal or that it justifies the expenditure of more of the public's money to continue with its design and implementation. All it demonstrated is that the county council used incompetent contractors and failed properly to supervise their work, and that (as has often been observed) it is easy enough to get the answers you want from any survey if you draft the questions in a certain way, especially if you also fail to consult those most directly affected. We do not consider that any weight can safely be placed on the supposed 'findings' of this exercise.
- 11 Although not consulted as a 'key stakeholder', the Civic Society became aware of the 'consultation' and submitted a paper to the contractors. This was a carefully compiled, detailed statement, which drew on the professional expertise of our members, combined with local knowledge. Only a very brief summary of our own summary of the paper was included in the consultants' report. For this reason we will reiterate here our objections to the proposed western extension of the route here, and our position on the proposed eastern extension.

Objections to the western extension of the existing route

- 12 The object of the western extension is to provide a safer cycling route between Holymoorside, a village just outside the built-up area of Chesterfield, and the town centre. At present the main route between the two is formed by Holymoorside Road and Chatsworth Road. The county council originally intended to create an off-road route for cyclists by upgrading an existing footpath which runs through privately owned farm land between Greendale Avenue (a cul-de-

sac off Holymoore Road) and Somersall Lane, from where the present Hipper Trail continues into the town centre. The county council later abandoned this idea, claiming that negotiations with the landowners had broken down, mainly over questions of public liability and maintenance. The landowners have repeatedly indicated their support in principle for a cycle track on this route. It provides the only flat route into Holymoorside and is much shorter and more commodious for cyclists than the Chatsworth Road route.

- 13 We believe that, instead of pressing on with the proposed scheme for Chatsworth Road, fresh efforts should be made to reach agreement with the landowners for the use of the Greendale Avenue route. We suspect that similar problems have arisen (and been overcome) elsewhere and that a solution could almost certainly be found, possibly with the assistance of the Department for Transport. We are not aware that the Department has been asked to help resolve this difficulty.
- 14 Even if the Greendale Avenue route has to be abandoned, there remains another route between Holymoorside and Somersall Lane, formed by Cotton Mill Hill, Walton Back Lane and Yew Tree Drive. These are unclassified roads which carry only light traffic and are safely used by cyclists, thus avoiding the need for building on Chatsworth Road.
- 15 The county council's current proposals involve building a new, two-way high-speed cycle track along the north side of Chatsworth Road between its junctions with Holymoore Road and Storrs Road. Chatsworth Road forms part of the A619 which (together with the A6 and A623) is in turn part of a major route between the Manchester region and the M1 at junction 29. It carries not only local traffic but also leisure traffic to and from the Peak District National Park, agricultural vehicles and very heavy HGV traffic, including long and wide loads. The building of a cycle track along one side of this road will make the carriageways narrower and, together with the loss of the right-turn medians, less accommodating and more hazardous to both motorists and pedestrians than they are already.
- 16 This section of Chatsworth Road is fully built up on both sides, mainly with private houses. If a two-way cycle track is built on the north side of the road, residents entering or leaving their driveways will be confronted with cyclists moving (virtually silently and possibly at high speed) not merely from west to east (i.e. in the same direction as motor traffic) but also from east to west.

This we consider an avoidable hazard.

- 17 This part of the route also runs past the entrance to a 1300-pupil secondary school, a large block of sheltered accommodation and a doctors' surgery. There is a local shopping centre just to the east of Storrs Road. Many pedestrians use the pavement on the north side of Chatsworth Road, particularly near its junction with Storrs Road, including the elderly or infirm. At times the pavements are functionally too narrow and need improvement. It does not seem sensible to add to the existing difficulties by introducing a high-speed cycle route alongside the existing pavement. To describe the new scheme as a 'walking and cycling route' is particularly silly, since there is already a 'walking route' (i.e. the pavement) and it is clearly undesirable to have cyclists moving at speed next to it. The proposed cycle route would in places compromise walking even to the point of safety. We would have welcomed improvements to this section of Chatsworth Road to make walking safer and more attractive, and improve a sense of place, but this approach seems not to have occurred to the county council engineers.
- 18 Because of all these objections to the building of a two-way, high-speed cycle 'superhighway' along Chatsworth Road, and the existence of alternative routes between Holymoorside and Chesterfield, the Civic Society considers the county council's plan for the western extension of the route is misconceived and should be abandoned.

Objections to the eastern extension of the existing route

- 19 The proposed extension between Chesterfield railway station and Chesterfield Royal Hospital follows two existing minor roads, Crow Lane and Wetlands Lane. Most of Crow Lane, between the entrances to Tapton golf course and Dobbin Clough Farm, has been closed to motor traffic by the county council during the pandemic using emergency powers. The present closure expires on 1 December 2021. The stated reason for the closure, 'to facilitate social distancing' is self-evidently absurd. Crow Lane normally carries little motor traffic and is used to a small extent for recreational walking or cycling. It is perfectly possible for pedestrians to use it without coming anywhere near 2 metres of each other. The widely held view locally is that the road has been closed in the hope of accustoming people to its permanent closure.
- 20 The closure to motor traffic of Crow Lane, which climbs steeply from south to

north, has aroused strong objections from residents of Brimington Common and Calow, for whom it provides an alternative route to and from Chesterfield, avoiding the heavily congested main roads to the north (Manor Road, Chesterfield Road and Brimington Road) and south (Chesterfield Road and Hady Hill). The route also provides an alternative means of access to the Royal Hospital from the town centre. Some 700 local residents have signed a petition objecting to the closure and asking for Crow Lane to be reopened. This is nearly three times the 237 respondents to the county council's 'consultation' who declared themselves in favour of the eastern extension of the cycle route. This petition has recently been submitted to the county council.

- 21 As in the case of the western extension, there are alternatives to the county council's plans. The simplest is to reopen Crow Lane and to allow the small number of cyclists who use it to continue to do so, alongside a small number of motorists and pedestrians. We fail to see why the road has to be closed to the majority of road users simply for the benefit of a handful of cyclists who form a very small minority of users. In addition, cyclists who wish to get from the station or town centre to the Royal Hospital while avoiding Crow Lane can do so by using an existing bridlepath (part of the Trans Pennine Trail) across Tapton golf course to Wheathill Lane, and from there follow that road and Dark Lane (both minor roads which carry very little traffic) to the hospital.
- 22 For these reasons the Civic Society, although initially in favour of the permanent closure of Crow Lane, now considers that this part of the scheme is unnecessary and, like the western extension, should be abandoned.

Conclusion

- 23 The county council's cabinet paper states (para. 6.1) that officers have considered and rejected creating walking and cycling routes elsewhere in Derbyshire, but then ludicrously suggests (para. 6.2) that 'Doing nothing is not considered an appropriate option' since the funding cannot be used for other purposes and would be lost if not spent on the Chesterfield scheme. We can only describe this attitude as badly mistaken; it reflects the deeply ingrained belief of some local government officers that 'if it's there, we've got to spend it'. Given the sums that the country has had to spend to get through the pandemic we believe that abandoning this scheme will avoid unnecessary public expenditure on unwanted projects. If the public's £1.68m. is not spent as the county council proposes it will not be 'lost': it will remain in the public's

hands to spend as the public, not Derbyshire County Council, thinks best.

- 24 Securing trust and integrity are essential for successful local governance, irrespective of the political composition of a particular authority, and in particular, managing the expectations of local communities, with democratic accountability at the heart of effecting change. National guidance advises that 'Before any specific proposal is put forward, the ground must be carefully prepared, with the public persuaded of the need for change and an attractive alternative to the status quo laid out that people can get interested in ...'. Clearly someone was more interested in delivering their project rather than ensuring it is designed to be integral with the needs of local communities.
- 25 We are adamant that the proposed western and eastern extensions of the existing walking and cycling route (previously described, more accurately, as a 'cycle superhighway') across Chesterfield are not wanted by a large majority of local residents, would only be used by a handful of cyclists, would duplicate existing routes, and would represent a serious and avoidable waste of the public's money. We also believe that the county council has not properly consulted the public and in particular failed to advise individual householders affected by the scheme. We therefore urge the Secretary of State to reject the county council's proposals and prevent them going ahead.

Philip Riden
Chairman
Chesterfield and District Civic Society
10 October 2021

Annexe

Streets on which, according to a Derbyshire County Council letter of 16 April 2021 to the chairman of the Civic Society, a circular concerning the proposed walking and cycling route was delivered to individual householders, and for which the society has evidence from the residents named that the circular was not delivered

Affected by proposed western extension:

Chatsworth Road: M. and K. Faubert (no. 478), Dr J.W. and Dr S. Hadfield (no. 666), Dr L. Pemberton (no. 670), B. and R.J. Thompson (no. 672), The Revd Canon and Mrs M. Barnes (no. 674), Dr W.G. and Dr K. Lambert (no. 684), N. and R. Mansell (no. 706), Mr D. Kavanagh (no. 708), K. and J. Davis (no. 762), K. and L. Elliott (no. 669), Mr and Mrs Ling (no. 683), Mr and Mrs Miles (no. 716)

Ryehill Avenue: C. and J. Robinson (no. 19)

Somersall Lane: P. and J. Cattee (no. 19).

Also: **Queen Mary Road, Linden Avenue, Oakfield Avenue, Thornfield Avenue, Westfield Avenue, Somersall Park Road, Storrs Road**
(ex inf. Mrs L. Bellamy, Queen Mary Road)

Affected by proposed eastern extension:

Barry Road: Doram (no. 28), Brennan (no. 38), G. Blackburn (no. 44).

Hathern Close: C. Rawson (no. 8), M. Crich (no. 11), N. Fullwood (no. 16).

Westmoor Road: E. Ainscough (no. 5), L. Fallows (no. 10), P. Cutts (no. 25).

Wheathill Close: D. Hart (no. 3), J. Aluko (no. 6).

Eastmoor Road: A. Cantrell (no. 7), D. Coupe (no. 9).

Manor Road: B. Shrikklady (no. 375), S. Atherton (no. 383).

Grange Park Avenue: H. Butler (no. 3), Lawrence (no. 6), Taylor (no. 22).

Melville Crescent: Rea (no. 3), Sands (no. 4).

Southmoor Close: Dewberry (no. 2), Nellis (no. 5).

Lodge Close: E. Scott (no. 1), A. Herbert (no. 8).