

## Hansard : Westminster Hall : 9 November 2021 : East to West Chesterfield Cycle Route

11:00:00

Philip Davies (in the Chair)

Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate, in line with guidance from the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to take a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate, and this can be done either at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering or leaving the room.

I will call Toby Perkins to move the motion and the Minister to respond. As I am sure they both know, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered East to West Chesterfield cycle route.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I welcome the Government scheme that will help towns such as Chesterfield to develop new cycling infrastructure. I am very much in favour of creating a strong cycling and walking network in Chesterfield and encouraging cycling across the country. I would not want anyone to characterise my contribution to this debate as being anti-cycling or as being a dispute between cyclists and motorists.

It may surprise you, Mr Davies, that I am an occasional cyclist myself, and many of my constituents will have seen me whizzing past them down the hills, or agonisingly plodding up them. In Chesterfield we have better cycling infrastructure than most towns of our size, but I support Derbyshire County Council's restlessness to improve that infrastructure. I am very aware of the limitations of our current network.

Many positive benefits come from further investment in cycling and walking, which can transform our communities. Cycling and walking are great for physical health, for mental health and for our communities. Being able to get out and about means that people can actively participate and engage with their community, which helps to address social isolation and loneliness. Having more people cycling and walking will also do wonders for our local shops and town centres. People who are on foot or bike are less likely to travel as far and are more likely to shop local.

At a time when the high street is under pressure and local shops are closing, we should be cognisant of the powerful rejuvenating effect that both cycling and walking can have on the backbone of our economy. In the week following the start of COP26, when the whole world comes together to discuss how we can combat climate change, we need to acknowledge the environmental benefits of cycling.

This does not mean that we should blindly support each and every project, or that new cycling infrastructure does not need a proper consultation process, which is what people are concerned about when it comes to the east to west Chesterfield cycle route. The controversy surrounds two aspects of the plan. To the east, without any consultation, the council closed

Crow Lane, an extremely steep hill that links the Riverside estate with Brimington Common, in May 2020. Initially for an 18-month period, the council now plans to make the closure permanent. This proposal was part of Chesterfield Royal Hospital's plan to encourage people to cycle to work. One of the critics' key objections to the plan is that closing Crow Lane adds to the traffic on the A632, which is exceptionally busy and is the only route to Chesterfield Royal Hospital. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was driving up the A632 on a Friday and had to pull over, with traffic stood still in both directions, as an ambulance attempted to wind its way down this busy road in an emergency. That is a common situation.

To the west, the proposal is to narrow the extremely busy A619, which links Chesterfield with Bakewell. It is the main road to Manchester and, particularly in the summer, is thronged with visitors to nearby Chatsworth House. We always encourage people to visit our beautiful town and to avail themselves of the Peak district and wonderful Chatsworth. We want visitors to linger in our town centre, not in a traffic jam on the A619. It is important that we do not have proposals that only add traffic to an already fairly congested road.

I have been contacted by countless residents, those who have been most affected by the proposed route, who did not receive any consultation letter or information leaflet from Derbyshire County Council inviting them to give their views. Residents living on the roads off Chatsworth Road, where the biggest impact of the route will be, and many of the people in the Brimington Common area, who are affected by the ongoing closure of Crow Lane, have reported to me that they have had no contact from the council.

I wrote to residents last week, when I secured this debate, to ask whether they had been consulted. Within 24 hours of receiving that letter, 70 residents had already come back to me. Those opposing the scheme outweighed those who supported it by a ratio of about two and a half to one. It is by no means a universal opinion—there are many people who support the route—but in all the consultations I have done, there is a majority against.

In June 2020, along with Stuart Brittain, the then councillor for Brimington, I sent a survey to residents of Crow Lane. We received 283 responses, 63% opposing any closure and 27% supporting it. In response to the letter that I sent last week, both constituents who supported the route and those who opposed it told me that they had never received a consultation letter. Those concerns cannot be dismissed as just disgruntled people unhappy with the suggested route. Even those who support the route say they have never been consulted on it.

The lack of contact from the county council has resulted in my constituents feeling that the proposals are being forced through, while excluding the views of the people who will have to live with their impact. The county council claims that 4,000 letters were sent out and that a small number of people responded, with a majority in support. It is implausible that 700 people should sign a petition against it; that 283 people in Brimington Common alone should respond to my survey, the details of which I sent to the county council; that 70 people should respond within 24 hours of receiving my letter this week; yet only small numbers responded to a consultation that the county council claims to have conducted.

I am sure the Minister agrees that a consultation that fails to hear the views of the people most affected should not be considered legitimate. It feels to me and many of my constituents as if the council made the decision on the route that it wanted and gerrymandered the consultation to match the decision it had already made. That means that alternative routes and legitimate concerns about the current proposals have been wilfully ignored.

Before I go into more detail about the merits of the individual decision, it is relevant to discuss the politics, in the hope that it might make the Minister think twice about it. The east-west cycle route was an issue in the Derbyshire County Council elections in 2021. It pains me to inform you, Mr Davies, that the 2021 Derbyshire County Council elections were a considerable success for the Conservative party, which ended the election with eight more councillors than it started with.

The main variation to that Tory success was in Chesterfield, specifically in the divisions attached to the cycle route. We went into the elections with the two wards most affected having one Labour county councillor representing them and one Conservative county councillor. The Labour councillor in Brimington was elected but the Conservative councillor was not, I think uniquely among Conservative councillors. Both publicly and privately, he has blamed this ill-conceived cycle route for his defeat, and I share his view on that.

I also share the view of local councillors such as Councillor Dean Collins in Brimington that Derbyshire County Council had been provided with better options than using Crow Lane to the east or Chatsworth Road to the west. On that western route, a cross-country path from Somersall to Holymoorside has been in the pipeline for many years and still makes the most sense, in reducing the impact on residents and providing a much more pleasant rural and safer cycling route. The only obstacle to that route was landowners who required clarity about liability for prosecution and upkeep of the route. The county council seems to have used those legitimate concerns as a rather flimsy excuse to scrap the more rural and sympathetic route and instead pursue the idea of narrowing the A619.

Alternative routes have been suggested to the east, which would mean that Crow Lane could be reopened. The route could use the far less developed Dark Lane, instead of Crow Lane, which would help to cut commuting times for my constituents in Brimington and reduce traffic on other heavily congested roads.

The proposed scheme could have an adverse effect on emissions in Chesterfield. The closure of Crow Lane has forced cars on to busier roads such as the A632 which, as I mentioned, serves the Royal Hospital, as well as affecting people wishing to travel to Bolsover and other districts to the east. The road is already blighted by slow-moving traffic. The narrowing of Chatsworth Road is likely to cause traffic to become heavily congested, with the potential for large heavy goods vehicles having difficulty passing one another on that road. I fear that the gains made from encouraging more people on to their bikes could be undermined by the added traffic jams, which would mean that cars remain on Chesterfield roads for far longer than before.

Chatsworth Road is one of the busiest roads in Chesterfield. It is the primary route between the M1 and Manchester for those travelling between the south and the north-west of England. It has a significant amount of HGV and commercial traffic, and is vital for Chesterfield businesses. On Chatsworth Road, as is standard with many urban A and B roads, hatched-line medians are in place to improve safety. These enable vehicles to move towards the median, away from emerging traffic, to overtake parked vehicles more easily and maintain a better distance from the pavement, and they aid safe right-hand turns. The proposals put forward by Derbyshire County Council will see the median removed and the available road narrowed. With such large vehicles using Chatsworth Road, I am concerned that these measures will make it considerably more dangerous.

The plans also reduce the number of pedestrian crossings and they do not extend across the proposed cycle path, creating an additional risk to pedestrians. I share the concerns of many constituents regarding the danger and the traffic congestion that will be created at the

junctions along Chatsworth Road. These problems would be avoided with the proposed route through Holymoorside to Somersall Park. I am anxious about supporting any scheme that has the potential to increase the risk to pedestrians, cyclists and all other road users. The county council needs to listen to constituents and provide answers to their concerns. We need a plan that is right for Chesterfield, not just one that meets the funding criteria decided in Whitehall.

The residents who have contacted me are generally people who are very much in favour of improving our cycling infrastructure, but they have genuine concerns about the safety of the proposed route along Chatsworth Road, the ongoing unfair disruption caused by the Crow Lane closure, and they worry that the plans will lead to more congested roads.

The closure of Crow Lane, which the council wishes to make permanent, has been handled in a completely unacceptable fashion, which has led to widespread anger among constituents in the Brimington Common area and in Calow in the Bolsover constituency. Those constituents now have longer commutes to work, spend more time sitting in traffic and have added difficulties on the school run. The closure of the road was initially proposed during the first lockdown; we were informed that it would be for three weeks. It was a measure that I supported to help staff in the heat of the pandemic to be able to cycle to work and avoid public transport when travelling to work. I have to say that cycling up Crow Lane to the back entrance of Chesterfield Royal Hospital is not for the faint-hearted—it is a very steep hill. When surveys have been done, there are very small numbers of Royal Hospital staff cycling to work. Without any consultation or communication with residents, Crow Lane's three-week closure turned into an 18-month closure and it now appears it is going to be made permanent.

The voices of residents and the representations from local councillors and me have been completely ignored, and the closure has remained in place without any real discussion. We have seen the same disregard for local representatives in the county council's consultation. The county council emailed me to ask about my availability for a meeting to discuss the cycle path proposals. My office provided details about my availability, but instead the county council picked a date when I was out of the country. We contacted the county council again to make it clear that an alternative date would be needed. The local ward councillors—including the leader of Chesterfield Borough Council, Councillor Tricia Gilby, who is a huge supporter of cycling—and the local county councillors also made it clear that an alternative date was needed. There was plenty of time for an alternative date to be found, but the county council went ahead with the meeting, entirely disregarding local representatives. That feels like a deliberate attempt to silence the voice of local people.

I therefore call on Derbyshire County Council to pause their plans and re-engage with residents in the affected areas, so that their views are heard and fully considered. I have also raised a complaint with the local government ombudsman regarding the consultation and the decision-making process. I would appreciate the Minister's views on this situation and his saying whether or not he is satisfied that a scheme funded by his Department is going ahead without the views of local residents being heard, apparently with a deliberate attempt to diminish the voices of those who oppose it. Does the Department for Transport have any guidelines for local authorities on the minimum standards required for the consultation process, in order that they can access funding from the Department's scheme, and will the Minister investigate to see whether Derbyshire County Council's consultation adheres to those minimum standards?

Three years ago, I pressed the Department for Transport to provide ring-fenced funding for local authorities for cycling and walking infrastructure, so of course I welcome any such funding that we can secure in Chesterfield. However, I am absolutely determined

that such funding should not be set up so that projects are designed to fit centrally developed criteria, rather than being based on what cycling infrastructure is best for an individual town and its people.

It has been suggested that the funding that the Government have brought forward in this respect would not be available for a rural scheme and is only available for urban schemes. If that is the case, I would be interested to hear from the Minister why that is so.

Would either the Minister or his colleague—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who is responsible for cycling infrastructure and who, I understand, was unable to attend this debate; he very kindly contacted me to say that he already had a commitment to be in Saudi Arabia—be willing to meet me to discuss the funding scheme, the current proposals and whether other routes would qualify for funding, as well as the question that I have asked about the consultation process?

In conclusion, I do not want this debate to become one that pits cyclists against motorists, because the majority of my constituents who have contacted me support cycling infrastructure; they just have concerns about this particular route. Unfortunately, however, Derbyshire County Council's approach has polarised opinion and left many of my constituents feeling ignored and disenfranchised.

With every major planning decision, there will always be people who remain opposed to it and remain angry, but if a proper consultation process has been followed, with every view given equal weighting, then at least people know that the process has been fair. I do not believe that Derbyshire County Council's process has involved a fair consultation. That is a failure of process and of democracy, so I urge the Minister to do whatever he can to ensure that Derbyshire County Council pauses its plans and undertakes a proper consultation with my constituents. After that consultation, if DCC still presses ahead with its proposals, that will be fair enough, but at least the people of Chesterfield, particularly those most affected by these proposals, will have had their views fully heard and considered.

11:18:00

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I start by thanking the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) for raising this important issue.

May I also say how happy I am personally to respond to a debate on cycling, because my constituency of Pendle is home to Hope Technology in Barnoldswick, which created the bikes used by Team GB at the Tokyo Olympics? My constituency is very proud of its record on cycling, and I echo much of what the hon. Gentleman said about the importance of supporting cycling.

Before I turn to the hon. Gentleman's specific concerns about the east-west cycle route in his beautiful constituency, let me say a few words about Government support for cycling and walking, or active travel, which I am pleased he supported in his speech.

We really are at a now or never moment when it comes to reducing emissions and stemming the rise in global temperatures. As transport is our biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions, we need more people to change their travel habits, choosing cleaner, more sustainable and healthier ways to get around.

We must also recognise that the profile of walking and cycling has never been higher.



The pandemic has fundamentally changed our relationship with travel. We went from a car-dependent economy, where a quarter of all journeys by car were under 2 miles to one where active travel has ended up flourishing. Cycle rates went up by 46% in 2020 compared with 2019, and a million more people started walking for leisure. Travel restrictions obviously played a part in that, but there was clearly pent-up demand for active travel, which existed before the pandemic brought about the conditions for a release valve. That is why I am confident that we can achieve the Government's ambition of ensuring that half of all journeys by 2030 are cycled or walked.

We are building on the momentum we have seen over the past 20 months by investing an unprecedented £2 billion over the next five years, delivering new walking and cycling routes, wider pavements and safer junctions across the country. We have already issued 400,000 bike repair vouchers, delivered £18 million of Bikeability training for children and parents and helped extend the Walk to School outreach programme to 1,000 primary schools. Step by step, we are giving people the confidence to see active travel as a practical means of transport, rather than just a form of leisure or sport.

To maintain progress, we need the help of local authorities. We need bold and ambitious proposals that deliver real change for active travellers. That means properly segregated cycle lanes, street architecture that encourages people to walk, and measures that treat cyclists as vehicles, not pedestrians. Last month we doubled down on our commitment to active travel. The spending review set out a significant uplift in funding through the £5.7 billion city region sustainable transport settlements, which gives transport authorities the flexibility to plan and deliver long-term improvements to cycling and walking.

We are making it easier for local authorities to make these changes. Our recent changes to the highway code will help with this, as will our support for school streets to enable more children to walk to school. We are also updating our design guidance for streets to ensure local authorities make decisions that prioritise people and places over motorists. This design guidance, which will help create more sustainable, healthy and active communities, should be published next year.

I realise that in recent months there have been a lot of negative comments about measures to support active travel, but opinion surveys regularly show that the majority of people support these improvements to their local communities. Two thirds of respondents to a Government-commissioned survey were supportive of reallocating road space to walking or cycling across towns and cities in England. Making our streets more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists is without doubt the right thing to do, because it is not just active travel that benefits; we all do. More people cycling and walking means fewer cars on the road, less congestion and an economy that is not held up by gridlock. It means cleaner air and less pollution, creating healthier communities and better spaces to live and work.

I will now turn to the specific scheme in Chesterfield, about which the hon. Member spoke so eloquently. One thing that can be said for sure about any meaningful cycle lane is that it will have its supporters and its detractors. Reallocating road space in favour of people cycling inevitably means less road space for other modes of transport, so getting the design right is critical. There is always a balance to be struck. It is not for central Government to design cycle lanes in Chesterfield—or anywhere else for that matter. Local authorities are the ones who must decide where the balance of the interest lies, taking into account the statutory network management duty guidance, which we have made available.

The guidance makes clear that in many cases a traditional consultation exercise may not fully capture local views. The results of traditional consultations can sometimes be

deceptive, because respondents tend to be those who are most passionate, either for or against the scheme in question. That is why genuine and thorough engagement with local people is so important, including through the use of objective methods, such as professional polling, to provide a genuine picture of local opinion, rather than listening only to the loudest voices.

The Department has always said that local authorities should seek the views of a representative sample of the local population as a whole on their proposals. Our own public opinion surveys suggest that there is often a silent majority who are either in favour of or neutral about new cycle lanes or low traffic neighbourhoods. That is not the impression that we get from media coverage or from traditional consultations that tend to polarise the debate. Of course, local authorities must listen to the opponents of schemes as well as those in favour, and must make sure that any changes make sense. No meaningful active travel scheme is ever universally popular. Local authorities should not expect or require universal support for their schemes, and should avoid allowing any group to exercise a veto on them.

Given all the benefits of active travel, it has one of the best returns on investment for the Government. The economy, the environment and public health all receive an active travel dividend. Cycling and walking must be a core part of that future. Schemes must be properly designed to the appropriate design standards, and local authorities must listen to the views of local people. Getting more people walking and cycling is the right thing to do, and the pandemic, for all its disruption and devastation, has given us a golden opportunity to make a lasting change. Let us not waste that chance.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said today. I am more than happy to meet him, and I know that the Minister with responsibility for cycling, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), will be happy to meet him. I am also sure that the hon. Gentleman's council has heard his remarks loud and clear. I thank him once again for calling this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11:26:00

Sitting suspended.