

Transport Planning
Room 120
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4QD

29th November 2024

Boniface Trail Consultation

Dear Transport Planning team,

The Exeter Civic Society is writing to comment on Devon County Council's proposals for the Boniface Trail, a multi-use trail between Crediton and Exeter. We are commenting on this consultation because Exeter is a congested city and the number of vehicles entering the city from our rural hinterland, particularly single occupancy cars, must be reduced. If cycle routes such as this one are to be successful, they need to be direct, fast and safe, otherwise they will only provide a recreational route, which will be a huge expense to justify, and not contribute to reducing congestion.

The Society strongly supports the construction of the proposed trail however it considers that there are other routes which could be considered which would overcome some of the problems implicit in the two options proposed by the Council.

As you are aware, the Council's two proposals are a route alongside the A377 and an alternative trail through lanes largely to the north of the A377. As explained, the route alongside the A377 is difficult and potentially expensive in particular for the half between Newton St Cyres and Cowley Bridge. This route is also potentially dangerous and people using it will breathe vehicle exhaust fumes. The route through the lanes would be much less expensive and quicker to implement however it is considered by the Society to be unsafe and in parts unreasonably hilly.

The lanes to the North of the rail line and A377 road are used by a lot of traffic particularly when, as is often the case, there are road works or accidents on the A377. From personal experience of cycling along the lanes, they are unsafe, particularly for children and especially during rush hours. Also, as you pointed out, the part of the lanes route through Upton Pyne is too steep for regular commuting or recreational cycling. The final section of the proposed lanes route along St Andrews Road to the E18 at Exwick is currently quite unsuitable for cycling or pedestrians at any time but particularly during rush hours. It is difficult to envisage how it could be made suitable for use as part of the proposed trail.

In summary, the Society objects to the lanes option on safety grounds unless the Council was proposing to buy land beside the lanes for the trail – as has been done elsewhere. Even this suggestion however would result in an indirect trail and does not overcome the steepness of some of the route.

The Society suggests that the best option for the trail which meets the five Design Principles set out in the proposals is a route alongside the rail line from Crediton rail station to the E19 trail at Cowley Bridge. A safety fence will be needed between the trail and the rail line as has been done elsewhere such as along the Bristol and Bath Railway Path where it runs beside the Avon Valley Railway. It is assumed that at some stage Network Rail will want to make the line dual track again. This will mean that a trail beside the railway will either need to be on stilts in the adjoining fields or it will need to be on a widened rail bed (or a mixture of both). At the four places where there are road bridges over the railway, a trail following this route will need to go up and across the road.

If the assumption about Network Rail's intentions is incorrect and there are no plans to make the line dual track again, then the need for stilts or a widened rail bed quite clearly reduces significantly. At the Cowley Bridge end of the trail, an additional bridge would however be required but this is believed to be necessary regardless of the option selected – see below.

If there are overriding reasons why the trail could not go alongside the railway all the way from Crediton station to Cowley Bridge, then it is believed that there is a compromise solution based on the route going partly alongside the A377. Breaking this option into sections:

- **Crediton Station to Home Farm, Newton St Cyres.** For this section we suggest that the Trail follow the route outlined by the Council along the Northern side of the A377 which, as explained, involves some minor road alignment.
- **Home Farm, Newton St Cyres to Half Moon Village.** The Society suggests that this option for the trail should leave the A377 at the 30 mph sign before Newton St Cyres and then go down past Home Farm using the existing sealed private road to the road bridge over the River Creedy on the lane to Newton St Cyres rail station. It is suggested that here the trail should go over the road bridge (with appropriate signage) and then immediately turn right and follow the footpath which forms part of the Devonshire Heartland Way along beside the River Creedy until it comes to a T junction by a footbridge over the river (OS grid reference SX 895 976).
- **Half Moon Village to New Bridge (on the lane from Langford).** From the footpath T junction mentioned above, it is suggested that the disused lane up to the A377 be sealed to provide access to/from the trail for Half Moon residents. It would be possible for the trail to use this lane and then to go behind

the Half Moon houses and run alongside the A377 to New Bridge (on the lane to Langford). However, it is thought to be preferable for the trail to follow the footpath which runs northwest from the footpath T junction to the pedestrian crossing over the rail line. From this crossing to New Bridge, it is believed that the only appropriate route is for the trail to run alongside the railway.

- **New Bridge to Cowley Bridge.** For this section it is believed that a route following the rail line is again the only sensible option. The narrowness of the highway, and the proliferation of side roads, on road parking and private drive access, makes the highway wholly unsuitable as a cycle route. Also, as you will be aware, the bridges over the River Exe and the main rail line at Cowley Bridge are completely unsuitable for pedestrians or cyclists. There is no footpath at all on either river bridge and, quite regardless of the Boniface Trail, pedestrian and cycle bridges are urgently needed. The risk that local pedestrians or walkers using either the Exe Valley Way or the Devon Heartland Way would be hit by vehicles using the bridges is completely unacceptable. The Society suggests that a new foot and pedestrian bridge should be built as the highest priority, and this bridge should in turn link the Boniface Trail to the proposed E19 route from Cowley Bridge to St David's station. The cost of this part of the Boniface Trail could be significantly cheaper if a link to the E19 cycle route is made at the Cowley Bridge junction. The new bridge could be a similar structure to that alongside Bridge Road on the A379.
- **Cowley Bridge to St David's Station.** The potential routes for the E19 are outside the scope of this consultation however this route will impact the detail of a new bridge over the railway and river. Rather than E19 running immediately beside Cowley Bridge Road, it is suggested that consideration should be given to using the flood relief works embankment to provide a cycle and pedestrian trail partly on stilts beside the main railway line to St David's station.

It is suggested that DCC open discussions with Network Rail immediately to ascertain areas where a parallel cycle route is possible because this option is the most direct and will avoid hills and road vehicle pollution and will therefore be the most attractive to cyclists.

During development of the project, it is suggested that emphasis should be on journeys to and from Exeter so that the Boniface Trail assists in reducing congestion. The trail should be built out towards Crediton from the Exeter end.

Conclusions

It is concluded that:

- The 'Lanes option' is unsafe.
- The best option is a trail alongside the rail line.
- If the rail line option is not feasible then an adaptation of the 'A377 option' should be pursued.
- Regardless of the Boniface Trail, foot and cycle bridges are urgently needed at Cowley Bridge.

Yours faithfully

Charles Curnock

Member, Strategic Planning & Highways Group, for ECS Planning Sub-Committee