

Woking Cycle Users' Group Statement on Shared Use

1. It is very important that Woking Town Centre remains safe for everyone. It is important that it doesn't become a 'no go area' for any group, especially vulnerable pedestrians who have limited other public places they can go to and feel safe. However having looked at many sources of evidence we can find nothing to support the idea that cycling should be banned from Woking Town Centre on safety or indeed any other grounds.
2. The fact that cyclists may sometimes be perceived as weaving in and out of pedestrians is not generally a cause for concern but recognises that those cyclists are seeking to give room to pedestrians. In practice in our experience the speed of cyclists in the shared use areas is much slower than would be the case on roads. This shows that the effect of pedestrians in slowing cyclists which is mentioned in the DfT study is happening in Woking exactly as predicted. No avoiding action is expected of pedestrians. A cyclist will always seek to avoid a collision with a pedestrian and will take any avoiding action necessary.
3. The fact that there may be one or two inconsiderate cyclists going too fast is not a reason to rescind the shared use order. Those irresponsible cyclists would be unlikely to obey a prohibition on cycling in any event. A prohibition newly introduced would be difficult to enforce and such enforcement would add to the costs of rescinding the shared use order.
4. There is a large amount of research into safety in shared use areas, however out of all this research only one carried out by Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) themselves seems to find evidence of safety problems. Other sources of related information include: government guidelines, published statistics, insurance premiums, research study conclusions and the results of the trial in Woking. In none of these can we find any evidence to suggest that shared use is inherently unsafe.
5. As Guide Dogs for the Blind come up with such starkly different conclusions, we have looked at their research methods and campaign in more depth to try and find out why. We can't find any evidence of GDB using any third party evidence in their research or campaign to help them come to their conclusions.
6. Our view is that both the research and the campaign methodologies used by GDB are deeply flawed and misguided. In our more definitive paper (authored by Steve Millard and recently circulated to councillors and others¹) we have used published evidence to support our conclusions that:
 - The research itself is not sufficiently robust to be able to draw any sound conclusions about the safety or the suitability of 'shared space'.
 - The research methods and the campaign are likely to have lead to an escalation of perceptions of conflict and danger.

¹ This paper can readily be accessed at www.wokingcycle.org.uk/shared_space_-_open_letter.html

- Thus the GDB research can't even be used to accurately gauge perceptions of danger among the visually impaired, as those perceptions are likely have been altered by the research methodology and campaign itself.
 - The people most likely to suffer from these escalated perceptions of danger are those the campaign seeks to help. The fear induced is likely to reduce their independence and freedom, as the level of fear is out of line with reality.
7. By contrast there is ample evidence from many research projects referred to in our longer paper that cyclists sharing space with pedestrians is neither dangerous nor undesirable. The overall conclusion of the Department for Transport on this issue is that "*Observation revealed no real factors to justify excluding cyclists from pedestrian areas, suggesting that cycling could be more widely permitted without detriment to pedestrians.*"²
8. Considering the strong evidence in support of allowing cycling in pedestrianised areas and the flimsy evidence against it, it would be very difficult to justify preventing cycling in Woking Town Centre based on the evidence available. We therefore believe that the shared space should be retained.
9. What would be the effect of a ban on cycling? If a ban is introduced it would likely have all of the following outcomes compared with not introducing a ban:
- Frustration and anger at the ban.
 - Frustration and anger because of people breaking the ban.
 - More 'them and us', less social cohesion.
 - The fear people have would be further justified and intensified by the ban.
 - This fear would further limit the independence of vulnerable people.
 - There would be pressure to enforce the ban, yet it would be difficult to justify resources for enforcement given the available evidence and DfT guidance.
 - The increased negative image of cycling, together with the lower perceived official support for cycling would lead to less cycle use and more car use.
 - Less choice.
 - Less child independence, worse child health.
 - There would be more overall danger because of increased car traffic.
 - More congestion from increased car traffic, leading to increased frustration and anger amongst drivers.

² Traffic Advisory Leaflet 9/93, published in August 1993

- More traffic leads to the vicious circle of worse road conditions for cycling leading to a further decline in cycling, leading in turn to more traffic...
- More health costs and worse health outcomes from higher obesity and lower fitness levels causing lower life expectancy and wellbeing.
- An increase in local air and noise pollution.
- An increase in CO2 emissions.
- More vulnerability of the local economy to oil price shocks.
- Fewer visitors and less vibrancy to the town centre.
- Less chance of winning Government money for the borough under the new Local Sustainable Transport Fund

Considering the many and important negative effects that a ban would have, it is important to make a sound decision on this, and not base it on unfounded fears, even though such fears are genuinely held.

10. Some observers have commented that it would not be unreasonable to ask cyclists to dismount and walk with their bicycles through the town centre. While it is true that cyclists could get off their cycles and walk through the shared use area, to insist on this would have the following effects:
- A person pushing a cycle takes up more space and is less manoeuvrable than when cycling, causing greater inconvenience to pedestrians
 - Carrying heavy shopping on a bicycle will increase the instability of the machine plus rider
 - Cyclists are much less likely to go through the town centre if they have to get off and walk and then remount. It is the continuity of routes through as well as to the town centre that is most important in encouraging cycling
 - Elderly cyclists are much more comfortable and safe when riding slowly than when being required to push a laden cycle
 - There is no need and no evidence to support introducing this requirement
11. Based on all the available evidence and on the expected negative outcomes of a ban, the shared space arrangements in Woking Town Centre should be continued. However, we need to recover from the current situation of fear and believe that the Local Committee could reasonably suggest measures to achieve this.
12. A more realistic assessment of the level of danger is needed so that people can be properly informed and advised on how to behave in the shared use environment. Overcoming fear should lead to an increase in freedom for many people, not just within the town centre but also the freedom to use the Basingstoke Canal Towpath and the other areas where cyclists are present.

13. We would certainly welcome such an outcome and be happy to be part of the solution.