

Totnes and Littlehempston Cycle / Footpath Scheme and the Council's Cycling and Multiuse Trail

Report of the Head of Planning, Transportation and Environment

1. Summary

This report provides a briefing to support the Cabinet in its consideration of a Notice of Motion on Totnes and Littlehempston Cycle / Footpath Scheme and the Council's Cycling and Multiuse Trail, submitted to Council on 20 February and in accordance with Standing Order 6(6) was referred, without discussion, to the Cabinet for consideration (Council Minute 275 refers).

The Notice of Motion referred is as follows:

'That the proposed Cycle and footpath link scheme between Totnes and Littlehempston be added to the County Council's current Cycling and Multiuse Trail strategy as this will:

1. *provide an important non-vehicular link between Totnes and its adjacent parish and village centre in Littlehempston;*
2. *support the SHDC A385 Air Quality Management Action Plan (it is listed as an action) to address traffic congestion and air quality in Totnes and environs;*
3. *complete an important missing link of the national NC2 cycle route (which when complete will link Dover in Kent with St Austell in Cornwall) supporting commuters as well as tourism; and,*
4. *thereby support DCC's declaration of a climate emergency.'*

2. Background

There has been a local aspiration to deliver a walking and cycling connection between Totnes and the village of Littlehempston for many years. However, progress has been stymied by the failure to reach agreement regarding the access to a privately-owned bridge. For such a scheme to progress there is a need to identify the strategic need for a scheme, potentially a Multi-Use Trail from Totnes to Newton Abbot. This would then lead to an options assessment, planning application, land acquisition and delivery. There are currently numerous requests for similar schemes throughout Devon and the Totnes to Littlehempston scheme is not identified in the current plan. Consequently, it is not possible to undertake any further work on the proposed scheme or progress a compulsory purchase order.

On 29 November 2019, South Hams Highways and Traffic Orders Committee (SH HATOC) reviewed the issue of public access across the South Devon Railway (SDR) pedestrian bridge. It resolved that *'given the lack of progress over time, Cabinet be recommended to investigate the public use of the pedestrian railway bridge by compulsory purchase if necessary, given its importance and benefit as a public amenity'* (SH HATOC Minute 84 refers).

Cabinet subsequently considered the matter on 15 January 2020 and resolved *'that no further work should be undertaken on investigating whether the footbridge could be used by*

*the public and the development of a multi-use trail and that Compulsory Purchase Order should not be pursued as it cannot be justified ... ' (Cabinet Minute *450 refers).*

The Notice of Motion (as detailed in para 1 of this report) was submitted to the Council meeting on 20 February 2020. At the meeting, it was decided that it should be referred for consideration by Cabinet.

3. Proposal

Scheme Context

Littlehempston is a village situated north of Totnes with a population of approximately 200 residents. The primary transport link between the two settlements is via the A381, with a journey time of approximately 5 minutes in free flow conditions. The A381 also provides hourly bus services (service 7 & 177), running between 7am and 7pm. The bus services do not run into the village itself, to access the bus there is a 10-minute walk along a county road with no footpaths. For school children there is a school bus.

There are currently no safe walking or cycling routes that avoid the A381 corridor. A significant constraint in achieving such a route is the severance caused by the River Dart. Any route linking Littlehempston to Totnes would most likely have to include a bridge crossing. The option under consideration uses the privately owned Bulliver Bridge which, assuming the rest of the route could be identified, would result in a 3km route from Littlehempston to Totnes town centre.

In addition to connecting the village of Littlehempston to Totnes, if a multi-use trail was delivered it would have the potential to form the initial phase of a wider Totnes to Newton Abbot route.

Bulliver Bridge

There is an existing pedestrian bridge over the River Dart: Bulliver Bridge. This is privately owned by South Devon Railway, providing access to the tourist attractions of the South Devon heritage railway and Totnes Rare Breeds Farm.

The funding of the footbridge, built in 1993, was primarily from South Devon Railway. This was topped up by grant funds from a number of organisations, including Devon County Council. As far as can be ascertained, there were no specific requirements or covenants attached to the funding. South Devon Railway have been, and continue to be, responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the bridge.

The use of the bridge would provide a convenient crossing of the River Dart, utilising existing infrastructure. Littlehempston lies approximately 2km from the end of the bridge, and this remainder of the route would be comprised of a new path constructed over third party land, a narrow undulating private track and a narrow rural lane to Littlehempston.

South Devon Railway

Numerous meetings have taken place between South Devon Railway, local Members and Devon County Council officers over a number of years, the last being in June 2019. However, it has not been possible to agree the use of the bridge as part of a multi-use trail.

South Devon Railway have a large collection of fragile buildings, rolling stock and antiquities stored at their Totnes station. Due to their specialist nature, even relatively small-scale damage to these assets can be extremely expensive.

The Railway company has had to diversify and offer two attractions, one at either end of the rail line. The Totnes Rare Breeds Farm is adjacent to the Totnes South Devon Railway

Station and is also accessed via the footbridge. It is very cute, with wooden pens and lots of very small fragile animals.

The current security is provided by the geographical constraints of the site; a combination of the River Dart, two railway lines and a private road. There is no car park, with access limited to the pedestrian bridge. The Bulliver Bridge is currently only open when the railway is running, with gates on the bridge itself locked at all other times. This acts as a security measure and deterrent to intruders, protecting the South Devon Railway and Totnes Rare Breeds Farm. Loss of this security and the resultant risk of vandalism is a key factor in the South Devon Railway's reason for not agreeing 24-hour access to the bridge.

Totnes to Newton Abbot Wider Route Development

Developing a route from Totnes to Littlehempston, and ultimately on to Newton Abbot, would be challenging. The topography is hilly, the existing lanes are narrow, and it would be difficult for a vehicle to safely pass a cyclist or pedestrian. Some of the existing roads, which would provide onward connections to Littlehempston, are privately owned and carry large HGVs, such as those associated with the South West Water Treatment Works. There are also a number of isolated properties along these lanes that would require ongoing access.

Current data from existing multi-use trails show the greatest usage is seen in coastal locations, where there are sizeable population catchments along the route, gradients are generally level, there are a number of attractions to break up the journey and the landscape value is high. The Exe Estuary Trail between Exmouth and Dawlish and the Tarka Trail between Barnstaple and Bideford are successful examples of leisure trails with high daily usage. Utility trips on the Totnes to Littlehempston route will be low due to the small number of commuters and students making the daily journey. Its rural location, challenging topography and remoteness will also make this journey less attractive to cyclists and pedestrians.

Multi-Use Trail Strategy

Devon County Council's adopted Multi-Use Trail Strategy, published in March 2015, does not include the Totnes to Newton Abbot route in its current development strategy. The existing strategy is very oversubscribed, with a lack of external funding opportunities limiting the progress that has been possible over recent years. As a result, a revised list of priorities was taken to the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee in November 2018. Devon County Council are committed to delivering these existing priorities and there is very little likelihood of extending the strategy in rural areas, such as this, where usage is lower.

Should the route be included in a future strategy and the development of a scheme progress, a strategic planning application would be required. The number of landowners affected, and sensitive environment means the process would be costly and potentially contentious.

Compulsory Purchase Order

In the event that an agreement could not be reached regarding access over private land, a compulsory purchase order would be required. To apply to the Government to compulsory take away land there would be a requirement to fulfil the following criteria:

- The scheme need would need to demonstrate a compelling case in the public interest, for example in terms of transport, safety or economic development;
- The scheme would be included in the County Council's Cycling and Multi-Use Trail Strategy and there would need to be sufficient funding allocated;

- The scheme would require planning permission, of which there is no certainty this would be granted due to impact on private properties;
- 24-hour public access through the footbridge impacting on South Devon Railway and the Totnes Rare Breeds Farm would have significant security issues. Devon County Council would need to make provisions in order to effectively increase the security in the area.
- Use of the narrow lanes would need to be reviewed, some are not in public ownership and a Safety Audit undertaken
- There would need to be reasonable certainty that the route could be extended to Newton Abbot

At this stage the bridge on its own does not fulfil these criteria, therefore, a compulsory purchase order should not be pursued as it cannot be justified.

4. Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change)

Direct emissions from surface transport accounts for 23% of total UK CO₂ emissions, with over half of these from cars ('Transport Factsheet', Committee on Climate Change). Multi-use trails and infrastructure which facilitates sustainable travel have an important role to play as part of tackling poor air quality and the Climate Change Emergency by reducing the carbon emissions from transport by encouraging modal shift. However, modal shift as a result of delivering the Totnes to Littlehempston multi-use trail is expected to be limited due to the low forecast usage. As a result, the expected air quality and climate change benefits would be negligible. Instead, resource and funding should be used to deliver routes with a greater potential for modal shift, as identified in the Multi-Use Trail Strategy.

If a route is progressed, it should be noted that there are a number of potential environmental sensitivities such as the location in a strategic nature area (woodland), Greater Crested Newt consultation zone, flood zone 3 and proximity to the South Hams SAC Greater Horseshoe Bat Special Area of Conservation. These issues would be further investigated during the planning process.

5. Legal Considerations

The lawful implications of the proposals have been considered and taken into account in the formulation of the recommendations set out above. The key legal consideration relates to the lack of justification for a compulsory purchase order.

6. Risk Management Considerations

This proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken to safeguard the Council's position.

7. Options/Alternatives

Alternative Options

Alternative routes that avoid utilising Bulliver Bridge include the delivery of a second bridge crossing the River Dart and the utilisation of the existing road corridors between Totnes and Littlehempston. The cost and environmental impact of this option suggest it would be extremely challenging to deliver.

8. Conclusion

Although it is recognised that there is a strong desire for a pedestrian / cycle connection across the River Dart from Totnes to Littlehempston there are several significant challenges. Use of the existing footbridge is not possible due to South Devon Railway's security and safety concerns. Provision of a strategic multi-use trail route from Totnes to Newton Abbot is not currently in the Cabinet approved strategy and is unlikely to be included in the foreseeable future due to engineering, economic and cost constraints. There are a number of requirements before land can be compulsory purchased which have not currently been met. At this stage the bridge on its own does not fulfil these criteria, therefore, a compulsory purchase order should not be pursued as it cannot be justified.

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Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

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Background Paper	Date	File Reference
Nil		

hc210220cabTotnes and Littlehempston Cycle / Footpath Scheme and the Council's Cycling and Multiuse Trail
hk 04 290220

