



Heaton Mersey Village Conservation Group

HMVCG Heaton Mersey Common Residents Steering Group

E: info@hmvcg.org.uk

30 July 2021

Dear Chris Boardman

We are writing to you as residents of Heaton Mersey in Stockport, together with Heaton Mersey Village Conservation Group, to share our serious concerns surrounding Stockport Council's plans for the Heaton's Cycle Link - part of the extension to the Beeline Network and the Trans Pennine Trail.

Let us start by saying that we wholly support improvements to the cycling network across Greater Manchester, and the intention behind the Beeline programme, which should provide environmental and wellbeing benefits for us all. Our concerns relate to the section of the proposals put forward by the council for the Heaton's Cycle Link, and the way these proposals are being driven through with little or no effective consultation with residents. This proposal impacts deeply on a local nature reserve at a time when nature is in freefall and the UK stands as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. This nature reserve is not only a wildlife sanctuary it is a destination for local residents who wish to bathe in nature and escape the reality of COVID or simply the concrete that surrounds them.

You may not be aware that the current proposal for this section of the route runs directly through Heaton Mersey Common (the "Common") (see map at Annex 1), a designated Local Nature Reserve surrounded by housing developments. Pedestrians, dog walkers and schoolchildren use it heavily on a daily basis. It is all that remains of woods that once stretched to East Didsbury. It originally made the border between Didsbury and Burnage to Green End and was a forested area known as Heaton Wood. Felling over the has years diminished the scale of the wood, and it is only remembered today by the trees on Heaton Mersey Common, and in the name of Parr's Wood, which formed its southernmost extremity. It is both a precious and scarce resource with historical resonance stretching back to the 12th century.

HMVCG and many residents strongly oppose the decision to run a shared use cycle path through one of our only natural, local green spaces because of the implications for nature and existing users. Shared paths just don't work; the evidence tells us they are a recipe for disaster. The width of the proposed paths and the infrastructure required to support resin paths and lighting will necessarily involve the destruction of a significant number of established trees and devastate habitats. No replanting will offset the damage incurred nor the consequential increase in carbon footprint by the introduction of lighting in an area treasured for dark skies. These concerns are amplified by the fact there are a number of alternative routes that could be considered, which would be more in keeping with the stated aims of the Beeline Network and not fuel a further depletion of nature.

There have been two consultations put forward by the Council in relation to the route:

- Consultation #1, launched on 7 October 2019. The route consulted on passed through the Common [see [Attachment 1](#) (Inset C highlighted box) from public reports pack 27012020 1800 Heaton's Reddish Area Committee. Route: Trentham Avenue to Priestnall Road/Mersey Road¹]. However, this consultation failed to engage appropriately or fairly with those most directly impacted by the proposals: the leaflet drop and collateral sent by the Council in relation to the consultation itself missed out the core groups who should have been involved, including those

¹ http://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g26619/Public%20reports%20pack%2027th-Jan-2020%2018_00%20Heaton's%20Reddish%20Area%20Committee.pdf?T=10&fbclid=IwAR2kkyrTBoLEa33X_kalFFxT-t7jO8PsVPmlxTJ215f-rHpH1ND1rMerl7g

residents who back onto, or face the Common itself. The Council stated in its subsequent report that there was “strong support” for the proposed route. However, the response statistics clearly show that there were only 168 respondents, within a heavily populated area, and virtually no responses were received from the area directly surrounding the Common. Instead, the response came mainly from those living out of area who, we would suggest, would only be interested in using it as a cycling route. There were no responses to the Consultation from residents in the immediate area because no residents were ever made aware of the proposals, or the Consultation. The maps appended to the Consultation Report [see [Attachment 2 – Leaflet Drop Map](#) and [Attachment 3 – Response Map](#)²] show the location of the leaflet drop and of those respondents. As you can see most are not near to the Common (bottom left corner). The Consultation Report also includes a copy of the original Consultation leaflet, which was apparently dropped through the doors of local residents. We can categorically state that none of the residents on our street ever received such a leaflet.

- Consultation #2, launched in March 2021, which again only became known to the local residents after a local Councillor wrote comments on a local Facebook Group page announcing he was collating feedback in relation to a proposed change to the route. Consultation #2 is a radically different route to Consultation #1 [see [Attachment 4 – Consultation #2 route](#) – the highlighted sections are new additions and the red asterisks show changes to the route, such as going through the Prestnall Playing fields and not along the path behind the allotments and also running the path inside St John’s School boundary]. Further communications with other local Councillors then revealed that this was not for public knowledge at that time. After pressure from local residents, the second consultation was launched in March 2021 for a period of 21 days and consulted on an amended route through the Common, with no apparent explanation for the change in proposal. Despite the statistics underpinning the first consultation, and the fact that that first consultation related to a different route, the Council again cited “strong support” for the proposals.

It is vital to note that at no point, in either consultation, has the Council ever provided a clear rationale for why they are choosing to run a dedicated cycle path through a Local Nature Reserve. There has never been an explanation as to which other routes have been considered, and why these have been discounted; for example, using some of the existing streets and pathways which would divert away from the Common completely and avoid the need for any destruction of such precious green space. It has been left to us to make Freedom of Information Requests to the Council to try to obtain answers to questions that were previously raised with the Council directly – including the outcome of the ecological surveys. These surveys were carried out after consultation #2 closed but appear to be based on the route proposed in Consultation #1, to go alongside St Johns school grounds, not through it as was proposed in Consultation #2. The ecological survey explicitly states no lights should be used on the route from Woodheys to St John’s school, and if they are, these must be bat specific. However, the Council has said verbally that it would look to mirror what it has done at other locations such as Abney Hall and Bruntwood Park, using lights until 10pm. The tree survey also cites felling of mature trees that were not included in Consultation 2, and confirms that there will be a huge issue with tree roots along the section of the path between Woodheys and Hawthorn Road.

The position we therefore find ourselves in is as follows:

1. No meaningful engagement. There has been a shocking lack of proactive engagement and feedback from the Council in communicating and consulting with those residents who are likely

² https://consultation.stockport.gov.uk/policy-performance-and-reform/5619cf2a/user_uploads/200116-mcf---full-consultation-report_compressed-2.pdf

to be most affected; at an early enough stage to have any meaningful discussion or input into the proposals and options available.

2. No transparency. There has been a lack of clarity around what alternative routes have been considered and why these have been discounted, as well as a lack of transparency around the ecological and environmental impact on the Common. It has been left to us to make Freedom of Information requests in order to obtain the information despite having personally asked for this information during a call with members of the SMBC planning team.
3. We are being misled. The second Consultation was wrongly publicised as plans relating to "Common Path Improvements", which was not only a misrepresentation, but showed a distinct lack of appreciation of the reality of the proposals and its implications. This poorly thought-out headline gave out the message that the plans were primarily about providing access to the Common itself, and improving the paths within the Common, rather than about installing a shared use cycle route through the Common. This has led to the issue being debated by some as a binary issue around being "for or against" improving access and condition of the paths, instead of it engendering a balanced discussion of options which best serve cyclists, residents and our vital green space.
4. Nature depletion. During COVID the value of accessible green space for residents' wellbeing was patently obvious, COVID simply provided a wakeup call and underlined the value of this kind of space. The impact of introducing lighting on protected species and residents whose properties abut the common is also abundantly clear. The disregard for residents' concerns in spite of the science providing clear evidence and warnings as to the dangers as to the loss of dark skies is tantamount to a degradation of duty by the council.

Furthermore, the current proposal not only fails to align with the Council's own climate change commitments, but it also undermines the Beeline Network reputation and guidelines, which actually advise against shared use paths and suggest focus should be on utilising cycle routes along existing roads.

To date, there has been absolutely no recognition of the impact these proposals will have on the character of the Common, especially the woods - a peaceful green oasis will be damaged if not lost irreversibly, which has been proved to be enormously important to mental health, especially this last year.

Most importantly, however, we do not believe that the Council has acted in accordance with its own legal obligations, as set out in its Consultation Policy, which states on its website ([Have your say - Stockport Council](#)) – the red emphasises those areas where we believe the Council has failed:

"We ensure the method of consultation we use is appropriate for what we are consulting on and who we are consulting with. We make sure that our consultations are legal by:

- consulting when any proposal is still at a formative stage
- including sufficient information to allow for intelligent consideration and response
- giving respondents time for consideration and response
- taking the findings into account when making decisions"

We would urge you please to step in and review these proposals as a matter of urgency, in order to help us reach a balanced solution that avoids the unnecessary destruction of green space and irreversible impact upon the local area.

Yours sincerely

On behalf of HMVCG Heaton Mersey Common Residents Steering Group