

DEFERRED APPLICATION**1 DCSE2003/2781/F - CONVERSION OF FOREST TRACKS AND FORMER RAILWAY LINE TO SHARED SURFACE PATH FOR WALKERS AND CYCLISTS EXISTING PATH BETWEEN ROYAL HOTEL CAR PARK AND ADMINISTRATIVE AREA BOUNDARY, SYMONDS YAT EAST, HEREFORDSHIRE.****For: SUSTRANS Ltd per SUSTRANS Planning, 5 North Avenue, EXETER****Date Received: 1st October 2003****Ward: Kerne Bridge****Grid Ref: 5603 1563****Expiry Date: 26th November 2003**

Local Member: Councillor Mrs R Lincoln

1. Site Description and Proposal

- 1.1 Determination of this application was deferred by the Committee on 5 November 2003 because of the perceived traffic congestion both at Symonds Yat East and along the road leading to it and so that the opportunity to increase parking provision could be investigated.
- 1.2 The application site is on the border of Herefordshire with Forest of Dean District Council. It comprises three sections: (i) a forest track (ii) former railway track bed which leads directly to (iii) the car park of the Royal Hotel. Apart from the car park the route of some 225 metres is through woodland managed by Forest Enterprises.
- 1.3 The application is for a new cycle route between Monmouth and Goodrich. The section between Hadnock (Monmouth) and Symonds Yat East is not on public roads and this application is for the extreme northern end of this "off-road" section. From the Royal Hotel the route joins the C1258 Symonds Yat East - Huntsham Bridge road. To the south the route continues on forest tracks through the Forest of Dean. The proposal involves making good the existing tracks which are currently used by forestry vehicles as well as informally by walkers, and a safety barrier 1.2 metres high on the upper level of the incline where the path diverts down a steep track to join a section of former railway.

2. Policies**2.1 Planning Policy Guidance**

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| PPG.7 | - | The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic & Social Development |
| PPG17 | - | Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation |

2.2 Hereford and Worcester County Structure Plan

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| Policy CTC1 | - | Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty |
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Policy CTC2	-	Area of Great Landscape Value
Policy LR1	-	Leisure and Recreation Development
Policy LR2	-	Leisure and Recreation Development
Policy LR10	-	Cycling Routes

2.3 South Herefordshire District Local Plan

Policy C5	-	Development within Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Policy C8	-	Development Within Area of Great Landscape Value
Policy C12	-	Statutory Protection of Nature Conservation Sites
Policy C12A	-	SAC Protection
Policy R1	-	Provision of New Recreational Facilities
Policy R12	-	New Access Provision

2.3 Unitary Development Plan – Deposit Draft

Policy T7	-	Cycling
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3. Planning History

3.1 There have not been any recent applications relating to the application site.

4. Consultation Summary

Statutory Consultations

- 4.1 English Nature does not wish to comment on this application.
- 4.2 Forestry Commission states that the site is within 500 metres of ancient semi-natural woodland. However the side of the proposals is such that there will be no effect on the woodland.
- 4.3 Environment Agency has no objections to the proposed development.

Internal Council advice

- 4.4 Head of Engineering and Transportation has no objection to this proposal. The development would affect public footpath GR38 and requested that reasonable steps must be taken to ensure risk to footpath users from cycle traffic is minimised.

5. Representations

5.1 The applicant makes the following submission:

- (1) This application consists of creating a new shared use route made up of various sections.
- (2) Applications have been made to Monmouthshire and Forest of Dean for their part of the route - the latter did not consider that an application was required.

In addition a detailed statement including objectives and benefits of the whole path has been submitted.

5.2 WhitchurchParish Council support the application.

5.3 Goodrich Parish Council has several reservations regarding this application:

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“The first being that a large percentage of the current visitors to Symonds Yat are of an older age group or young families, who should not have to worry about cyclists when taking a leisurely walk along the river. As the area from the Biblins Bridge to the Royal Hotel, Symonds Yat is already a well-known tourist area; perhaps two paths would prove a safer option.

Parking facilities. No consideration has been made for the parking of vehicles delivering or collecting cyclists to this area, or for the storage of cycles at this end of the ride. Symonds Yat West is at the end of a single-track access road with a further pinch point at the single track Huntsham Bridge. Traffic problems already arise within the tourist season.”

We also question the feasibility of the cycleway continuing from Symonds Yat East, along the above-mentioned road to the junction of the B4229, where cyclists are expected to turn across the traffic towards Kerne Bridge. The B4229 is signposted as being the Ross on Wye By-pass for large vehicles from the Forest of Dean.”

5.4 Two letters have been received objecting to the cycle route in general. The following points are made:

1. The current visitors to Symonds Yat tend to be of an older age group and when they use the path by the river, they should not have to worry about cyclists. It is suggested that the cycle path and the pedestrian path should be kept separate from the stretch from the Royal Hotel to Biblins Bridge.
2. The plans totally ignore the issue of parking for vehicles bringing the cyclists in and the secure storage of cycles at this end of the ride. On top of this is the issue of the single track access road to Symonds Yat East and the single track Huntsham Bridge.
3. This also needs to be considered in the context of the planned new Canoe Centre which is also presumably going to generate significant parking problems and the question as to whether the character of Symonds Yat East will be destroyed as it is turned into a (an even bigger) giant car park and traffic jam. The situation is already acute at summer weekends. I would also note that the future draft plans will have the cycleway continuing along this single track road to Goodrich and Ross, although many will presumably terminate at Symonds Yat as this will be the limit of the off-road track.
4. Consideration might be given to the cycle track on the other side of the river from Biblins, running to the easily accessed and extensive parking at Symonds Yat West which is directly accessed from the A40. This would also have the advantage of allowing possible local use of the track between Whitchurch and Monmouth which has been identified as useful in local Parish Council meetings but seems now to have been rejected.
5. Regrettably the current Sustrans plan, which is meant to benefit those not relying on the use of cars, seems to have totally ignored the impact that the cars associated with the cycleway will have on the local villages.
6. This footpath is heavily used by walkers and presumably will be upgraded so that the speed of cyclists would make it unsafe for walkers – at the least there should be some means of segregating the two.

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7. I consider that Herefordshire Council should not approve the plans until these questions have been properly addressed.
- 5.5 The Ramblers Association objects to the proposal as a pedestrian only path would be shared causing safety concerns. It is suggested that the existing river bank path be segregated and used by walkers only with appropriate barriers to prevent cyclists gaining access.

The full text of these letters can be inspected at Southern Planning Services, Blueschool House, Blueschool Street, Hereford and prior to the Sub-Committee meeting.

6. Officers Appraisal

- 6.1 The proposal raises three issues: the effect on the environment including the natural beauty of the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the nature conservation interest of the River Wye; the effect of any additional traffic generated by the cycle route; and pedestrian safety.
- 6.2 The Council's policy supports the provision of such routes. Policy LR10 of the County Structure Plan states:

The need for recreational cycling routes to enable safer access to recreation facilities and the countryside in general is acknowledged and proposals which in particular allow access from urban areas and make use of disused railways, forest tracks or other linear features will be encouraged where they do not conflict with Policy LR2.

In addition the Unitary Development Plan – Deposit Draft points out that:

As part of the National Cycle Network the Wye Valley Cycleway is proposed to link Hereford with Ross on Wye, Monmouth and Chepstow following for the most part a route alongside or near the River Wye. Support for the establishment of the route is given within Policy C7.

- 6.3 There would be a minimal works required to provide this route. Only the safety barrier would have any adverse impact and this is required for only a short section. The use of the route by cyclists need not cause any significant harm to flora or fauna. This is not a circular route or part of a network of routes through an area with full public access, as is the case in the Forest of Dean. The proposed route, at the northern end, is through private woodlands, where other routes for cyclists would presumably not be provided. It is not considered therefore that the natural beauty of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the nature conservation interest of the River Wye SSSI/candidate SAC would be harmed.
- 6.4 Turning to the second issue, it is unfortunate that no surveys have been carried out recently and the level of congestion is not therefore known. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this problem may have eased in recent years but this cannot be confirmed. The problem is acknowledged in the Symonds Yat Management Plan.
- 6.5 There are two car parks at Symonds Yat East, both privately owned, which offer all-day parking for a fixed fee (£1.20 or £2). In total there are over 50 spaces. In addition the Royal Hotel car park is open to patrons who are not staying at the hotel and no doubt

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caters for a number of visitors. However there appears to be no scope for providing additional car parking. There are large car parks at Yat Rock which are only ½ km or so from Symonds Yat East but the direct route is not suitable for cyclists. Further car parking may be available at the southern end of the proposed cycle route, at Goodrich Castle, although this may require negotiation with English Heritage. There are also large car parks at Symonds Yat West, but connexion for cyclists with the cycle path proper is not easy, the direct route being along the A40 or Ross Road. It may well be possible to negotiate improved links for cyclists to the proposed route from these car parks. More generally Sustrans point out that links to visitor attractions and settlements along the cycle paths could be improved to develop a network of cycle routes which would result in a more dispersed pattern of use. Example would be use of quiet lanes to Goodrich and Kerne Bridge and a link to Lydbrook via Symonds Yat tunnel.

- 6.6 The proposed cycle route is not designed as a national route and will not be advertised as such. It is intended as a local route which aims to satisfy primarily local recreational and utility demand. Publicity would be the responsibility of the local authorities and could direct cyclists who travel by car to these less congested locations. Nevertheless it is appreciated that Symonds Yat East may be an attractive starting/finishing point for some cyclists because of the long off-road section of the cycle route. The estimated number of additional vehicles is between 5 and 20 per day but this would be divided between Symonds Yat East and Monmouth. Site visits by officers to Symonds Yat East suggest that even in summer congestion is a serious problem only at weekends and on Banks Holidays, rather than a daily occurrence. The additional cars attracted by the cycle route would be only a small fraction of the total number of cars visiting Symonds Yat East and Yat Rock..
- 6.7 Of the three options for a cycle route presented in the Draft Feasibility Study for consultation the existing railway path emerged as by far the most attractive and least environmentally damaging. The route is already used by cyclists and this application seeks to formalise this informal arrangement. Sustrans anticipate that, subject to appropriate publicity, there would be no dramatic change in the type or scale of use. To refuse permission for this short section of the cycle path would raise serious questions regarding the practicability of the entire route. In view of the strong national and local policy support for cycle routes and the marginal increase in vehicular traffic it is considered that there are insufficient grounds to justify refusal of permission.
- 6.8 The concerns regarding pedestrian safety have been taken into account by Sustrans and 95% of the off-road cycle route have separate paths for pedestrians. At the Symonds Yat East end this cannot be fully achieved. However at this point there would be additional footpath as an alternative for walkers viz. the riverside path below the level of the railway track-bed" (which runs close to the River).

RECOMMENDATION

That permission be granted subject to the following condition:

- 1 A01 (Time limit for commencement (full permission))**

Reason: Required to be imposed by Section 91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

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Decision:

Notes:

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Background Papers

Internal departmental consultation replies.