

The Comber Greenway

A vision for sustainable travel within East Belfast



This document has been prepared by Sustrans as our vision of the future for local transport in East Belfast. We would like this to be assessed by the Northern Ireland Assembly as an alternative to plans already prepared under proposals for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). Sustrans believes that the vision set out in this document offers the best environmental, social and economic solution to the future of transport within and through East Belfast. It will, in our view:

- increase the share of journeys made by walking, cycling and bus, and offer a real alternative to car journeys, including those to school and work.
- enhance the Comber Greenway as a green corridor and a valuable community resource for those who live and travel along it
- provide quality bus corridors, with park and ride for fast, efficient access for commuters and shoppers.



Summary

In partnership with others Sustrans has coordinated the development of the Comber Greenway – a 7 mile traffic free walking and cycling path and wildlife corridor that runs between Inner East Belfast and Comber. The route is heavily used by people of all ages and abilities and facilitates many activities including, travel to a range of destinations, leisure and tourism, play and socialising, as well as offering a key biodiversity corridor. It is used by walkers, cyclists, joggers, people with pushchairs and wheelchair users and is a major resource within and beyond the local community.

The number of users has dramatically increased recently as the Greenway, and links to it from communities and schools, has been completed, and as people become aware of its existence.

The Department of Regional Development has announced plans to convert the corridor into a route for Bus Rapid Transit. This proposal, at a cost of £106 million, is included in the Regional Transportation Strategy with

a commitment to build a new pathway for pedestrians and cyclists alongside the BRT to National Cycle Network standard. The feasibility of achieving this is yet to be established, but it is our belief that even if this were possible, the ambience and the other benefits offered by the Greenway would be lost. Evidence suggests that this will reduce the number of people using the route for travel and pleasure, an inevitable net reduction in the number of people able to benefit from the Greenway.

Whilst Sustrans fully supports the need for improved public transport, we do not believe this should be at the expense of existing and future levels of walking and cycling. It is our view that bus services can be significantly improved through the reallocation of road space rather than the reallocation of green space, and that together buses, walking and cycling offer the widest choice as an alternative to car use. To reduce the opportunity to walk and cycle to run BRT is counter-intuitive when the challenge is to encourage people to leave their cars behind.

The vision

The key elements of the vision are:

1.0 Development of a wider Greenway Network

The further development of an on and off-road network of cycle and walkways in East Belfast linking with the Comber Greenway, the Connswater Community Greenway and the riverside paths along the Lagan. These will provide a network of walking and cycling thoroughfares throughout the community, giving people still more opportunity to walk and cycle for local journeys.

- greenways are hugely popular as they provide traffic-free corridors where people can travel by foot and bike free from the fear of traffic.
- evidence from research on 14 greenways throughout Northern Ireland shows 75% of users say greenways have helped them increase their levels of everyday physical activity
- 31% of users say that “pleasant surroundings” is the main reason for using greenways

- at Bloomfield, the Comber Greenway has annual usage of 122,000 trips – evidence from more established greenways throughout the UK shows that usage grows rapidly and consistently over time. A similar greenway in East Bristol, England, is seeing over 6,500 journeys every day by foot and bike, half of these to work during the week, and usage is still growing after 25 years of use.

2.0 Upgrading the Comber Greenway

Upgrading the Comber Greenway to include:

- lighting in the urban area to enable greater usage at night and in winter months
- improvements to road junctions at Kings and Beersbridge Roads and a bridge at Ballyrainey Road outside Comber to give walkers and cyclists a greater sense of safety
- a comprehensive programme to build links from the greenway to homes, schools, shops, people's work, churches, medical centres and green spaces
- priority links include the Stormont Estate, the Ulster Hospital, the expanding Dundonald Ice bowl complex, a traffic-free link to Comber, Belfast City Centre and Titanic Quarter.

3.0 A first rate public transport system

Development of quality bus corridors with continuous bus lanes at peak times along the Upper Newtownards and Albert Bridge Roads. The majority of destinations are located on these arterial roads within a short walk to Metro bus. Improvements include:

- more frequent bus services, enhanced real time information and park and ride facilities along the arterial roads
- a new quality bus corridor linking East Belfast to Titanic Quarter and on to the city centre

- an increase in the number of buses on linking routes to Tullycarnet, Sydenham and Belmont.
- alterations to the road network and improvements to the public realm to improve pedestrian, cycle, and bus access at the Holywood Arches.

4.0 Development of a regeneration and transport masterplan

The development of a regeneration masterplan for the area, including an integrated land-use plan to increase access by foot and bike for the short, local journeys that people make everyday. This would deliver:

- a vision for social and economic regeneration in some of the most disadvantaged areas focusing on local journeys and the travel needs of people without access to a car
- mixed land-use planning in a high quality sustainable environment to make travel to work, shops, schools and green spaces possible by active modes. This will result in a place to live, work and socialise.

5.0 Smarter Travel programmes

Work with the local community on travel behavioural initiatives such as School and Workplace Travel Plans and Individualised Travel Marketing to enable people to choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment.

- evidence from Sustrans' TravelSmart programme shows that just by giving people information on their local walking, cycling and bus routes car use can be reduced by as much as 14% across an entire area
- Sustrans' Bike It programme which works with children and young people to give them the skills they need to cycle to school, doubles levels of everyday cycling, with 26% of children cycling to school at least once a week
- by encouraging walking and cycling for journeys to school and work, roads space can be freed up for the quality bus corridors.



What is a greenway?

A greenway is a route apart from the main trafficked roads, for the exclusive use of pedestrians, cyclists, wheelchair users and others who feel vulnerable on or near busy roads. A greenway comprises of traffic-free sections such as railway paths, riverside routes, canal towpaths, parks and numerous specially constructed sections all necessary to create a continuous quality route. A greenway can consist of lightly trafficked roads and traffic-calmed streets and public spaces, but is always eased past traffic via special facilities and, wherever possible, by planting schemes to ensure that the ambience of a traffic-free section is maintained. A greenway will have numerous links to connect its main route with local places and communities, and it may follow separate strands for walking and cycling.



Proposals to build BRT on the greenway

Sustrans believes that BRT on the Comber Greenway will reduce levels of walking and cycling – the most sustainable and healthy ways to travel. The likely width and quality of any replacement path running alongside BRT is unlikely to replicate the ambiance and pleasant current conditions that encourage people to walk and cycle in the first place.

- BRT can reach speeds of 60 mph - fast moving buses adjacent to any replacement path will be off-putting to more vulnerable and less experienced cyclists and walkers, including children, destroying the amenity value of the greenway
- because of the speed of BRT crossing points will be few. Evidence shows that access points are crucial to the success of walking and cycling routes because trips by foot and bike are, by their nature, short, direct journeys, so any reduction in access will also reduce the opportunity to walk and cycle

- the biodiversity value of the greenway as a wildlife corridor will be greatly undermined as a result of the noise and speed of buses and the loss of trees, shrubs and grassland.

In effect the people of East Belfast will lose an already efficient, healthy, low carbon transport corridor used all day, every day, by a wide variety of people to facilitate a potentially smaller number of journeys by public transport.

Benefits of improved bus services and walking and cycling opportunities

It is our view that, in combination, improved bus services on the road, and improved walking and cycling networks will offer people the widest possible choice of travel options compared to the private car, whilst delivering a more sustainable and healthy transport system.

Our proposals will deliver a wide range of benefits that support Government objectives in Northern Ireland, including commitments to:

- more sustainable transport
- sustainable and liveable communities offering economic and social regeneration
- health and well-being through improved access to everyday physical activity
- environmental improvements, including reduced carbon dioxide emissions, pollution and noise from transport
- supporting greater bio-diversity – green corridors are essential for flora and fauna, linking the countryside to urban areas. On the Comber Greenway there

are butterflies, birds, frogs and newts and thousands of trees, shrubs and wildflowers - many planted by the local community over the last 25 years. The wetland in Dundonald is a designated Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance

- improving economic income from tourism and leisure – walking and cycling are popular leisure pursuits, and evidence from Sustrans shows the economic value of greenways to the tourism and leisure industry - the Comber Greenway is now a major leisure facility in East Belfast and Comber with businesses starting to benefit from the spending power of users. Beyond Comber it leads to the Strangford Lough Cycle Trail which will bring economic benefits from cycle touring to that rural area.

Summary

Whilst BRT may bring benefits in terms of improved public transport to some people for a couple of hours Monday to Friday, it is Sustrans' view that investing in a wider ranging transport plan for East Belfast will bring much greater benefits to many more people, extending access to walking, cycling and public transport, offering greater choice and therefore competition to private car use. Our proposals will require significant investment, but nothing on the scale proposed for BRT.

We would welcome a cost benefit analysis assessing this proposal alongside the existing proposal using the recently amended guidance issued by the Department for Transport in England to assess different transport initiatives.

Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity.

Our vision is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment. Every day we are working on practical, innovative ways of dealing with the transport challenges that affect us all.

To find out more visit or call: www.sustrans.org.uk 0845 113 0065

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