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Strategy for Setted Streets¹

Consultation response from Spokes

Spokes welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above consultation, and the fact that fuller consideration is now being given to cycling and walking as compared to the original Setted Streets Committee report of 17 January.

Whilst recognising the importance of the heritage issues, there is another side to the topic, which needs full consideration when it comes to which streets should be setted and, even more so, the type of setts which should be used in such cases. There is a wide range of types of sett, from the flat-topped ones beautifully installed at the junction of the High Street and George IV Bridge, which are fine for cycling or walking, through to the round-topped ones (e.g. elsewhere in the High Street) which for cyclists are not just uncomfy but potentially dangerous and can also be difficult and/or painful for pedestrians with certain injuries or disabilities.

We stress that is not just a matter of badly-laid setts, though that can add to the basic problem, but of the type of setts used. Flat-topped, skid-resistant and close-laid setts are the only sett-based solution which we can support except perhaps in the most exceptional heritage cases.

Clearly, too, the level of problem will vary considerably with the type of bicycle involved: narrow-wheel high-pressure tyres will suffer worst, whilst mountain bikes with low-pressure tyres may be much less affected. However the problems are sufficient that this is an issue often raised with Spokes by individual cyclists, some of whom even turn to alternative longer or more heavily-trafficked routes or have to dismount for the duration.

Finally, there are significant financial implications in these decisions, as discussed below.

The dangers and problems include...

- ◆ **Increased road traffic danger for cyclists** The cyclist has no choice but to transfer part of their attention to the road surface – even more so if it is wet and slippery or dark - and this reduces attention to traffic. One of our members suffered a serious injury, with temporary loss of consciousness and a fractured kneecap, having been hit by a van which emerged from a side road into the High Street, whilst his attention was partly on the rounded-sett road surface – he might well have seen the van in time had there been a level road surface.

1 <https://consultationhub.edinburgh.gov.uk/sfc/strategy-for-setted-streets/>

- ◆ **Health risks for cyclists** Recent research² by Dr Mark Taylor of Edinburgh Napier University and Prof Chris Oliver (consultant orthopaedic hand surgeon at the Royal Infirmary) shows that just 16 minutes of cycling on streets such as the High Street, on a test bike with 2.15” tyres inflated to just 60psi, is sufficient to risk permanent damage to nerves and blood vessels through Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome, Havs. Symptoms can include finger numbness and/or painful finger blanching attacks. Presumably the risks are worse, possibly significantly worse, with narrower tyres and/or higher tyre pressure, both very common.
- ◆ **Pedestrian issues** There are significant problems for certain classes of pedestrians from round-topped setts, even where well laid. This is particularly important at road crossings, but it must be remembered that some setted streets are traffic-free or traffic-reduced, either permanently (like the High Street) or occasionally for special events, and therefore pedestrians may wish to use any part of the road surface. Categories of pedestrians at risk include elderly with impaired balance, who need a flat surface, and people of any age suffering from arthritis or with certain foot/ankle injuries who can suffer significant pain if the foot is not able to land on a level surface.
- ◆ **Wheelchairs, pushchairs, etc.** Anyone who has tried to use such wheeled pedestrian-accessories on round-topped setts will be aware of the discomfort and difficulty involved.
- ◆ **Noise** This is a lesser issue, but nonetheless irritating for people who live in or who frequent setted streets with significant levels of motor traffic.
- ◆ **Financial** Installation and maintenance of setted surfaces is very costly as compared to asphalt. This is a major consideration for road safety - and resulting claims for compensation - as cash for setted surfaces disproportionately reduces the resources available for other poorly maintained and potholed surfaces.

Solutions...

- ◆ **Flat-topped, skid-resistant and close-laid setts** as at the junction of High Street and George IV Bridge.
- ◆ We note a **Bristol experiment**³ where round-topped setts are sliced in half and re-laid, flat-side up, *“to improve the surface for pedestrians, cyclists, wheelchair users, people suffering from arthritis and many others.”* That Council has a vision *“to improve road surfaces across the city in order to make Bristol more attractive to walk and cycle.”* We understand the experiment was successful and is to be extended.
- ◆ **Asphalt surfacing** The ideal surface for cycling or walking – smooth, cost-effective to install and very cheap to maintain as compared to setted surfaces.
- ◆ **Physically segregated cyclist routes** with smooth surfacing, asphalt or flat slabs – with special attention to ensure a flat surface remains at junctions and other road crossings
- ◆ **Smooth strips** (usually slabbed) through setted areas, as for example through the cobbled area of Linlithgow High Street, or (unintentionally) the smooth drainage channels on the High Street near St Giles. However, we stress that this solution is less satisfactory than the earlier bullet points – cars may park on the strips (even with double yellows!); you can be forced out of the strip by traffic pressures; and unless the strip is wide you have to keep some attention on the road surface to remain within the strip.
- ◆ For **pedestrian issues**, similar solutions to the above can also be implemented.
- ◆ **Where setts (of whatever type) are still used**, particularly in heritage areas, such streets should wherever possible be pedestrianised (with cycle exemption). Road safety will be improved (although if the setts are round-topped the health risks and serious discomfort remain), historic and cultural value will be enhanced and, by removing heavy vehicles, maintenance costs will be greatly reduced.

In conclusion, for the reasons above, existing setted streets (and paths) outside the World Heritage Area should gradually be asphalted or, where considered appropriate and cost-effective, relaid with flat-topped, skid-resistant, close-laid setts.

Within the WHA, and where asphalt is not appropriate, flat-topped, skid-resistant, close-laid setts should be the preferred option wherever possible.

Yours sincerely
 Dave du Feu
 for Spokes

² <http://www.scotsman.com/news/transport/cyclists-risk-nerve-damage-from-uneven-street-surfaces-1-4580875>

³ <http://road.cc/content/news/147616-no-appetite-pav%C3%A9-93-cobbles-lifted-and-cut-half-create-smoother-surface> [Note that the photo in the article is not relevant to or part of this experiment!]