

Police investigate cycle death reportedly linked to tram rails

CYCLING

by Andrew Forster

POLICE ARE investigating a fatal accident in central Edinburgh last week when a cyclist apparently got her wheels stuck in the groove of a tram rail and fell into the path of a minibus.

The accident at the West End junction on Princes Street has heightened concern about the dangers that the city's on-street tram rails pose to cyclists. In March, professor Chris Oliver, head of the trauma unit at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, said 191 cyclists had been injured in incidents connected with the tram lines. The most common cause of injury was getting a bike wheel caught in the tram rails (142) while the second was the wheel sliding on the rails (32).

The BBC reported Oliver as saying: "We deal with thousands of fractures a year in the Royal and it's become a new work stream for us."

Thompsons Solicitors is representing more than 100 cyclists who are suing the city council for damages after accidents connected with the tram.

In a statement about last week's fatality, the City of Edinburgh Council said: "We remain

deeply saddened by last week's tragic accident. In light of this, and notwithstanding Police Scotland's ongoing inspection, we will carry out a road safety assessment of the area, considering all users and aspects of the junction and its approaches. This will include consultation with key stakeholders and any findings that could lead to safety improvements will be carefully considered."

Sheffield City Council published a report last year looking at ways to reduce the number of cyclist injuries on its tram lines (*LTT* 24 Jun 16). The report, by the council's PFI road contractor Amey, considered whether some form of filler could be placed in the rail groove. Said Amey: "The basic problem is that the groove in the rail is only slightly deeper than the depth of the wheel flange of a passing tram. Therefore any material installed would need to reliably compress more than 70% and always spring back to full height (to the top of the rail). It is considered that it is very unlikely that even modern complex filler materials could achieve this and still have a useful product life."

Amey concluded: "It seems feasible that treating the rail with a skid resistant coating or

installing a robust filler in a pocket alongside a standard tram rail on-street, or a combination of these techniques, could be feasible at some point in the future but possibly only if suitable coatings and materials are developed specifically for tramway operational requirements."

Spokes, the Lothian Cycle Campaign, said this week: "People frequently suggest use of plastic or other tramline 'fillers'. We understand that [council-owned company] Edinburgh Trams has investigated a variety of makes and not found any which are effective, can withstand tram wheel pressure and, most importantly, which work on the type of rail used in Edinburgh's on-road tram sections."

Spokes said Edinburgh's problems stemmed from the poor initial design of the tram line. "The impression was to design a tramline and then fit everything else in as best could be done."

It said remedial measures had helped cut accidents at the junction outside Haymarket station, which had been the worst blackspot. The council relocated a taxi rank, where poorly parked taxis forced cyclists to hit the tramlines at a poor angle, and installed a brightly coloured cycle

lane.

Spokes said the West End junction where the fatality occurred was a "far more complex problem... with several danger points, restricted space, much bus and coach traffic, and significant private traffic at peak times".

"The worst manoeuvre is when turning right from Lothian Road and wishing to continue eastbound along Princes Street – you can be turning as you cross the tramlines, with traffic on one or both sides, and with little chance to cross all the four lines [rails] at a good angle."

Spokes campaigner Dave du Feu told *LTT* that a segregated cycle lane should be installed on the north (shops) side of Princes Street.

The city council is planning an east-west cycle route that will make use of George Street, which runs parallel to Princes Street. In the past there have been suggestions of banning cyclists on Princes Street, along which the tram runs.

Du Feu said a ban was not on the political agenda. Spokes supports the east-west route but says that for many cycle trips George Street "it is not a realistic alternative to Princes Street".