

Water of Leith Management Plan 2020-30¹

Consultation Response Spokes, the Lothian Cycle Campaign

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the WoL Management Plan 2020-30. This is a very impressive piece of work, covering a wide range of topics and subjects - history, geography, habitat, access, and planning, all the way to climate change; the small team are to be congratulated on bringing all this together.

Our focus will be on access and recreation.

'Path' not 'Walkway'

The Land Reform Act Scotland 2003 agreed that the appropriate term for a multi-use non-vehicular way is 'path'. 'Walkway' suggests priority for one group of users only, with other users marginalised; in this case, horse riders, joggers, cyclists, runners and others. 'Path' is appropriate for all such users, and also serves to exclude any vehicles (except for maintenance). While 'walkway' might be used informally, its use should be avoided in formal documentation, such as here, and in signage on the route. The Management Plan should change its own wording in the document, and ensure that signage along the route is changed, as the opportunity arises.

For funding purposes especially, funders are likely to be deterred if the term Walkway is used.

The Path Experience

Apart from the Visitor Centre (which can be accessed by public transport or car), how does the public in general experience the Water of Leith? For the vast majority, the experience is gained by *use of the Path*, either as walkers, joggers, horse riders, cyclists etc. Of paramount importance for all, therefore, is the quality of the surface; if the surface is wet, slippery, muddy, broken or impeded, the experience will be a bad one. This might seem to be stating the obvious, but the Plan thinks otherwise:

“Access & Recreation: The path is used by local residents and visitors. The condition of the path is monitored frequently, and measures to maintain it in a safe condition are implemented. However, it is now some time since the path was completed, and many areas show signs of deterioration and inconsistent signage which can cause confusion. A steady rise in use over the past 5 years has meant a greater pressure on the infrastructure and can lead to conflict between user groups. *The issue for the management plan is to improve this deteriorating infrastructure and enhance the image of the Water of Leith through improved and consistent signage and interpretation, promote the ‘share with care’ approach on a multi-use path* and to maintain the Visitor Centre as a focal point from which education and information can be provided.” [Key Issues and Pressures: Access and Recreation, 3.2, p.8]

Note how the mention of the state of the path is downplayed: the “signs of deterioration” are not amplified or explained; no mention of any program of works; we move on immediately to “inconsistent signage” and “conflict between user groups”; and the issue for the Plan is not the state of the surfaces, but “*to improve the image of the Water of Leith through ... improved signage*” etc.

Below are some photos of the recent state of the Path. The reader can judge whether this is the kind of “image of the WoL” the Management are keen to “improve” [1]:

¹ <https://consultationhub.edinburgh.gov.uk/sfc/wolplan2030/>



Location: Saughton allotments. Notice how, here and in the other photos, the path has “spread” along the edges as users try to avoid the water. At this particular spot the puddle is so long that users have gone over the bank and diverted to an informal 'fisherman's' path closer to the river.



Location: ibid., at double bend: note the 'spread'



Location: Saughton Cemetery; smart dog about to encounter the puddles shown above. Will he emerge as 'Harry the Dirty Dog' [2]?



Location: Saughton allotments: note the 'spread' again



Location: ibid. Note: we asked permission before taking the photos, and explained what we were doing (ie for use in this Response). On their return the girls said “tell 'em our feet are soakin'”!



Location: almost everywhere where the path is dry. Shows how the path has been reduced to bare metal from sheer wear and tear; it has not been renewed since it was built as part of the Millennium Project in 2001.

In sum, this is the “image” many users are now taking from the Path. Admittedly the photos were taken after a wet winter, but the 'spreading' shows this is not a temporary problem; it recurs after any significant rain.

The photos also show that the Path here has a perfectly 'flat' profile; this again is due to many years of wear; the profile should be 'domed', ie high in the middle and sloping towards the sides, to allow surface water to drain off.

The Plan should surely include measures, urgently, to improve these surface conditions, which impact on all users indiscriminately.

Sharing Responsibility

The Path above Kingsknowe (to Balerno) is different in character and patterns of usage from the rest of the route (ie from Slateford downwards). From Slateford upwards to Colinton Tunnel there are many parallel paths, mostly close to the river, but what might be called the main path follows the course of the old railway, which starts at Kingsknowe. Significantly, the main path has become a commuter route to the city, mainly for cyclists, who leave the Path at Kingsknowe to cross the Lanark Rd and join the canal towpath.

The Path on this section is designated NCN75 in recognition of its role. It serves the rapidly growing communities of Colinton, Juniper Green, Currie, and Balerno and offers a vital alternative to the often narrow and very busy A70 Lanark Rd and Lanark Rd West.

The condition of the Path here is likewise poor - though not always as bad as the section pictured above (Slateford to Gorgie Rd), it is nonetheless significantly poorer than the other old rail paths throughout the city, which are mostly surfaced in tarmac (to reduce maintenance costs) and regularly maintained, often at considerable expense (eg the North Edinburgh Path Network (Roseburn Path to Ferry Rd Path), where £1m has been spent recently on upgrading).

A significant upgrade of the path is required to remedy the current problems and to ensure that the construction of the path is such that the maintenance burden is greatly reduced. An upgrade of this kind should be done in conjunction with the Council's Active Travel team, given their widespread experience of such routes elsewhere in the city. As noted at the beginning, the Management currently have responsibility for a very wide range of activities, not least path maintenance, and would be better able to concentrate their resources, both of staff and materials, with a sharing arrangement.

Sharing out the Usage

There are sections where there are not just one 'Path' but several, in parallel: walkers and horse riders could be encouraged to segregate from cyclists and vice-versa:

1 from Colinton Tunnel to Slateford, there are river-side alternative paths in addition to the old railway; these are usually closer to the river, narrower, more winding, and in many ways more attractive, especially for dog-walkers. With appropriate signage, walkers could be advised of these 'nicer' alternatives; and they could be made even more attractive with picnic benches, tables etc

2 some sections between Currie and Balerno, where informal riverside alternative paths have been created, could also be signed as more appropriate for (dog-) walkers, for similar reasons. In all cases the signage would be purely advisory; walkers could continue on the rail path if they wished. At present, many users are simply not aware that alternatives exist.

Summary

In sum, while the 2020-30 plan is wide-ranging, and suitably ambitious in places, we feel the focus should be not on the “image” but on the *reality* of the Path itself, its current state, and the urgent need for repair and upgrading - the Path being the way most users experience the Water of Leith in practice.

The City Council currently allots 10% of its annual transport budget to active travel, and the WoL Management Plan could and should be tapping into these resources, and allocating staff time to do so. In terms of funding, note that Sustrans now offers 100% funding for design projects, and this could be sought in order to design a significant upgrade package for the path. Funding of the upgrade itself could be a combination of Natural Heritage funds and Council Active Travel funds, both of which should attract 50/50 match funding from Sustrans. In terms of regular attention, we suggest that once this path is upgraded, it is added to the Council's priority 1 paths.

The document admits “pressure from the multiplicity of users” of the Path (“A steady rise in use over the past 5 years has meant a greater pressure on the infrastructure ...”, p.9). In places this could be alleviated by making better use of alternative parallel paths, usually closer to the river, so as to share the burden. This could be achieved through appropriate signage, and if necessary by including this information in posters, booklets etc - users are often just not aware that alternatives exist.

Notes:

1 Photos courtesy of Valerie Hawkins

2 'Harry the Dirty Dog', by Gene Zion: Harper, reprint 2002 (children's book)

Peter Hawkins
Spokes Planning Group
March 2020