

BATHGATE-AIRDRIE RAIL 2011 RE-OPENING PROJECT

... notes on cycling non-integration

Whilst Spokes is delighted that this rail service linking Edinburgh and Glasgow via the heart of West Lothian has been re-opened, we are very unhappy about several aspects of how the project relates to cycling. Sadly, this is far from the only case where the 'big projects' section of Transport Scotland has taken a very blinkered view of the role of cycling [several other examples are given in Spokes Bulletin 108].

Despite all the talk of transport integration, Transport Scotland has run this as a 'rail-first' project rather than an integrated transport project. Unfortunately this seems like a Scottish disease (or possibly British) - we have experienced similar with the Edinburgh tram project, which was run as 'tram-only' from the outset, meaning that cycling has to be slotted in later, and less satisfactorily than would have been possible in an integrated transport project.

Spokes is lobbying hard to try and ensure that the Borders Rail project integrates cycling properly, including with good quality links between stations and surrounding communities. For anyone wishing to pass on suggestions, the Borders Rail community liaison officer is Jonathan.Hepton@scotborders.gov.uk. We were pleased to hear from him that Borders Council has made the point to Transport Scotland that cycling extends the catchment of a station 15-fold over walking for the same access time. But it sounds as if Transport Scotland, as with Bathgate-Airdrie, is again saying this is up to the Council to find the money, rather than seeing this as a fully integrated transport project.

Peter Hawkins, of Spokes Planning Group and CTC, has prepared the information below about how cycling lost out in the Bathgate-Airdrie project.

a. LINKING STATIONS TO SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

Transport Scotland said this was a matter for the Local Authority - but no funding was provided for it. So much for an integrated transport project! You would think that a new railway would need decent links to nearby towns in order to maximise patronage, particularly by sustainable means. And such routes should have been built BEFORE the line re-opened, so as to get travel patterns off to a good start.

In fact virtually every town on or near the route is very poorly connected to the railway.

Towns lying to the south of the line, including **Seafeld, Blackburn, East Whitburn, Whitburn, and Harthill** are all badly affected. Some of these are sizeable towns, and the roads leading from them to Bathgate, Armadale or Blackridge, where the stations are, are narrow, winding and busy - certainly not suitable for cyclists or potential cyclists who aren't experienced or confident enough to cope with such conditions.

Armadale itself lies about 1km north of its station. Furthermore, the NCN75 cycleroute (see below) disappears into a vast car park at this point).

The new **Bathgate** station is much further from the town than the old one, and access is via a spur off the A89 - a spur with no cycle facility. Cycle parking isn't signed as such, and there's no signage from the station to Bathgate town, or to the cycle route to Airdrie. [Dec 2012 - we understand that this may now be being corrected].

Blackridge station is a disaster. It's been built at least 1km from the town, and looks like a station in the middle of nowhere - as indeed it is.* Again, it's reached by a spur off the A89. Again, no signage. But worst is that the access is from the north only, whereas the east-west cycle route NCN 75 runs south of the line, just a few yards away - all fenced off from the railway by heavy-duty fencing. To reach the cycle route means a detour of at least 2km. So in effect, the cycle route can't be used to bring commuters to the station.

*A housing development had been intended nearby, but has failed - though even this would have left the main existing town distant from the station.

Others have commented on the **aesthetic aspects of the new stations**, especially the over-engineering of ramps and bridges. Livingston North station is an outstanding example. The distance from Platform 1 to Platform 2 is about 200m, with innumerable right-angle bends, and several of 180 degrees. All possibilities for short cuts or 'desire lines' are fenced off - run for your train (even without a bike)? No chance!

b. REPLACEMENT NCN 75 CYCLEROUTE

The rail bed between Bathgate and Airdrie had formed an important section of Sustrans National Route NCN75 between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The project did at least replace this route, but the replacement cycle route itself has some big disappointments. Unfortunately Network Rail and some sections of Transport Scotland seem to have the idea that cycling is a leisure activity, not a mode of transport.

The railway reopened in early 2011. Unfortunately at that time the new cycle route had been constructed only from Bathgate to the eastern boundary of Plains, some 4km short of Drumgelloch Station. The new route finished abruptly at the point where the path emerges onto the A89 – and it still remains like that nearly two years later [January 2013]. What would have been the reaction if the railway had stopped abruptly at Plains?

The new cycleroute has steep gradients, and is mostly very exposed, because all the trees have been cut down, leaving swathes of open moorland. On the railway side, the path has a continuous 3m-high steel mesh fence, giving the impression of cycling through a linear Kolditz! - as compared to the former post-and-rail fencing.

From Blackridge westwards, the A89 offers, paradoxically, what some might even consider a more cycle-friendly route! It's a wide road, with very little traffic, evenly graded, sheltered in parts by woodland, and not bounded by steel mesh. For the more confident cyclist, and those who need or wish to cycle fast, cycle lanes on this road would be preferable to the NCN route, should be implemented now – and would have been a useful part of the original Airdrie/Bathgate project had it been a proper integrated transport project rather than a 'rail-only' project. The A89 also has the advantage of giving access to cafes/ shops etc in Armadale and Blackridge, which sadly require significant diversions if you are using the NCN75 cycleroute.

Finally, the consultations which took place over the replacement NCN75 cycleroute were of the "this is what we're planning to do" variety - and all significant suggestions made for improvements were rejected.

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