

On serendipity and cycle routes

Try googling the meaning of “*serendipity*” – it means an unexpected discovery, often from a surprise co-incidence. I had one of those the other day. I had just finished reading through NZTA’s “*Cycle Network Guidance – Planning and Design*”, and also sorting some old papers from my past career. I came across a letter of mine published in 1993 in the UK professional magazine *Local Transport Today*, and was surprised how the points I had raised seemed still topical today.

I was on the Transport Policy Team of Birmingham City Council at the time. I commended a certain other local authority for putting walking and cycling central in their transport policy, saying this was a refreshing change from:

“ . . .seeing the sum total of alternatives to the car as ‘public transport’ and then being negative about ‘private transport’ as if car transport was all there is to it.

“Oh yes, ‘encouraging cycling and walking’ is usually in there somewhere, but not in any seriousness as transport modes. Walking is tackled by traffic calming and pedestrianisation as a safety or amenity issue. Cycling policies usually mean a cycle route network with the assumption that this will mean ‘more cycling’, although the [UK Department of Transport] recent research on the subject suggests much more than cycle routes is needed for this to result. It’s easy to pay lip service to these, the real green modes, without even beginning to assess their strengths and weaknesses, what contribution they could make to lessening car dependency, or what policies would be needed to achieve this. It contrasts starkly with the exhaustive attention we have devoted to public transport. I suspect the way forward lies in – to coin an overworked phrase – an integration of policies on public transport and non-motorised transport respectively. The former’s strengths are in the transportation of mass numbers of people over medium to long distances along defined corridors. The latter’s strengths are in the myriad – by far the majority – of short to medium length journeys, which are likely to take place in a diffused pattern. For these journeys, which often can’t be conveniently or economically-viably served by public transport, the non-motorised modes share the personal availability and flexibility of the car, and in urban areas cycling is often just as quick.

“To only seriously look at public transport as a car-substitute is to effectively fire on only one cylinder, and to call this ‘integrated’ transport planning is a misnomer. Let’s look seriously at the non-motorised green modes too. They have integrated these two categories on the Continent – just walk out of any Dutch railway station and look at the bike stands. And to readers who say ‘But Holland’s flat’, try Germany and Switzerland as well.”

I’m talking about integrated planning, not planning for cycling. Integrated planning means planning for the different modes of transport together, not separately. That’s more difficult, not just conceptually, but because you are constantly faced with trade-offs. We absolutely must trade off, because otherwise we are just bunging things together, hoping for the best, and ignoring the truism that sometimes policy measures for different forms of transport work against each other.

It’s far easier to ‘fudge’ it, and convinces ourselves that we can provide well for cars, well for public transport, and at the same time well for people on foot and on bikes. We can’t, because those different forms of transport constantly interface and interact with each

other; so trade-offs are in the very nature of integration. Providing well for one form of transport will come at some form of a cost to other forms of transport, and we dodge this at our peril.

“Integrated transport planning” was the big new thing back in 1993 but, together with its supportive traffic modelling, it had only just started to embrace public transport as meeting some traffic need as an alternative to providing for the car. It had irked me somewhat that planning for cycling, for all its positive points, was completely isolated from this, the mainstream, cutting-edge new frontier of transport planning. And I was so pleased to see that one local authority was starting to think broader, that I wanted to commend them.

You’ll notice I also referred to a UK government trial of cycle networks and routes. This, the late 1980s/ early 1990s *Cycle Route Demonstration Project*, comprised local trial projects in various towns and cities, based largely on either off-road cycle routes, or what were called ‘back street’ routes. The aims were to increase cycling levels while reducing crashes. These projects were brought together in a comprehensive final report in 1995 (*“Cycle Routes”*) although by 1993 the results of the various individual trials were already well-known. The results were, to put it bluntly, under-whelming. Nay-sayers said *“There, we told you it was a waste of time putting resources into a dying form of transport like cycling”*. Many others, including me, said to compare Britain with Denmark and the Netherlands (and other places) where the trade-offs between bikes and cars had been faced. In Britain, the trade-offs had been fudged: we thought we could provide well for both, and ended up not quite doing a good enough job for cycling, because of an underlying ethic that nothing should be done which disadvantaged mobility by car. In the Netherlands and Denmark, in contrast, they had adapted the road system so that it was more difficult to get around by car than it was by bike – and new towns, when they were built, had (deliberately!) tortuous detour routes for cars but short, direct and frequently connected ways through by bike and foot. The results? Legendary (readers probably don’t need reminding how high the cycling levels are over there), and downright embarrassing, when seen from mid-1990s Britain.

And NZTA’s latest *Cycle Network Guidance – Planning and Design?* I’m not concerned about the cycling facility engineering, because that’s just a technical job. I’m concerned about the planning, which is different entirely. The aftermath of that 1995 UK *Cycle Routes* report had been a turning away from a focus on ‘cycle route networks’ and ‘cycling facilities’, and a focus instead on general road network planning and traffic management. No matter how impressive your plans for a cycle route network, they always needs to be traded off against plans for other forms of transport, most notably the car. And that is where, often, the guidance on cycling facilities and route networks, no matter how impressive, fails to make it onto the ground, and cycling still (after decades of this!) fails to break out of the preserve of what Portland’s Roger Geller would call the rather limited *“enthused and confident”* market – that is, people who already cycle. I don’t need to remind readers that cycle route planning has had some pretty disastrous press coverage in certain parts of New Zealand over the past couple of years; this should not just be dismissed as *“bikelash”*.

Read the *Cycle Network Guidance* for yourself, and make up your own mind.

