

Gogar Station – What Went Wrong?

CEC have now approved the planning application for a new station and tram interchange at Gogar, without conceding any of the requests made by the cycling organisations to make best use of the proposed A8 underpass and thus make this important development properly integrated. This review looks at 'what went wrong'. It is not intended as criticism of anyone or any body, rather it is to ask if any lessons can be learned for the future.

Importance of the Route

The A8 is a major east-west corridor for cyclists, just as it is for all traffic. Cyclists however have the particular constraint that the Gogar roundabout can only be safely negotiated on the north side, whereas the eastward continuation of the route, towards the city, Gyle Centre, Edinburgh Park etc are all on the south side, while on the north side, the Maybury junction is a major barrier for cyclists.

An underpass of the A8 is thus essential to enable cyclists to cross from the north side to the south, and is a facility the cycling organisations have sought for many years. The existing cycle path runs beside the A8 on the north side, meaning cyclists have to negotiate the Maybury junction.

Important cycle destinations west of Gogar include the RBS, the Airport, and in future, the International Business Gateway. Because of shift work at the Airport, and late-arriving planes, it is important that any underpass be open all hours.

Engaging with the Democratic Process

Cyclists made representations from the very start – the Pre-Application Notice (PAN) and public exhibitions arranged by the promoter Network Rail (NR). The details of the design were not clear at this stage but it was clear that cyclists would be asked to dismount through the underpass, that there would be no direct link to the existing cycle path, and that the underpass would be closed at night. Many comments by cyclists made clear to the promoter what was needed.

At the Planning Application stage, 28 objections were received from cyclists concerning the (lack of) cycling facilities.

The objections centred round three conditions:

the need for a direct link from the north portal of the underpass to the existing east-west path;

shared-use of the underpass without dismounting;

24/7 operation.

What was NOT clear from the plans was that the promoter (and CEC) planned a clear-plastic continuation tunnel from the north portal into the station itself, a distance of some 150m – ie the south entrance of the underpass would constitute the entrance to the station, from which there would be no exit until the actual station.

Development Management Sub-cttee of the Planning Cttee: Hearing, 1st April

The Application came before this sub-cttee on 1st April. Despite the comments at the PAN stage, and our objections to the Planning Application, none of the cyclists' requests had been incorporated into the designs.

It was agreed beforehand that the cyclists' interests should be represented by a single presentation, since we all, organisations and objectors alike, agreed on our three main requests, as above. The 10-minute presentation was made by myself, on behalf of all 28 objectors and of the main cycling organisations, Spokes and CTC (Scotland). There followed a period of questions and discussion by the Councillors, during which it emerged

that the reason for not including a direct link to the existing path was because it would interfere with the landscape designs.

When it came to the voting, Cllr Rose tabled an amendment which *appeared* to be cycle-friendly, and *appeared* to offer a solution which would incorporate the first two of our requests. Cllr Burgess tabled a further amendment which clearly offered all three of our requests. Worryingly, there was no discussion of the exact wording of Cllr Rose's amendment. The Burgess amendment was then voted down, but the former was upheld, even though the wording was far from clear.

It later transpired that the wording was in fact exceedingly vague. It did not mention a link from the northern portal to the existing path, nor specify shared-use of the underpass. Its wording was: "the applicant to bring back revised proposals considering an element of shared-use and access to the cycle slip route". The only consolation was that the revised proposals would have to be ratified by the Sub-cttee.

This meeting raised several issues of principle concerning the determination of major proposals of this kind:

Issue 1: How can it be acceptable that policy is made "on the hoof", by the tabling of amendments at the last minute? This is a project that will cost millions, and whose impact will have long-lasting effects – probably for at least the next 50 years.

Issue 2: Is it acceptable that the aesthetic quality of the landscape is allowed to take precedence over the functional performance of a transport mode (in this case, cycling) ?

Issue 3: Is a sub-cttee of the Planning Department the right cttee to be making the decision? This project was presented as an interchange of rail and tram; since it is essentially about *transport*, should it not be at least equally determined by (a sub-cttee of) the Transport, Infrastructure and Environment Cttee? Indeed, the latter had made similar representations to ourselves about the needs of cycling (Notice of Meeting and Agenda, pp 23-4).

Issue 4: *Advice from CEC's own officials was ignored:*

The comments from Transport (TIE cttee) were submitted on 25th Feb, well before the Planning Sub-Cttee meeting of 1st April. As regards cycling, they read as follows:

"In order to preserve a cycle route to the West Edinburgh Business Gateway and the Airport from the Gyle the applicant be asked to re-examine the official entrance position to the station such that cyclists would be able to cycle through the underpass...a ramp(s) to and from the national cycle route adjacent to the A8 requires to be provided." (Notice of 1st April Meeting and Agenda, p.23).

This is almost exactly what the cycling organisations were also seeking.

Questions: Is it acceptable, and normal, for official advice from other Departments to be ignored? Were TIE notified that the advice would be ignored, and given reasons why?

Issue 5: Is CEC satisfied that Cllrs with the remit of taking decisions on major projects of this kind, are given adequate preparation and advice on the main issues before the critical meeting? At the 1st April meeting, to which I gave my presentation, it was obvious that many Cllrs on the committee had little knowledge of the station design:

- 1) When a model was presented, they all crowded round to look at it, clearly indicating that they had not already seen it.

- 2) Most of them had not realised that the northern portal of the underpass would lead directly into a plastic tunnel, of about 200m length, into the station, and there was lengthy discussion about the safety issues of this, and of the likelihood of over-heating in sunny conditions.
- 3) It later transpired that the model was incorrect, and that there would not be an enclosed plastic tunnel, but a covered walkway.
- 4) No-one had apparently been aware that the reason for the lack of a direct cycle link was because of aesthetic considerations of landscaping.

At the Full Council meeting of 29th April to which the application was referred, no further representations were allowed, and the Council passed the resolutions as they stood (Note: the original Cllr Rose amendment became the Motion on 29th, proposed by Cllr Lowrie).

On 24th May CTC(S) and Spokes representatives received from the Head of Planning a letter, dated 19 May, informing us that the (revised) application “was to be considered at the Development Management Sub-Committee on – “ and the date had been blanked out. By the time I had ascertained when the meeting was to be held, it had already passed – on 26th May. Cock-up, or Conspiracy?

Issue 6: We would like an internal investigation into the reasons for this letter being sent with so little notice, and with vital information crudely deleted.

By way of the required revision of the plans, the promoter had done the absolute minimum necessary to satisfy the highly vague wording of the Cllr Rose amendment.

- 1) The “element of shared use” was “satisfied” by offering shared-use of the path network *north* of the underpass, ie between the northern portal and the station, and from the station back to the A8. The underpass itself remains 'pedestrian', with cyclists told to dismount.
- 2) The second part, the “access to the cycle slip route”, was “satisfied” by providing an additional link, of about 20m in length, (and of substandard width, only 2m), at the point where the path from the station meets the existing A8 path.

In other words, cyclists will still have to proceed northwards, from the northern portal, to the station, and then south-eastwards (essentially a re-trace) from the station to the existing A8 path, adding an unnecessary 300m to their journey, and will still have to dismount in the underpass.

Thus, in summary, none of the objections from the cycling organisations and the 28 objectors to the scheme has been resolved. A huge opportunity to make the underpass part of the cycling infrastructure has been lost. Policies to promote cycling, both local and national, have been trampled on. We cycling organisations have pursued the democratic process to no avail at all. And perhaps the unkindest cut of all, is that the interests of functional and sustainable transport have been made subservient to aesthetics and appearance.

Peter Hawkins
CTC Lothians

In fairness we should add the comments of Cllr Gordon Mackenzie, who is Chair of the Transport/Infrastructure/Env't cttee and Chair of the Cycle Forum - if you wouldn't mind posting these.
Peter

Begin forwarded message:

From: "Gordon Mackenzie" <gordon.mackenzie@edinburgh.gov.uk>
Date: 1 June 2010 12:00:08 BST
To: "Peter Hawkins" <peterhawk@phonecoop.coop>
Cc: "Chris Brace" <Chris.Brace@edinburgh.gov.uk>
Subject: RE: Gogar Station decision review

Peter,

thank you for your efforts to summarise and analyse the process as you saw it.

As you are probably aware this was the first time the Council has considered an application in this way and for that reason, for everyone involved, it was a learning experience.

There are a few points I would like to add which I hope are of some benefit:

Firstly, in terms of the process, it may be difficult (but not impossible) to produce amendments for Councillors to consider at the Dev Sub stage (don't be confused by the Ctte title, that is just a formality - DS is the principle decision making body for Council Planning decisions). It may be that as part of future representations you should consider promoting an amendment (or options) in the hope that someone from the Ctte will take it/them up and formally propose.

While there are some procedural difficulties in doing this at the Dev Sub stage (because the members of the DS are bound by guidance not to declare a position prior to the debate) it seems far less problematic to promote amendments between the Dev Sub stage and consideration at Full Council. The advice to Cllrs was that they were free to engage more fully with the arguments after the Dev Sub meeting had been held. For example, it may have been possible for promoters of an amendment to exhibit / hold an open forum and invite Cllrs to hear what you have to say between those two meetings (I shall check this detail with Planning).

Had there been a more engagement between stages it would have allowed Cllrs to hear what you and /or other objectors thought about the Police advice given in the report. Although I voted with the amendment from Cllr Burgess it was my impression from reading the report and listening to the debate, that the Police advice was the key influencing decision as far as Cllrs were concerned at Full Council, not the issue of aesthetics. There was no discussion about the aesthetics of the design when the application was debated at Full Council while nearly every opponent of Cllr Burgess's amendment mentioned the Police concerns.

It is also fair to say, and I regret this, that I could have engaged better with the process myself. I and several others were initially concerned that we had a conflict of interest, as Directors of TIE, which would prevent us from voting. It was only late in the day that this was clarified and as a result I did not take an active part in the process. This situation will, hopefully, not arise very often in the future as there are very few situations in which I would

have a potential conflict interest.

I shall take up your points regarding the weight which was given to the Transport officer's submission with the Section, to see what we can do to be more effective in future and will also take up the failure to properly notify with Planning.

Once again many thanks for the time and effort you have taken to put your summary together. I would also confirm I am happy for your summary to be circulated and will ask for my comments be circulated with it.

Regards

Gordon