

Report to: **Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment**

Date: **7 February 2005**

Report By: **Director of Transport and Environment**

Title of Report: **National Cycle Network Route 21 – Cuckoo Trail to Forest Way**

Purpose of Report: **To advise the Lead Cabinet Member of relevant issues surrounding the determination of the National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 21 between the Cuckoo Trail and the Forest Way and to seek approval to commission a Feasibility Study of various options for this route.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. To approve the consultants' brief contained in Appendix A for a Feasibility Study of route options for the National Cycle Network Route 21 between the Cuckoo Trail and the Forest Way.**
 - 2. To authorise the commissioning of the Feasibility Study.**
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1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The total cost of the Feasibility Study is estimated at £25,000.

1.2 The Study forms part of the 'Franco-British Cycle Plan' INTERREG project and up to 50% of the costs are eligible for funding by the European Regional Development Fund. In addition, a contribution of £5,000 has been secured from Wealden District Council. Funds to cover the remaining costs are available within the 2004/05 Traffic and Safety budgets.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The National Cycle Network (NCN) consists of more than 8,000 miles of routes across the UK for cyclists, pedestrians, people with disabilities and horse riders. Its implementation is co-ordinated by Sustrans, the sustainable transport charity, in partnership with local councils. In 2004, the NCN was awarded the National Lottery's prestigious Helping Hand 'UK Life Award' for the project that has made the greatest overall impact to UK national life.

2.2 By providing a network of safe high-quality routes that link towns and villages, the NCN aims to increase travel choices for both utility and leisure journeys. Any route signed and promoted as "final" NCN has to be suitable for a family with small children or an unaccompanied 12 year-old child.

2.3 In 1997, East Sussex County Council made a commitment to implement two NCN routes (2 and 21) in East Sussex. This commitment has since been reinforced by including the completion of the NCN as a target in the East Sussex Cycling Strategy.

2.4 In addition, parts of Route 2 and all of Route 21 coincide with the 'Avenue Verte London Paris', a flagship European greenway scheme, which aims ultimately to link the two capitals via almost (95%) traffic-free routes. In 1999, the County Council pledged its support for the Avenue Verte and accepted the related criteria by signing a charter with its partners Wealden District Council, Lewes District Council, Conseil General de la Seine-Maritime, SIVU de l'Avenue Verte and Conseil Regional de Haute-Normandie. The route to be considered in this report forms part of Route 21, which includes the Forest Way and the Cuckoo Trail; together they account for about 35km of already traffic-free route. The remaining sections are signed as interim routes on sometimes fast and busy roads that act as a strong deterrent for many less confident and would-be cyclists.

3. Comments/Appraisal

3.1 The Cuckoo Trail is currently 17km long and follows the former railway line between Polegate and Heathfield. It is used by about 200,000 people per year and provides a traffic-free route to a number of schools. It is jointly owned and managed by the County Council and Wealden District Council (WDC).

3.2 Ever since the completion of the existing section of the Cuckoo Trail, ESCC and WDC have been keen to identify the final alignment of Route 21 north of Heathfield and to this end have been working with several individuals and organisations such as parish councils, Sustrans and the Heathfield Partnership, a charity comprising local stakeholders, council members and officers. One of the outcomes of this partnership working was the identification of four possible routes with public exhibitions on the options held in Mayfield and Heathfield in 2003.

3.3 At the public exhibitions, a number of people questioned why the former railway line between Heathfield and Mayfield was not shown as a possible route. It should be noted that unlike the section south of Heathfield, which is in public ownership, the railway line north of Heathfield is mainly in private ownership and any conversion to a cycle track would meet with considerable opposition. In addition, the topography of the land means that the route utilises a number of very high embankments whose stability is unknown. Because of these facts and the controversial nature of this option, the decision was taken not to include it as an option in the exhibition. However, in hindsight, this decision was probably incorrect, primarily because no independent technical assessment was available to demonstrate the unsuitability of the route. Even the former studies commissioned in the 1990s did not explore the stability of the existing embankments or give any advice on their long term stability. Clearly without this information it would not be possible to provide the public or members with all the facts and for them in turn to make a decision on how to proceed. Neither did the public have the opportunity to comment on this option.

3.4 The County Council recognises the importance of providing high quality routes for cyclists and other vulnerable road users and acknowledges that, because of its directness, gentle gradients and traffic-free nature, the former Cuckoo Line could provide the most desirable alignment for Route 21. This position was last reinforced on 30 September 1997, when the Transport and Environment Committee resolved to *'support in principle proposals for extending the Cuckoo Trail northwards from Heathfield to Groombridge, including, where possible, utilisation of the dismantled railway line'* and with this in mind substantial sums of money have already been spent on the old railway tunnel and the Millennium Green in Heathfield.

PLEASE NOTE THAT, AT THE MEETING ON 7 FEBRUARY 2005, THE LEAD CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT AGREED TO DELETE PARAGRAPH 3.4 OF THIS REPORT – MINUTE 37.4 OF THE MINUTES OF 7 FEBRUARY 2005 REFERS

4. Environmental Issues

The promotion of cycling and walking is consistent with, and contributes to, achieving the County Council's objectives for Integrated Transport and Environment. Environmental Impact Assessments will be carried out for identified routes.

5. Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendation

5.1. For the reasons quoted above, I consider there is a need to take a completely fresh look at all the possible options for the final alignment of Route 21 between the Cuckoo Trail (south of Heathfield) and the Forest Way. In order to achieve this, it is of paramount importance that the study is carried out by impartial consultants with an expertise in the field and that total transparency is guaranteed both during the conduct of the study and at the decision making stage. I also recommend that, whilst the selection of the routes should not be unduly influenced by previous studies or consultation exercises, the four options that have been identified in co-operation with the Heathfield Partnership should be included in the study and be explored alongside other alternatives as suggested by the consultants. The project brief, which aims to deliver this advice, is set out in Appendix A to this report.

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Local Members: Councillor Tidy and Councillor Simmons

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

File T/Cycles/05; Draft Consultants Brief; Sustrans Study; Bابتie Study; and the Avenue Verte Charter