

Sutton Living Streets' response to the A232 Grove Road TfL consultation

Charles Martin, Sutton Living Streets, February 2013

Introduction

A consultation on proposals to improve facilities for cyclists at the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road in Sutton¹, jointly developed by Transport for London (TfL) and the London Borough of Sutton, was held between 21 January and 12 February 2013.

This document reproduces the response submitted by Sutton Living Streets. Details of the proposals, as given on the consultation website², are included in Appendix 1, with Google Street View images of the location provided in Appendix 2. The accompanying blog post, published on 26 February 2013 (<http://suttonlivingstreets.org.uk/2013/02/26/groveroad/>) is reproduced in Appendix 3.

Sutton Living Streets' response to the consultation

1 What is your name?

Charles Martin

2 What is our email address?

Supplied

3 What is your organisation?

Sutton Living Streets

4 What is your postcode?

Supplied

5 Do you support the proposals for improvements for cyclists on the A232 Grove Road?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- No answer ✓

6 Do you have any comments about these proposals?

Sutton Living Streets support some of the proposals outlined here, namely the provision of a raised platform across the entrance to Bridge Road and the improvements to footways and crossing points around Grove Road, but have reservations regarding the proposed use of the footway as a pseudo cycle-path. These reservations do not relate to the fact that the footway is to be shared between people on bicycles and those on foot, but rather to the lack of aspiration of the proposal. What is required here is a more robust, forward-thinking, design, which will do more to facilitate cycling. This proposal, it could be argued, tends to

¹ The National Grid Reference for this location is TQ258638, nearest postcode SM1 2AF.

² Consultation website Citizen Space <https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/cycling/a232groveroad>

marginalise cycling, and this is particularly a pity given the current status, and rising profile, of cycling on the political agenda.

It is worth noting that the proposal has been presented as “improved facilities for cyclists”, implying that “cyclists” are somehow a breed apart, and that only existing cyclists, as opposed to people who may like to try cycling, will benefit. A key outcome of any proposal like this, promoted as improving facilities for “cyclists”, is whether or not it will encourage more people to try cycling - those future “cyclists” (even if they will not think of themselves as cyclists). So the proposal would be deemed a success if, for example, just a small percentage of the 700+ pupils attending the nearby Sutton High School for Girls in Grove Road were to start cycling on an occasional basis, or more often, as a result of its implication. The question is, will they? Will the proposal give added impetus to those Year 5 and Year 6 pupils in the Junior School who opt to take part in Cycling Proficiency Courses being held at the school during the half-term holiday next week? It would be good to think so, and only time will tell.

There is no doubt that the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road, and the adjacent junction of Sutton Park Road with the residential part of Grove Road, is a challenging location. The two-lane, one-way, gyratory forms a barrier here (as it does for most of its length) for those on bicycles (and to a lesser extent those on foot). The magnitude of this challenge is reflected in the fact that although the proposals endeavour to address the current situation, in terms of accessing Bridge Road and the (relatively) quieter roads when approaching from the west (the more residential part of Grove Road), it does nothing to tackle access to the town centre by bicycle from this direction. Anyone heading for the town centre has to join the fast-moving and aggressive traffic on the gyratory. Effectively, only that fraction of the population who are “traffic-tolerant” need apply. That almost certainly excludes the Year 5 and Year 6 children, even after they successfully complete their Cycling Proficiency Courses.

Nevertheless, on the face of it, allowing cyclists to share the area of footway between Grove Road and Bridge Road with pedestrians, and so enabling them (the “cyclists”) to bypass the Sutton town centre gyratory system when approaching from the west to access quieter roads (and so at the same time bypass the town centre too), could be interpreted as a way of improving facilities for cyclists. This proposal will certainly legitimise what many “cyclists” already do at this location anyway, and that is ride on the pavement. With that in mind, it is worth noting that traffic counts have indicated that the number of people on bicycles here (in either direction) is very low indeed (even when Post Office employees from the nearby sorting office are included). These counts also suggest that the number of people on foot along the more residential part of Grove Road, immediately to the west of the gyratory, exceeds the number of vehicle movements on the same section of street, at least at certain times of day. So, all in all, given that relatively few people already cycle on the pavement here, it is unlikely that the proposal to allow cyclists to share the footway will introduce any great deal of conflict with pedestrians.

The real down-side of this proposal, however, is that it marginalises cycling. It is making a statement that the only real option here is to ride on the pavement. The fact that no new space is being found for cycling here gives a very strong message. Simply providing an

add-on, quick-fix, facility suggests that cycling is still something that does not merit being taken seriously. After all, the proposal, if implemented as planned, will clearly not be adequate to accommodate high levels of cycle usage. Therefore, it would be reasonable to presume that the proponents of the scheme do not foresee any great increase in cycling levels here post implementation. And that is a real pity.

So what could be done here in order to achieve higher levels of cycling (and walking) and to improve the public realm? Certainly a more determined approach is required, but what are the options? Two immediately come to mind. One would be to negotiate with the owners of Greensleeves Manor to re-locate some front garden space in order to accommodate a well-defined cycle-path alignment between Grove Road and Bridge Road. A 'pocket park' could be created here too. Another, and complimentary option, would be to close Bridge Road to vehicular traffic at the railway bridge, allowing 'access only' to Bridge Road, but retaining full access for people on foot or on bicycle (particularly useful should an additional entrance to Sutton railway station be constructed here). Bridge Road is really only used as a short-cut to avoid Brighton Road and the High Street when travelling north-bound, or to avoid the gyratory (Grove Road/Sutton Park Road/ Cheam Road/Carshalton Road/Chalk Pit Lane/ Sutton Court Road) when travelling to the south (typically on leaving the Morrisons' car-park). Obviously, not having access to Bridge Road would be seen, initially, as an inconvenience by anyone who regularly drives on this route as it would necessitate driving an extra few hundred metres. And it is likely that, in the short-term at least, traffic flows on the alternative routes would increase if the Bridge Road 'release-valve' was no longer available. But is this too large a price to pay to start to civilise our suburban streets? People might find that they no longer need to drive into town because the surrounding streets actually start to feel as safe and inviting for cycling as they do in the Netherlands. And it should be remembered that making London's streets as safe and inviting for cycling as in the Netherlands was a pledge made by Mayor Boris Johnson in April 2012, when he gave his support to the London Cycling Campaign's 'Go Dutch' campaign. I am sure the Mayor would accept that simply allowing cycling on a pavement is not something that the Dutch would recognise. The Dutch design paths to give people on bicycles priority rather than to get cyclists out of the way.

Politicians of all parties need to continue to make the case for better streets, streets that allow everyone a genuine choice of how they get around. And there is help with this right now, because in January 2013 the 'Get Britain Cycling' all-party parliamentary inquiry commenced. This inquiry is currently seeking views from expert witnesses on how the government can help get more people cycling by making it safer and more accessible. The third session, held just last week on 6 February 2013, focussed on road planning and design. Some comments from the session resonate with the proposal for Grove Road. For instance, Roger Geffen, CTC Campaigns Director, is quoted as having said "what we don't want to see is cyclists excluded from the road and forced to share space with pedestrians". He also remarked that the Highways Agency can "out-design cycling" because they "assume there is no demand for it, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy". Urban Movement's John Dales said: "Communities must start designing roads for people who are not already cycling. We must be very ambitious", and Phil Jones, Phil Jones Associates, is quoted as

saying “There has to be an emphasis in training for engineers in incorporating the needs of cyclists. Most people aren’t cyclists, and therefore most highway designers aren’t cyclists”.

Finally, it is relevant to note that last week London Assembly members voted in favour of a motion calling on the Mayor to implement their recommendation that at least £145m be allocated for cycling in his final budget for 2013/2014. This is promising, of course, but any additional funding needs to be spent wisely. And how do we know if it’s been spent wisely? One measure must surely be the consequence that children (and their parents and grandparents in fact) who, having completed their Cycling Proficiency Course, can actually begin to enjoy cycling for local journeys on the streets where they live, or in the case of the children, where they go to school. It’s unlikely that the girls of Sutton High School, or their parents, will feel they have the ability for that type of freedom for a little while yet.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. I very much look forward to learning of even bigger and better proposals in the coming months that will improve conditions not just for cyclists, but for those yet to consider cycling too.

Date: 12 February 2013

Appendix 1: The TfL and London borough of Sutton consultation

Overview

Transport for London (TfL) and the London Borough of Sutton have jointly developed proposals to improve facilities for cyclists at the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road in Sutton.

The proposals in detail

The proposed improvements are shown on the attached plan (Fig. 1) and include:

- Providing a raised platform across the entrance to Bridge Road to create a level crossing point for pedestrians and allow cyclists to access the footway along Grove Road.
- Allowing cyclists to share the area of footway between Grove Road and Bridge Road with pedestrians. This will enable cyclists to bypass the Sutton town centre gyratory system when approaching from the west to access quieter roads and speed up journey times. Cyclists will be able to access this footway without dismounting.
- Making the footways and crossing points around Grove Road and Bridge Road more accessible for pedestrians.

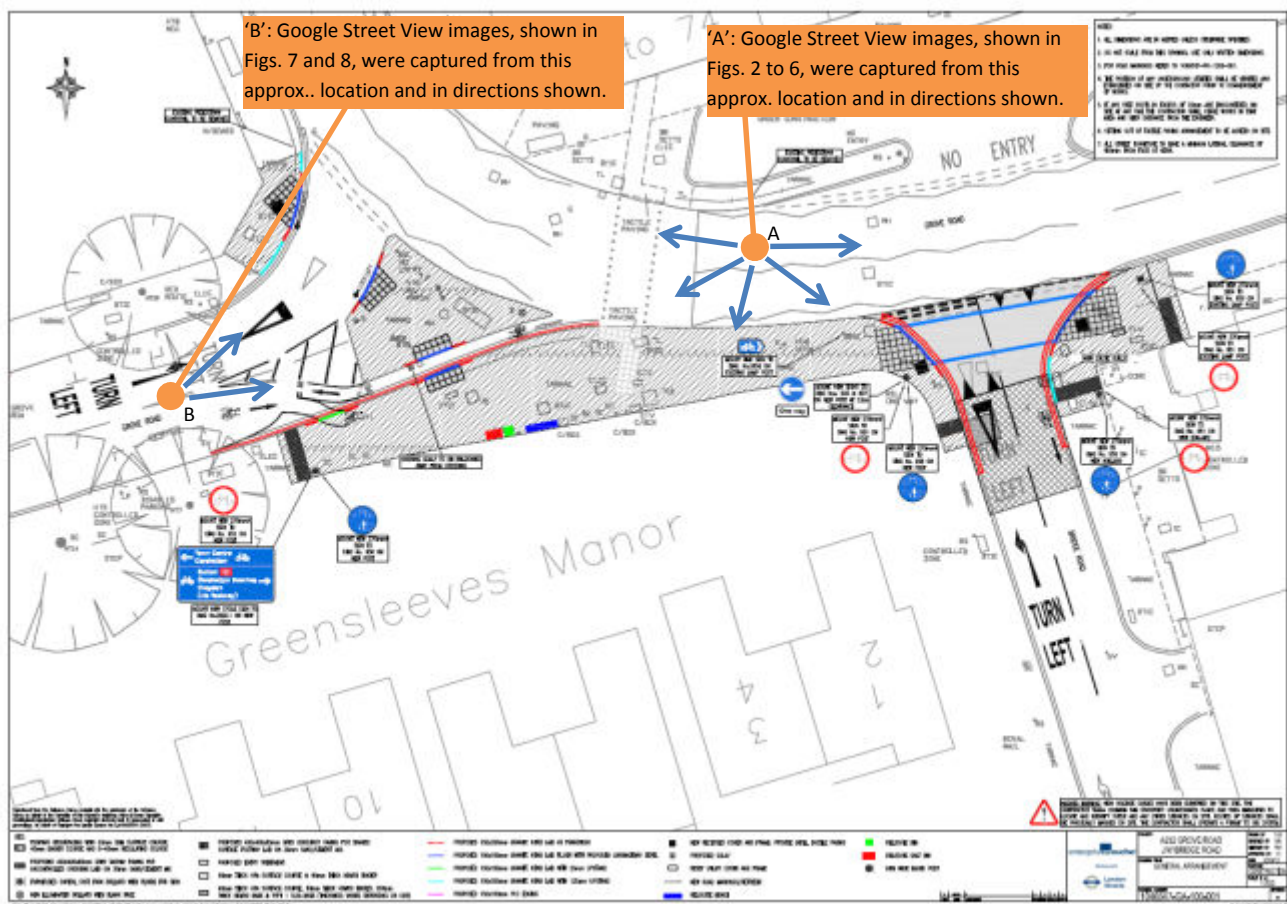


Figure 1: Plan of proposals: original available from <http://suttonlivingstreets.org.uk/2013/02/26/groveroad/>

Source: TfL <https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/cycling/a232groveroad> accessed 21 January 2013 with additional labels by author

Subject to the feedback received during this consultation TfL plan to undertake these works in February/March 2013.

For further information or to let us know your views please contact TfL's Consultation Delivery Team at the above address or by emailing STengagement@tfl.gov.uk. You can also let us know your views by following this online link:

<https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/cycling/a232groveroad/>. Please let us know your views **12 February 2013**.

Appendix 2: Google Street View images

This section shows Google Street View images of the location (image date May 2012), taken from two locations marked 'A' and 'B' in figure 1. Five of these images (figures 2 to 6) are from a point on Grove Road gyratory ('A'), and two (figures 7 and 8) from Grove Road residential ('B').



Figure 2: Grove Road, looking east (Bridge Road to the right)

Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/0wUyc> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 3: Grove Road, looking south south-east (Bridge Road centre-left)
Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/0wUyc> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 4: Grove Road, looking south
Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/0wUyc> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 5: Grove Road, looking south-west (gyratory continues to right at Sutton Park Road)
Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/0wUyc> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 6: Grove Road, looking west (Grove Road ahead, Sutton Park Road to the right).
Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/0wUyc> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 7: Grove Road, looking east (Grove Road ahead, Sutton Park Road to the left)

Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/Lx07T> accessed 25 February 2013



Figure 8: Grove Road, looking north east (Grove Road to right, Sutton Park Road to the left)

Source: Google Maps Street View <http://goo.gl/maps/Lx07T> accessed 25 February 2013

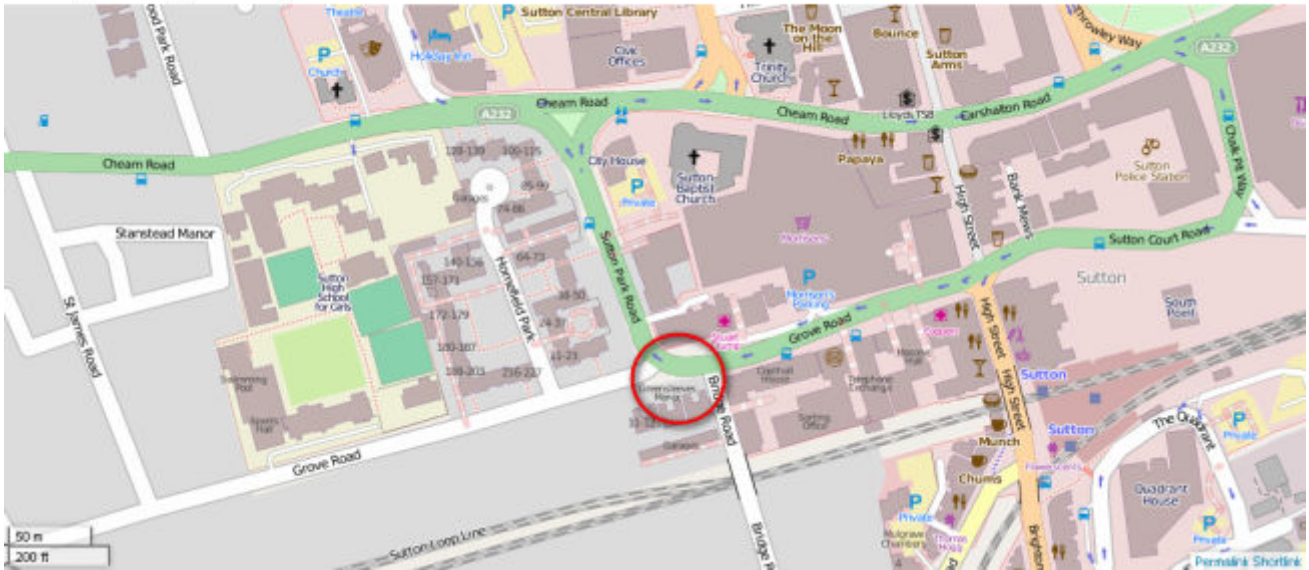
Appendix 3: Published blog post

Here is the text of the accompanying blog post, dated 26 February 2013

Proposals to improve facilities for cyclists in Grove Road: but will they encourage you to cycle?

Transport for London (TfL) and the London Borough of Sutton have jointly developed proposals to improve facilities for cyclists at the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road in Sutton. Charles Martin has taken a look at the proposals, which include allowing “cyclists” to share a key section of pavement, and he is not all that impressed.

Map showing location of proposed improved facilities for cyclists in Grove Road and Bridge Road, Sutton, SM1 2AF [525800, 163853]
Source OpenStreetMap, 26 February 2013



“Cyclists”, don’t you just love ‘em! Who are they? What do they want? Why are they in my way? Why are they on the pavement? You would never get me on a bike! All that traffic - you must be mad to cycle, it’s so dangerous!

But, hold on a moment, does it have to be like this? The answer to that question is emphatically no. Unfortunately, however, I can’t help thinking that these sorts of negative perceptions of cyclists and cycling are more likely to continue if the best options that can be offered as “improvements for cyclists” are similar to that recently developed by Transport for London and the London borough of Sutton for implementation at the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road.

The proposed improvements at this location close to Sutton town centre, will, if implemented, allow cyclists to share the area of footway between Grove Road and Bridge Road with pedestrians. This will enable “cyclists” to bypass the Sutton town centre gyratory system when approaching from the west (Grove Road) to access the relatively quieter roads to the south (via Bridge Road).

To a degree, this all seems quite reasonable. After all, the area of footway is arguably wide enough to be shared with care, especially when you consider that the number of cyclists using it is likely to be very low. And the ability to cycle here will effectively provide a link that some people will find useful (avoiding a long detour and enabling two-way cycling effectively on the same alignment). But that’s about as far as it goes, and that is a pity.

Simply enabling cyclists to share an area of footway (that a small number currently use unofficially anyway), falls far short of the sort of improvements that are really required if more people are to ever take to the bicycle (particularly, perhaps, at locations adjacent to a fast moving one-way gyratory system). Therefore, it will be no surprise if, post-implementation, many people continue to feel dissociated from the very idea of cycling, and, sadly, never get to sample the simple pleasure that taking a ride by bicycle can, and really should, be like.

And some of those people could be the pupils of Sutton High School, situated just two-hundred metres or so further along Grove Road. Some girls attending the junior section of the school were enjoying their cycling proficiency course last week during the half-term holiday. I suspect, however, that if you asked the parents of these 10 and 11 year-old children whether they would be particularly happy for their daughters to cycle from the school into Sutton town centre (a distance of under 500 metres) the answer, even post implementation of the nearby “improved facility for cyclists”, would likely be ‘no’. This is because these proposals do nothing to improve access to the town centre from Grove Road by bicycle. The two-lane, one-way, gyratory will continue to act as a barrier to everyone except traffic-tolerant cyclists. To get the full benefit of the cycle training sessions, more needs to be done on the streets to make the streets feel safe and inviting for these children and for their parents.

The proposals also demonstrate a lack of ambition. The existing footway area (particularly at the intersection with Bridge Road) is not adequate to accommodate high levels of cycle usage and so, as no additional space is to be provided, it would be reasonable to presume that the proponents of the scheme do not foresee any great increase in cycling levels here post implementation (a prophecy which could be self-fulfilling). This lack of aspiration also tends to indicate that all the talk about encouraging more trips by bicycle or on foot, by a borough clearly seeking to be seen as green, really doesn’t come to very much after all.

There is also a mind-set issue here. The proposals have been presented as “improved facilities for cyclists”, implying that “cyclists” are somehow a breed apart, and that only existing cyclists, as opposed to people who may like to try cycling, will benefit. This line of thinking not only perpetuates the idea that you have to consider yourself a “cyclist” before, or even when, you cycle, but also effectively overlooks the fact that improving cycling facilities is not solely about making cycling better. It’s about improving the urban landscape too. And that’s good news whether you walk, cycle, or drive along the street.

A major disappointment, however, is that these sort of proposals are still being put forward at a time when cycling is increasingly in the political spotlight. Perhaps just three or four years ago this would all have sounded quite reasonable (although the raised platform across Bridge Road is something that really ought to have been implemented when the gyratory became a “red-route” 15 or 20 years ago). But in the context of the age of the “Boris Bike”, the “cycle superhighway”, “biking boroughs”, “Cities fit for cycling”, “Love London, Go Dutch” and now the “Get Britain Cycling” inquiry (which started on 23 January 2013, just two days after this particular consultation opened), these type of proposals for improvements for cyclists simply feel they belong to a bygone era.

Let’s hope that, following the publication of the Get Britain Cycling inquiry report and the Mayor’s Cycling Vision for 2020 (both of which expected within the next few weeks), the days of the quick-fix towards all things cycling will soon be over. In its place, we need to think about dedicated spending, political ambition and enlightened planning. Then, when we talk about improving facilities for cyclists, the approach taken will be joined-up, holistic and aspirational. All of which could result in us thinking less in terms of cyclists being in the way, or on the pavement, or seeing cycling as something that is too dangerous to pursue and only for someone else, and rather more as recognising that cycling could be something that many more of us may actually consider trying. Because a “cyclist” is simply someone who rides a bicycle for certain journeys. In theory, a “would-be cyclist” could be any one of us. But for most of us, cycling will only become an option for some of our journeys when improvements for cyclists are mainstream and focussed rather than marginalised and piecemeal.

A consultation on proposals to improve facilities for cyclists at the junction of the A232 Grove Road and Bridge Road in Sutton, jointly developed by Transport for London (TfL) and the London Borough of Sutton, was held between 21 January and 12 February 2013. Details of the proposals, and the full response submitted by Sutton Living Streets to the consultation, are available in this pdf document “GroveRoadConsultation_ImprovementsForCyclists_v1_February2013”.

Copies of this document are available from the Sutton Living Streets website:

<http://suttonlivingstreets.org.uk/2013/02/26/groveroad/>