

# Active Travel in and around Little Leigh, Northwich, Cheshire

## Aims

The aims of this document are:

- To promote the development of a safe Active Travel route between Little Leigh Village and the services in neighbouring Barnton.
- To promote the development of a safe Active Travel route to and from Little Leigh Primary School.
- To provide an assessment of the current situation in Little Leigh parish and village in relation to Active Travel and public transport.
- To promote Little Leigh Parish Councils commitment to improving Active Travel opportunities for the residents of Little Leigh as an alternative to the current dependency on motor vehicles.

## Description

Little Leigh is a small parish of approximately 250 households in a rural setting approximately 4 miles from the centre of our nearest town of Northwich. Little Leigh consists of a small village with church, village hall, and surrounding rural farmland. It is bound by the A49 to its western edge and the River Weaver Navigation to its south. It is dissected by the A533 to the north of the village and by the Trent and Mersey canal to the south of the village.

The area is criss-crossed by a number of minor roads and country lanes, many of which are narrow single carriageways without pavements and bordered with high hedges. It is an area of great charm and beauty, drawing visitors from around the country. The Cheshire Cycleway route passes through the village.

Little Leigh village boasts a thriving and very popular primary school educating children from within the village and surrounding areas.

Little Leigh connects to Northwich through the neighbouring parishes of Barnton 1 mile away, Anderton and Comberbach.

Little Leigh Parish Council is a very small body of 7 local parish councillors and a Clerk. It has a small annual precept greatly impacting its ability to fund all but minor community projects.

## Road Transport

There are no public bus services in Little Leigh Parish. Despite the need having been frequently highlighted to the Local Borough Authority, Cheshire West and Chester (formally Vale Royal Council) over a number of years, the last remaining bus shelters in the parish, on the A533, have been removed in recent weeks clearly indicating that the borough council has no intention of instituting a public bus service anytime soon.

Both the A49 and A533 are two lane trunk roads carrying a very high volume of traffic and Large Goods Vehicles (LGV's). This despite the fact that the A533 passes through Little Leigh and Barnton en route to Northwich via the, 100 year old single lane, swing bridge at Winnington, a totally inappropriate and inadequate route for LGV's and the high volume of traffic using it. The current feasibility study looking at possible solutions to the Winnington Bridge pinch point is greatly welcomed, but, must include the surrounding approaches through the local villages and parishes. Indications are that a solution is not guaranteed and that any solution, whilst desperately needed now, may be many years away.

The A49 and A533 cross at a large traffic light controlled junction and is the scene of many traffic accidents due to its inadequate and dangerous junction layout, mainly no proper right turn lanes on the A49.

Speed limits have recently been reduced on certain roads and within the village residential roads, but, many residents argue that the 50 mph limit on the A553 between Barnton and Little Leigh is still far too high for the hazardous nature of the road.

There are currently no dedicated cycling routes within Little Leigh and the pavement between Little Leigh and neighbouring Barnton is very narrow and poorly maintained. Services such as shops, petrol service station, pharmacy and Health Centre are located in Barnton, there being no such services in Little Leigh village. A number of Children from Barnton attend Little Leigh Primary School as do many children from other areas outside of the parish. The introduction of a safe active travel route between Little Leigh and Barnton would, in time, reduce the reliance on the motor vehicle in order to access these local services and allow children an alternative, healthier, route to school.

Many residents regard Little Leigh as being an island in grand isolation. The only realistic method of transport in or out of the village is by car. Parents living outside of the village have no choice but to drive their children to and from the primary school, many using the narrow country lanes to avoid the heavy traffic, regular hold-ups and hazardous traffic light junction of the A49 and A533. The result is that the surrounding single track lanes have become rat-runs during school days, particularly around drop off and pick up times.

The lack of off-street parking at the school leads to heavy congestion of parked vehicles outside the school and other sections of road through the village, often a source of annoyance and confrontation with villagers trying to move around the village. There are two farms situated within the village; the farmers often unable to move agricultural tractors and machinery, not to mention delivery vehicles, during these busy times due to the congestion of vehicles around the school. This has been subject of many complaints to the parish council over the years. Regular complaints include obstruction, parents parking over driveways and engines left running whilst waiting to collect children.

On-street parking outside the primary school is totally inadequate.

## Active Travel – Current situation

There are currently no designated cycle routes within Little Leigh parish. Pavements within the village of Little Leigh are in the main narrow, inconsistent, and poorly maintained. The pavement between Little Leigh and neighbouring Barnton is narrow, poorly maintained and often overgrown by uncut hedges.

Pedestrians using this pavement are often forced to step into the carriageway of the A533 into the path of fast moving motor vehicles and LGV's. The speed limit on this section of the A533 is 50mph only dropping to 30mph on the immediate approach to Barnton. Observation at any time would conclude that the speed limits are often exceeded by drivers.

The road here consists of bends and high hedges, further reducing visibility for pedestrians and motorists. It is impossible and illegal to ride a bicycle on this pavement. The low number of road traffic crashes involving pedestrians and cyclists on this route has more to do with the refusal of most people to attempt to walk or ride this hazardous route than any inherent design benefits. As a cyclist, it is a highly uncomfortable experience not to be undertaken by the faint of heart. Most cyclists will take any other route to avoid this highly dangerous section of road.

Despite the above, the country lanes around Little Leigh and neighbouring parishes are very popular with leisure cyclists and walkers, pastimes that have noticeably increased in the area during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Use of the tow paths on the Trent and Mersey Canal and the River Weaver Navigation are popular for walkers and cyclists although the poor condition and narrowness of both routes precluded the use of anything other than mountain bikes or other cycles fitted with stout off-road tyres. Both routes suffer from a lack of maintenance or improvements over a number of years.

The river tow path has been badly flooded in recent winters due to the well documented River Weaver flooding incidents, often with large sections completely submerged below the river flood level. In wet weather the canal tow path becomes very muddy and difficult to walk, only made worse by mountain bike tyres churning up the poorly maintained path.

There are no secure cycle parking facilities at the primary school, or, any designated safe walking or cycling routes to the school. The school bus service to the school was cut a number of years ago.

A mobile library serving the village community was cut some years ago.

## Active Travel - Moving Forward

**Little Leigh Parish Council is dedicated to improving active travel possibilities within the parish and encouraging neighbouring parish councils to join a united approach to this end.**

To this end we support the government's cycling and walking strategy 'Gear Change' together with local strategies and projects emanating from the Local Authority and other agencies.

However, glossy brochures and grand strategies mean nothing if they are not properly funded and implemented for the benefit of local people. To date we have seen nothing in the way of implementation of these strategies within our, or, neighbouring parishes.

Little Leigh Parish Council has recently installed a secure cycle rack at the village hall and actively encouraged parish councillors to set an example by cycling or walking to meetings and events at the village hall. We have reinstated village cycle rides and village walks, encouraging all to join in.

It is the aim of the Parish Council to encourage residents to consider alternatives to the motor car whenever possible for travel within the parish.

The Parish Council wishes to open dialogue with Cheshire West and Chester Council, Government and all NGAs involved with the development of safe cycling and walking routes in the parish and beyond. But, as a small parish, we are dependent on the goodwill and funding from government at national and local level together with the available expertise to develop a safe active travel routes network.

We wish to encourage the development of safe routes, away from motor vehicles, for all forms of active travel by bicycle, on foot and by horse. The parish has a number of livery stables and is a popular area for horse riding.

As a pressing matter the parish council has been lobbying for over 20 years for a safe cycling/walking route between Little Leigh village and Barnton. A feasibility study was undertaken by the Borough Council a few years ago and proposed a route incorporating part of the canal towpath. This was apparently rejected due to lack of available funds at the time. Despite requests for sight of that study we have been unable to locate a copy from the Borough Council.

Time and time again we see funding issues raised as an excuse to do nothing, whilst seeing large sums being spent on the cycling schemes in Chester, Middlewich, Frodsham or other larger towns. Whilst not decrying the need for such schemes it does rile our rural communities that we do not see an equitable share of resources being spent on schemes in our communities where the need is equally strong and often more pressing.

The island mentality has become well entrenched and it's high time the 'Powers That Be' started to build the necessary bridges to re-join our communities. There appears also to be a need for planners and the borough council departments to re-read 'Change Gear' and understand that this strategy isn't the icing on the cake but the core of all future development.

Rome wasn't built in a day. Experience from other countries has shown that it takes decades to build fully integrated active travel networks. But, they all started somewhere!

Coming very late to the table does give the United Kingdom the benefit of learning the lessons from others who are further along in their projects. But, it is essential that we build active travel networks that work for 'us' and not just try to copy others.

The United Kingdom has one asset that is the envy of many countries, in that we already have a major network of paths and bridleways that criss-crosses our country crying out to be developed into the backbone of our future cycling and walking infrastructure. I refer to our canal and river towpaths.

Many sections of towpath have already been upgraded by forward thinking local authorities and developers working closely with the Canals and Rivers Trust and Sustrans. But these are often relatively short sections of towpath around larger conurbations. When government can always seem to find funding sources for 'smart motorways' and other major roads projects it has to be asked why,

for a fraction of the cost, investment isn't being ploughed into upgrading this ready made network across the country.

Upgrading our local canal or river towpath around Little Leigh could provide the very safe dedicated active travel link to Barnton and on into Northwich itself, that we are demanding, for a fraction of the cost of finding and planning new routes. The river towpath could also, eventually provide the next step in the network to join Frodsham and Dutton to the route to Northwich. Runcorn and Warrington could quite easily be included on a local network in the future using the towpath routes.

Likewise, the upgrading of Marbury Lane through from Anderton to Northwich would provide another safe link for the benefit of Anderton and Comberbach residents to access Northwich town centre via a largely motor vehicle free route.

Working in cooperation with landowners, the network of rural footpaths and bridleways could be upgraded to allow for safe mixed use with cyclists, walkers and equestrians.

These links require substantial investment over a number of years, but, will always be a far cheaper alternative to building and maintaining roads and motorways for motor vehicles, particularly at a time when the sustainability of privately owned motor-vehicles is being seriously questioned on environmental grounds.

The evidence is clear that the more roads that are built and the more lanes that are added to motorways solves nothing and exacerbates congestion as more motor vehicles arrive to clog them up.

At a time of environmental crisis, the government, quite rightly, has placed the emphasis on developing the active travel network. But, we need, indeed we demand, to see the fine words put into action locally.

The benefits of active travel are immeasurable. Environmental improvement, air quality, mental and physical wellbeing. One of the greatest and easiest vehicles to tackling the obesity crisis affecting our country and our health services is to encourage cycling and walking.

## Conclusion

It's quite simple:

- Our first priority is the building of a safe active travel route between Little Leigh Village and Barnton.
- Build the cycle paths and footpaths to connect local communities in the borough.
- Make it easier for people to cycle and walk directly to the shops and services they need.
- Network these routes by joining them together and joining our communities.
- Commit to maintaining them properly.
- Put Active Travel at the forefront of all development.
- Provide secure cycle parking where it's required.
- Improve the public transport infrastructure.
- Dismiss the 'nay-sayers' who say it can't be done and look to the countries and communities who have achieved miracles.

The experience from around the world is that if you build the network the people **WILL** use it. It just needs the political will and proper investment lead by politicians and planners who understand the desperate need.

Little Leigh Parish Council would welcome your support and views.

Martin Beecroft

Chairman

Little Leigh Parish Council.