

## Why do some cycle routes fail to reach their full potential? **Gavin Smith** explains the importance of planning and signing to attract users.

A good cycle route is a marvellous thing. Its signs not only let people know that a well planned and safe route exists, but also encourages those that do not cycle to venture out on their languishing – or as yet un-bought – bikes. In contrast, a poorly signed route or one that is ostensibly aimless will achieve nothing, or worse, it will entrench a non-cyclist's negative views.

With the standard signage in the *Traffic signs manual* not conducive to the making of 'good' routes – it does not work – some councils are experimenting with various surface signing methods instead. Now, a more standard accepted practice is needed for these markings.

Good cycle routes are, of course, not just about signage. A route's stated destination has to be attractive, and route planning and route mapping play important roles since, without a logical approach to routing, logical signage remains a faint hope. Nevertheless, signage remains the key public interface.

Extant types of signing appear effective in some areas. For rural leisure routes, the blue route-number stickers with direction arrows that appear along the Sustrans' National Cycle Network appear to work. Users keep their eyes peeled at every potential junction and volunteers make sure they are all maintained legibly.

Certainly, these relatively inexpensive and inoffensive stickers seem less exposed to problems as few seem to have considered them worth vandalising. Within towns, however, stickers are less useful and could be easily missed among the general urban information overload.

Signage should catch the public's attention and be hard to ignore. But it is easy to fail to see signs that have gone missing or point the wrong way. With standard blue finger-pointer signs vulnerable to the actions of local 'jokers', or at risk of removal for visual intrusion in this age of 'de-cluttering', it is natural that some councils are moving towards signage in the form of road markings.

The difficulty with cycle route markings on the carriageway is the lack of a nationally accepted system. Hence some authorities or route sponsors are inventing their own, and a selection is visible on the Cycle Touring Club's website photo-library of signing.

Possibly the most interesting efforts at carriageway route marking so far are those in Swindon and Peterborough. Peterborough City Council has adopted a way-finding philosophy pioneered by Judy Garland in the *Wizard of Oz*, and offers users a 'Yellow Brick Road'-style guide in the form of small painted diamond shapes, with a red leading edge, placed regularly along its routes.

In a different approach, Swindon Borough Council has used the standard blue cycle-sign pointers, but painted them on the ground. Its thermoplastic iron-on signs conform exactly with the requirements in the *Traffic signs manual* in size, colouring and content, but are laid horizontally and made with an anti-skid rough texture incorporating glass beads for night-time visibility.

So far, they have been used only at route 'decision points' – turns or junctions – and are placed towards the edge of the surface in order to avoid alignment with underground services.

At about £100 per sign, inclusive of laying, they are cheaper than erecting a pole and require less maintenance. The first examples have now lasted three years without a problem, although this can be dependent upon the laying skill of the contractor.

These thermoplastic signs have yet to be authorised by the Department for Transport and so can only be applied in off-road or on-footway situations, which is also the case with the diamond 'studs' in Peterborough.

Meanwhile, in Buckinghamshire, the county council has experimented with painting destination names directly onto the ground,

and in Bristol, the city council has used mini-signs mounted on low, square bollards.

Four authorities, four methods – but could some marriage of Peterborough's 'stud' and Swindon's 'recumbent direction sign' concepts achieve the advantages of both? There is a growing consensus that this is now what is required.

There may be colour-coding, or not, and design details such as surface logos – diamond, cycle or leaf shaped – and destination names may or may not be included, but certain principles do seem close to being established. They should:

- Be usable on footways and segregated paths – but also on narrow traffic roads and wider two-way roads, including those with twin ranks of parked cars;
- Avoid conflict with normal highway markings;
- Offer an intuitive means of advising a user whether they are heading into or out of town;
- Indicate that a sharp turn, or route junction, is just ahead.

None of the above should be impossible with a little initiative. A trial option could use spray paint, with the more expensive permanent fixtures adopting specially commissioned thermoplastic heat-on pads.

The implementation of such continuous and consistent route markings would reveal that many supposed cycle routes are neither continuous nor consistent. For example, consider a not-untypical route across London's Hyde Park (*see picture*), which ends at a park gate with a sign saying 'end of route, cyclists dismount'. This is not user-friendly.

Cycling, like any other legitimate form of transport, requires more consistency, with town routes continuing into the countryside and country routes on into the town.

The effects of consistency could be advantageous for all transportation, especially if a modal shift follows as cycle route marking is linked with marketing. Sustrans already recognises this and has signs proclaiming the 'C2C' (Coast to Coast) route across northern England. Rural planning agencies accept it too, including Devon County Council with its Tarka trail and the Peak National Park with the popular Tissington trail.

This device of route naming has yet to catch on in towns. Urban cycleways, as with pedestrian greenways, could benefit from names like Avon trail or university cycleway, but the reality is rather different. For example, southeast London's cycle route number 22 – intermittently surface marked as such – is also on occasions direction signposted 'to Catford', a suburb six miles out. It would seem more logical to re-name it the 'Crystal Palace trail,' or mark it 'to Lewisham', the relevant town centre in that direction, in the style of the interconnected 'A-roads' network.

This example does not decry the London Cycle Network, which has excellent mapping to accompany its routes. These maps identify quieter, novice-friendly cycle routes and distinguish 'signed' from 'recommended' (unsigned) sections. Greater Bristol's counties series of maps mark sections of routes too, but also feature roads with cycle-lanes and those with heavy traffic.

Ideally, a map should be accessible to all categories of cyclist, be they expert map-readers and aspirant route-creators, or humble novices wanting a well thought out cycle route into town or their local park.

Like maps, different types of cycle route have a different potential clientele and, with a clear and consistent system of signs and markings that focuses on the basics, they could all be just as easy to read.

• **Gavin Smith** is an independent consultant. Although Patrick Lingwood at Bedfordshire County Council and Philip Martlew at Swindon Borough Council kindly provided assistance, the views expressed here are his own.