Walkability Easton

Report from guided walk on 20 May during
## Bristol Walk Fest and Walk to School Week

On 20 May, Zoe Trinder-Widdess, Zoe Banks Gross and Abiir Shirdoon led Walkability Easton, a guided walk which explored Easton's good and bad walking environments.

We were a group of 12 people, including Nicolette who was using a mobility scooter and Abiir's small daughter in a buggy, as well as representatives from Up Our Street. Kye Dudd, Cabinet Member for Transport at Bristol City Council, joined us for some of the walk, and Ruth Pickersgill, Easton Councillor, was with us at the start. Quotes from the attendees are used throughout this report.

The route

The route fell into three parts. We met at Easton Community Centre, and the first part was along the Railway Path from the Centre to the Lawrence Hill roundabout. The second part was along Easton Way, on a segregated walking and cycle path next to Lansdowne Court. For the final leg, we went up Stapleton Road to Villiers Road, then into the residential streets of Easton, along Felix Road, Bannerman Road and back to the Community Centre via Easton Road. The route was just over 2.5km.
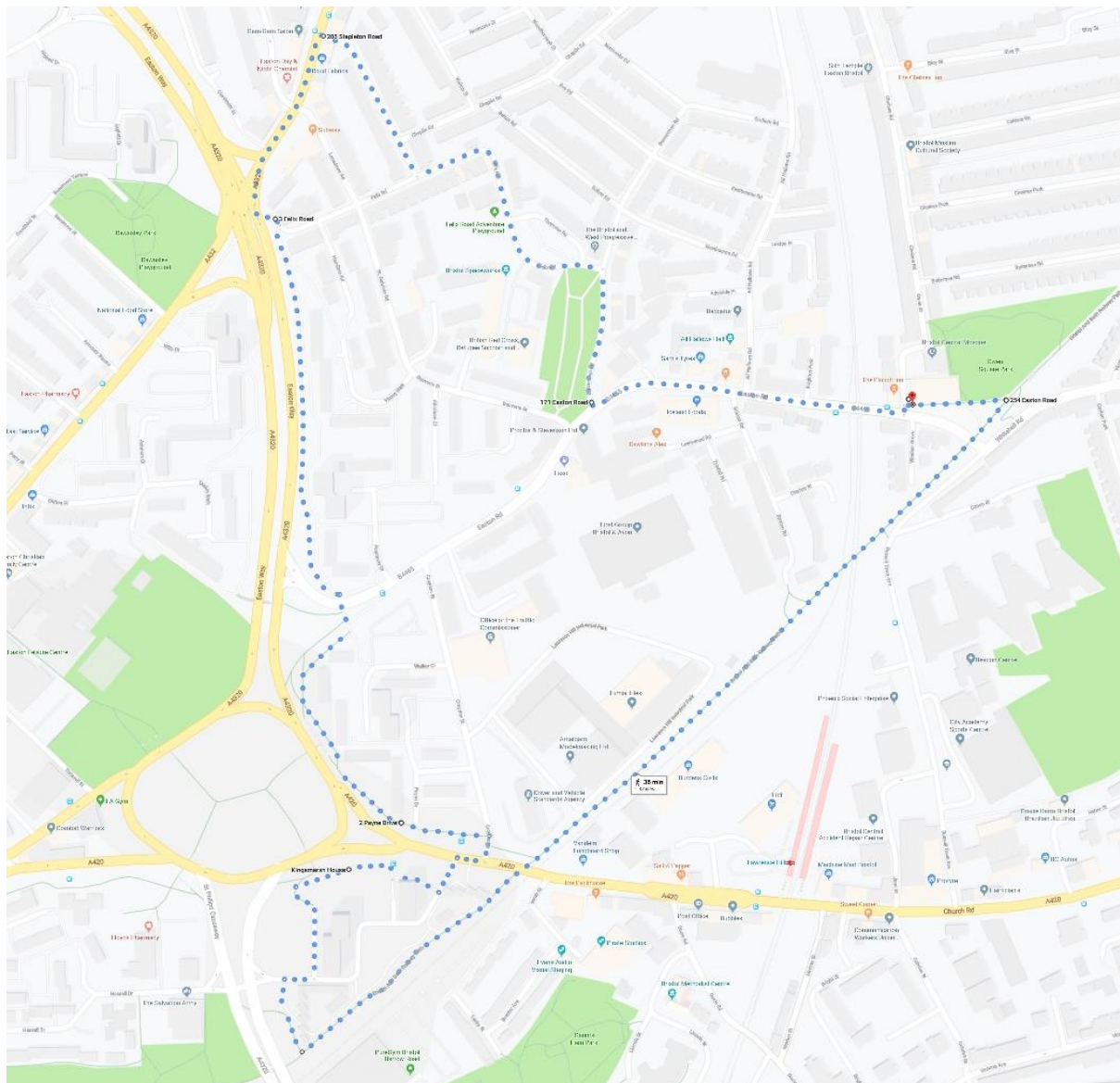
Part one: along the Railway Path

This was the pleasantest and most peaceful part of the walk. It was relatively easy to walk in a group and chat to others as we went along. Most cyclists treated us with respect although there was the odd example of people failing to slow down while passing us.

The space is nature rich, as Ted said: "It's a beautiful green space." The Railway Path is celebrating its 40th year in 2019 and has inspired similar projects internationally: it is the blueprint for active travel infrastructure around the world and is a great example of what a community can achieve when they work together.

But it has also become a victim of its own success, with some (though my no means all) cyclists dominating the space. As Zoe BG said, even as a slower cyclist you can feel marginalised on the Path by faster, more assertive users.

There isn't any signage explaining that it's shared use. The main signage on the Path is stickers on lampposts saying it's part of the National Cycle Network – reinforcing the notion that the space is for cycling rather than people on foot.

Jules also pointed out that signage at each junction would help connect people with the local area. There are road names at some junctions, but no additional information. Signs could also include links to green space, shops or other amenities. The group agreed that this would be an effective way of building up people's mental map of an area.

Zoe TW described going out of her way to use infrastructure like this rather than walking on main roads, for example, the shared path down the side of the M32. However, we also discussed rush hour on the Path, when it can be dominated by people on bikes travelling very fast. Some people actively avoid using the Path during this period.

There are places where infrastructure has been added to relieve conflict during peak times, such as the informal zebra crossing at Whitehall School, but this isn't always effective. There is some confusion about how to use this crossing, from both cyclists and walkers, especially parents with children. Ted also pointed out that this zebra crossing implies that, at all other crossings, bikes should take precedence. This reinforces the hierarchy with walkers at the bottom of the pecking order.

One metaphor for the Path that Ted came up with is that it is the body of a butterfly – a spine from which a latticework of local routes radiate.

The group wanted to see more infrastructure like the Path. It has become so well used because it is a key arterial route from the Eastern edge of Bristol, and nothing else like it exists in Bristol. But it is now at capacity, which leads to conflict among its many different users.

Part two: along Easton Way

The stretch along Easton way was along some more recently built active travel infrastructure, which includes a segregated cycle lane and a path for pedestrians. It runs alongside Easton Way, the busy dual carriage way that cuts Easton in two. The speed limit is 40mph here.

Abiir described how her children are terrified of crossing this road. She walks several hundred metres out of her way when walking to Easton Leisure Centre, to avoid using the pedestrian crossings at the intersection of Easton Way and Stapleton Road. She instead goes all the way to the M32 junction to use the underpasses there.

As Nicolette pointed out: "The environment is just so unpleasant compared to the Railway Path." Using the Hush City App, we measured the noise along this stretch of the walk. It was 65.5DB near the lights, where the traffic was slowing down to a stop.

Many people in the group were unaware of the walking and cycle paths we were using. "They don't really go anywhere, do they?" as Tony observed. Everyone agreed that these paths weren't heading in the right direction or connecting any particular points, which made them useful mostly to the people living in Lansdowne Court. The cycle path seemed more well used. Because they travel faster, people on bikes can go further out of their way to use suitable infrastructure than people on foot.

The paths here weren't created in response to demand, but, as Barry pointed out, to be created opportunistically – carving out a little space from an existing roadside verge.
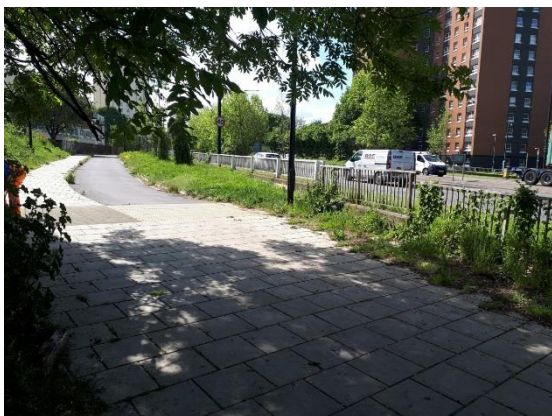
He said: "To create Easton Way, they've done this grand thing of scything it through an existing part of the city. It was built with ambition – they had to destroy a neighbourhood and put compulsory purchase orders on people's homes. Why isn't there the same level of ambition for Bristol's active travel infrastructure?"

At the Stapleton Road end of the path is a flat paved area treated as an impromptu car park. The cars parked there tend to block the sides, areas intended for pedestrians, despite the fact the 'road' area goes nowhere.

Cars parked on the wide paved area at the end of the cycle / foot paths. Note how they favour the 'pavement' portion of the space over blocking the 'road' portion.

Part three: Stapleton Road and into Easton

"I have to take a deep breath before I head out in Easton", said Nicolette. "It makes you reconsider whether you should bother leaving the house." She described having to plan her journeys round her neighbourhood with precision. She only uses tried and tested routes that she knows she can access, meaning vast swathes of Easton are inaccessible to her.

As we turned the corner from Easton Way onto Stapleton Road, she described how the wide pavement outside Lebeqs Tavern was usually full of parked cars, despite having double yellow lines. This could explain the strangely placed bike racks on this stretch of pavement – perhaps they are there to prevent pavement parking. They certainly don't seem to be placed with greatest utility for the cyclist in mind, as this block is quite difficult to access on foot.

Nicolette explained how she usually has to go round the corner on the road itself, onto the incredibly busy Stapleton Road and back onto the pavement via the zebra crossing, to cross Lansdown Road. This is because cars are usually parked on the drop kerb, despite double yellow lines.

We encountered a car parked on the narrow pavement just up from this spot, belonging to the owner of a shop.

While we stopped to discuss this example of pavement parking, the owner emerged and challenged us. He said that no one had ever had a problem with him parking like that before, and the council had said it was ok. This underlines how pavement parking largely goes unchallenged and has become the norm in some parts of the city.

As Abiir pointed out: "He knew he was doing wrong – but had become so comfortable with the wrong that he saw it as his right, like he owned the pavement in front of his shop. If I went shoplifting and didn't get caught, would that make it right?"

We also saw a woman parking on the drop kerb and double yellow lines of Villiers Road, who seemed more aware that this wasn't the right place to park. But she was able to justify it to herself because she was only popping into a shop.

Turning into Villiers Road, it was immediately clear that neither pavement was accessible to any of us, but especially to the mobility scooter and the buggy. Through a combination of pavement parking, recycling boxes and fly tipped rubbish, including a fridge, neither footway is accessible.

Abiir explained how usually, on this stretch of road, her older children use the pavement while she walks in the road with the buggy, shouting instructions to them.

Nicolette attempts one side of Villiers Road, but pavement parking and street furniture are in the way.

On the other side, a van, a fridge, recycling boxes and fly tipping means she has to turn back.

Abiir and her daughter also have to abandon the attempt.

Looks like we'll be using the road, then.

This pattern is continued through out the residential streets of Easton. We also go out of our way at the end of Bannerman Road onto Easton Road to access drop kerbs. Nicolette

describes how she this stops her accessing her neighbourhood: "Sometimes I just don't have the energy."

There was also a sense that this kind of obstruction wouldn't be allowed to happen in other more affluent parts of the city.

Conclusions

- We are lucky to have some of the best active travel infrastructure in the world running through our neighbourhood, but it's not replicated elsewhere so is very heavily used
- The shared active travel infrastructure is dominated by faster, more aggressive users
- People on foot and bike are prepared to go out of their way to access suitable infrastructure, if it will make their journey easier and more pleasant overall
- This is especially true of people using wheelchairs or with other mobility issues, or young families
- Our neighbourhood's inaccessibility is keeping people with disabilities and older people in their homes
- Pedestrian access is always sacrificed to drivers' convenience
- The culture of the rights of car drivers over people on foot is deep-seated and usually unchallenged