

# Living Streets Northampton - response to Abington Street proposals, April 2023

## **1. WNC's aim to reinvigorate the town centre**

1.1. The aim of the proposed scheme is to encourage more people to go to Abington Street, and to the town centre generally, to reverse the decline in the town centre. The number of shoppers is greatly reduced, so there is a need to get as many people as possible using the remaining shops in the town centre, and also a need to get as many people as possible going to the town centre for other reasons.

## **2. WNC's aim to reduce air pollution**

2.1. WNC also aims to reduce air pollution in the town as a matter of urgency. In February this year WNC accepted almost £300,000 from central government "to roll-out new initiatives to improve air-quality in Northampton". The announcement came shortly after a high-profile study rated Northampton as having the worst air quality of any city [sic] in the UK. Previously, WNC spent a grant of almost £150,000 in 2021/22 on "active traffic management to improve congestion and poor air quality" in the town. We did not find any WNC press releases about how much this active traffic management improved air quality, but it was obviously not enough to solve the problem.

2.2. Given that active traffic management is insufficient, there is an urgent need to replace car journeys with walking, public transport, cycling and scootering. There are no proposals (as far as we are aware) for major improvements to the bus services in the town. So the obvious best way to reduce car traffic, and help improve air quality, is to increase the number of people cycling and scootering to the town centre. Cycling and scootering must be made more attractive.

## **3. WNC is discouraging walking & cycling and encouraging driving**

3.1. However, the current scheme design continues the ban on cycles and e-scooters in the central pedestrianised section of Abington Street, and Fish Street, and no thought has been given to routes to and through the town centre for cyclists. It continues the policy of making the town centre a hostile environment for cyclists. The current cycle route through the town centre forces cyclists to bypass the majority of the shops on Abington Street. If instead the scheme had changes to allow people to cycle (or scooter) to the door of the shops, cafes or other premises they want to visit, that would provide local residents a new convenient option that other alternative shopping destinations cannot.

3.2. If WNC just keep the routes through the town centre as now for the various modes of transport, shoppers will still feel compelled to get in their car to go shopping in the town centre. Once in their car they will consider, and very likely choose, alternative car destinations such as Rushden Lakes or Milton Keynes.

3.3. Unlike for previous generations of young people, going "down town" to make retail purchases is not the default option for the current generation. But it will be beneficial for the town if they at least make some of their purchases there. Also, younger people will be important to the success of "encouraging cafe culture". Fewer and fewer young people are learning to drive than in previous generations. However, Voi's e-scooter scheme in the town has been a success, with the majority of users being younger people. Cycling is also more prevalent among younger people. So to get more young people to use Abington Street, it is crucial to encourage travel there by cycle or e-scooter. The alternative is to rely on

increased usage of Abington Street by older people. Even if that does work in the short term, it is not a long term solution.

- 3.4. Both now and if the scheme were to be implemented as described, the permitted routes create perverse situations for shoppers accessing the town via cycle or e-scooter. If a cyclist visits any of the shops in the section of Abington Street between St Giles' Terrace and Wellington Street, there is no usable legal cycle route to the rest of the town centre. The Market Square could be accessed by cycling northwards up Wellington Street then westwards along Greyfriars, but nobody could sensibly claim that is a good or safe route for cyclists. The plan provides cycle parking at the eastern end of the pedestrianised zone. It looks like shoppers will be expected to park their cycles (or e-scooters) there, then walk to anywhere else in the town centre that they wish to go. If a cyclist coming from the East is determined to follow the rules and uses that eastern end cycle parking, when they get back to their bike there is no route home for them (apart from Wellington Street, Greyfriars, Lady's Lane then through the junction of Lower Mounts - a route wholly unsuitable for cycling). Cyclists are apparently expected to push their bikes along pedestrian paths to travel towards home. Conversely, a cyclist approaching from the West must bypass the shops in the central pedestrianised section of Abington Street (the majority of the shops) to reach any shop in the eastern section; once there they have no usable route home either.
- 3.5. Given the above, it is hardly surprising that cyclists break the rules and cycle on the pedestrianised section of Abington Street, and will surely continue to do so after the scheme is implemented, whatever its final design. Whilst some of those cyclists may not be minded to follow the rules in general, many others will only do so because they feel the absurdities like those above give them no choice. There will also be a third group who do not appreciate the distinction between pedestrian paths, cycle paths and shared paths. Northampton has many paths that were designed and built as just pedestrian paths, have no adaptations for and are wholly unsuited to shared use, but are designated as shared use anyway. So it is hardly surprising that so many Northampton cyclists, especially younger ones, never think about the different types of paths. This scheme is not responsible for past mistakes. However, it is foolish to design and implement a scheme that does not consider the impact and effects of those past mistakes.
- 3.6. If the scheme design were changed to allow - encourage even - cycling in the central zone of Abington Street, and to allow cycling eastwards to St Giles Terrace and beyond, that would solve many of the above issues. (It would also solve issues with 35-39, 41-45 and 42-46 Abington Street - see below.) As stated above, allowing cycling to the door of wherever people want to go would be a new, positive reason for people to come to the town centre.
- 3.7. The scheme does nothing either to address issues for pedestrians in the section of Abington Street between Lower Mounts and Wellington Street. The pedestrian route into that section of the street is awkward, crowded and unpleasant. (At least pedestrians can enter the street there - cycle access is non-existent.) On both sides, but especially on the north pavement, pedestrians feel fenced-in and crowded behind the barriers. It is not clear where pedestrians are expected to cross the road between the north and south pavements, and there is nothing to make pedestrians feel safe when crossing. The roadway, and the barriers, make the shops on the north and south pavements feel very separate from each other. The north pavement crossing point at the corner of Wellington Street - where cars are given priority - is awkward, crowded and dangerous for pedestrians. The pedestrian experience is compromised for the benefit of a small number of cars.
- 3.8. No thought seems to have been given either to the pedestrian and cycling experience on Abington Street west of Dychurch Lane. The design is oblivious to issues for walking and

cycling in the surrounding area. It appears that the area of the scheme was demarcated, then the design was produced in isolation, with no thought about the surrounding area, or even the adjoining parts of the same street. If this scheme and the Market Square scheme are implemented exactly as described, we will have two multi-million pound redevelopments linked by the shabby, un-redeveloped western end of Abington Street. If accessing redeveloped zones is awkward and unpleasant, the benefit they could give is hugely undermined.

- 3.9. The scheme maintains the ban on cycling and scootering along Fish Street too. The street is, rightly, viewed as a vital pedestrian link between Abington Street and St Giles' Street. But cycle links between those two streets have not been considered. Do WNC expect cyclists to choose either Abington Street or St Giles' Street and not go to the other of the two at all during their visit to the town centre? Allowing cycling along Fish Street would greatly improve integration between the Abington Street and St Giles' Street areas of the town centre.
- 3.10. The published proposed layout has 'Fish Street Square' marked at the junction of Fish Street and The Ridings / Dychurch Lane. But nobody will really consider it a square with it kept open to through traffic - motor vehicles and cycles. If cycling were allowed along all of Abington Street, the crossroads would no longer have to be kept open as the cycle route through the town centre. That creates the possibility of temporarily, or even permanently, closing the crossroads to all through traffic, allowing it actually function as a square.

#### **4. Previous consultations ignored**

- 4.1. In June and July 2020, as part of their work for the central government's Emergency Active Travel scheme, NCC launched their Safer Streets Northamptonshire consultation, stating "We are looking for feedback on measures to make our streets better for walking and cycling". The public were asked to put pins on the 'Commonplace Safer Streets Northamptonshire map' and specify tags and enter comments about the pin location. On July 6 2020, just after the consultation closed, NCC stated "Ideas that have been submitted which are not directly related to social distancing will be used to inform our longer-term plans for cycling and walking in Northamptonshire." In our appendix (see below) we have collated tags and comments for all the pins placed in the area of the Market Square / Abington Street / Fish Street / Dychurch Lane / The Ridings. It can be seen that almost all of the issues we describe above had previously been highlighted to the council by citizens. What is not clear is how the ideas submitted were used to inform this plan.

#### **5. Access to new town centre residential development**

- 5.1. The new residential developments on the former BHS / Marks & Spencer site (35-39 and 41-45 Abington Street) are intended to be "high quality" - presumably with prices to match. If that is the case, then some, or even the majority, of the residents are likely to be commuters. Under the proposed plans, the only cycle access would be via Wellington Street. Residents could only get to/from the train station by foot or by car (unless they cycle or scooter on the unsafe, unsuitable route northwards up Wellington Street then westwards along Greyfriars). The legal cycle routes back from the station are even worse - none are at all direct and they are partly, or wholly, unsafe too. Allowing cycling along Abington Street would transform the travel options for residents of the new blocks - the quickest and most convenient way to get to the station would be by cycle.
- 5.2. Also, WNC planners have recommended approval of plans to convert 42-46 Abington Street (previously Tesco Express) to flats, with access to one of the two blocks via Abington Street, where the scheme proposes to maintain the ban on cycling. Even if cycle access is provided

through the other block on the site, via the entrance on The Ridings, that would be awkward and indirect and a huge disincentive to cycling for residents.

- 5.3. It is no longer acceptable to build new residences that effectively cannot be reached by cycle. The Governments 'Gear Change' document states: "we will ensure that all new housing and business developments are built around making sustainable travel, including cycling and walking, the first choice for journeys" and "we want new developments to be easily and safely accessible and navigable by foot and bike".

## 6. Connectivity with the rest of the town

- 6.1. WNC's press release of 3 March 2023 claims the scheme will "provide enhanced connectivity with the rest of the town". In reality, it doesn't even provide enhanced connectivity with either end of the same street. Instead of using the Towns Fund grants as an opportunity to reconsider and improve transit to and through the whole of Abington Street, and the rest of the town centre, WNC propose to just commission some prettifying works in the centre section of Abington Street, so it will look less ugly as it continues to decline.

## 7. Links

- 7.1. [https://westnorthants.citizenspace.com/place/abington-street-improvements-consultation/user\\_uploads/abington-street-and--fish-street-consultation-boards.pdf](https://westnorthants.citizenspace.com/place/abington-street-improvements-consultation/user_uploads/abington-street-and--fish-street-consultation-boards.pdf)
- 7.2. <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/news/west-northamptonshire-awarded-funding-improve-air-quality>
- 7.3. <https://housefresh.com/secondhand-smoke-world-map/>
- 7.4. [https://housefresh.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/03\\_Cigarette-Pollution-Levels\\_UK-Ranking\\_Hi-RES.png](https://housefresh.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/03_Cigarette-Pollution-Levels_UK-Ranking_Hi-RES.png)
- 7.5. <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/news/provide-your-view-plans-regeneration-public-realm-northampton>
- 7.6. <https://saferstreetsnorthamptonshire.commonplace.is/about>
- 7.7. <https://saferstreetsnorthamptonshire.commonplace.is/news>
- 7.8. <https://saferstreetsnorthamptonshire.commonplace.is/comments>

## Appendix - tags and comments from Commonplace Safer Streets Northamptonshire map

- # = tag, responding to "Why have you dropped a pin here?"
- Tags/comments for pins on each street are listed here in order of position, West to East

### Market Square

#### #Lack of cycle parking

"Lack of secure safe cycle parking in town centre. Cycle racks on market square are just a thieves' paradise. Had two locked bikes stolen middle of a busy Saturday from under cctv camera. Need secure cycle parking to encourage people to ride to town for work, shopping and leisure."

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

#### #Lack of cycle parking

"Please install cycle parking by the entrance of the Grosvenor centre. The beauty of a bicycle is that it can be a door to door vehicle. Thanks."

*2 people agreed with this comment.*

### **#Lack of cycle parking**

[Pin misplaced on Abington Street, commenting on "Market square cycle parking"]

"Current facilities are too small. Can this be increased along with sheltered parking. Along with one to the North end of the market place."

*5 people agreed with this comment.*

### [Abington Street - pedestrianised zone](#)

#### **#Lack of cycle parking**

#### **#Potential for more cycling here**

"Install a 'cycle with care and slowly' cycle lane up the middle of Abington Street to help control cyclist movements in the pedestrian area. Even though cycling is currently suspended on this street, it is clearly a vital route as it is still heavily used by cyclists. Create a formal route and then by all means fine those who deter from that route"

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

#### **#Lack of cycle parking**

[Pin by Grosvenor Street entrance, a few yards off Abington Street, technically on Wood Street]

"Please install cycle parking by the entrance of the Grosvenor centre. The beauty of a bicycle is that it can be a door to door vehicle. Thanks."

*1 person agreed with this comment.*

#### **#Physical barrier to cycling**

"Remove the outdated bylaw banning cycling on Abington Street. Cities like Leicester have proven that pedestrian priority zones allowing considerate cycling work."

*5 people agreed with this comment.*

### [Abington Street - east of Wellington Street \(one way to vehicle traffic\)](#)

#### **#Feels unsafe walking here**

[Corner of Abington Street and Wellington Street]

"Hello! There are two options here. The first is to close Abington street to through traffic. OK, so that's probably not going to happen. So the other option is to change this crossing. It is absolute INSANITY that motor vehicles have priority on this corner. This should be PEDESTRIAN priority. You stand on that corner for five minutes on a busy day and you will personally witness a near-miss, guaranteed. How this got past scrutiny I will never know."

*3 people agreed with this comment.*

#### **#Feels unsafe walking here**

#### **#Lack of cycle parking**

#### **#Difficult to cross road**

**#Feels unsafe cycling here**

**#Potential for more cycling here**

**#Potential for more walking here**

**#Pavement too busy / not wide enough**

**#Traffic rat-running**

**#Physical barrier to walking**

"Close this to cars so people have more space to walk. Make the street contraflow so cyclists can get to Wellingborough Road"

*6 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Signage**

[Outside library]

"Add a sign to show there's cycle parking here. It's hidden behind parked cars."

*2 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Long wait to use crossing**

**#Fast traffic**

**#Lack of cycle parking**

**#Physical barrier to walking**

**#Difficult to cross road**

**#Traffic rat-running**

**#Feels unsafe cycling here**

**#Feels unsafe walking here**

**#Potential for more cycling here**

**#Pavement too busy / not wide enough**

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

**#Not child friendly here**

**#Potential for more walking here**

"turning Abington Street into a road for traffic was a stupid idea, it needs re-pedestrianising ASAP"

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

**#Potential for more cycling here**

[Pin on St Giles Terrace', a few yards from Abington Street]

"Currently it's not possible to cycle from here to the bottom of Abington St. This is a direct route to the town centre and train station for anyone coming from Kettering Rd or Wellingborough Rd. Making a cycle lane in St Giles terrace (one-way) to allow cycles to go both ways would be an easy fix. Cycles can then connect to The Riding to reach town centre & station."

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Feels unsafe walking here**

**#Physical barrier to walking**

"Pedestrians are corralled into a tight spot by serious heavy duty guard rail with no chance of social distancing. While on the other side of the barriers, the space for half a dozen cars gets acres of space. Remove the guard rail, and remove the parking! The town should be for people not cars."

*3 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Lack of cycle parking**

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

"Cycle parking is needed here. There was some parking that's been covered with hoardings for the past 2+ years. Also need a through cycle route to Abington Square as this is a main route into town and to the station."

*4 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

**#Pavement too busy / not wide enough**

**#Physical barrier to walking**

"Pedestrian access is blocked by hoarding"

*8 people agreed with this comment.*

[Abington Street around junction with York Road / Lower Mounts](#)

**#Difficult to cross road**

**#Long wait to use crossing**

**#Potential for more walking here**

**#Feels unsafe walking here**

**#Feels unsafe cycling here**

**#Potential for more cycling here**

[Pin on Lower Mounts, just by junction with Abington Street]

"Main access to town centre is very unfriendly. The existing crossing here has a long wait and is split into two - have to wait on a small island that gets very crowded - very difficult for anyone with disability. Crossing is needed for people on foot and on bikes to go straight over Lower Mounts with no split."

*5 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Feels unsafe walking here**

**#Traffic rat-running**

**#Physical barrier to walking**

**#Fast traffic**

**#Need space for queuing here**

**#Pavement too busy / not wide enough**

**#Not child friendly here**

**#Potential for more cycling here**

**#Difficult to cross road**

**#Feels unsafe cycling here**

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

**#Potential for more walking here**

**#Long wait to use crossing**

"This junction needs a major overhaul to make it easier for pedestrians and cyclists to access Abington Street from Wellingborough road"

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Potential for more cycling here**

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

**#Lack of cycle parking**

"It should be possible for cyclists approaching Abington Street from Abington Square to continue onto Abington Street without having to dismount and share the crossing with pedestrians. Ditto for exiting Abington Street."

*3 people agreed with this comment.*

**#Physical barrier to cycling**

[Junction of Abington Street / York Road / Lower Mounts]

"There has never been an exit for cyclists into Abington Square for the Kettering and Wellingborough Roads. The nearest is Billing Road, way of any ones route. This problem goes back decades when the top end of Abington Street was closed to traffic. I say closed but that does not stop police cars and others exiting on the footpath between Radio Northampton and the metal barrier into Lower Mounts that I have observed.

Please find a way of producing a cycle lane which does not say Cyclists Dismount. The cycle took over from the horse and we do not ask horse riders to dismount. Equally we do not ask car drivers to get out and push. So please give us some equality. Thank you."

*4 people agreed with this comment.*



## Abington Street east of York Road / Lower Mounts

### #Potential for more cycling here

### #Feels unsafe cycling here

### #Pavement too busy / not wide enough

"This is the main route to the town centre from the east & north - very narrow pavements and unsafe cycling. Eastbound: close Lower Mounts and Abington Square to traffic except buses and access. Westbound: reduce to single lane through Abington Sq up to junction with York Rd to make space for wider pavement and segregated cycle lane."

*7 people agreed with this comment.*

## Dychurch Lane / The Ridings

### #Potential for more cycling here

"This is the marked west - east cycle route through the town centre. It is poorly signed and often blocked by cars / bins / delivery vans which pose a hazard to cyclists. Many cyclists aren't aware of it."

*10 people agreed with this comment.*

[Junction of Dychurch Lane / Fish Street]

"As the nearest point to the Grosvenor centre that can be reached by cycle, reinstating the cycle parking spaces that used to be here would be helpful. Be also useful for the 4 cafes nearby to attract custom"

*4 people agreed with this comment.*

### #Feels unsafe cycling here

"This back street is the main cycle route through the town centre. It is a very unattractive road, full of smelly waste bins, HGV's and vans delivering to the businesses. Feels very unsafe after dark. Poor road surface.

If we want to showcase our town and provide customers for cafe's etc. then the national cycle route (6) needs to go vis St Giles or Abington Street."

*2 people agreed with this comment.*

### #Potential for more cycling here

"Make this parallel route to Abington street cycle friendly. Signage for cyclists to show how to use. Keep cyclists and pedestrians separate on Abington st. Too dangerous to have bikes on pedestrian bit of Abington St. Use this back route."