

# Spokes Hub

## December 2023



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### Introduction

Welcome to the December edition of Spokes Hub, our brand new newsletter for Spokes Members.

One of the most important things you told us at our recent strategy workshop was that we need to communicate better with our members.

We will aim to do this in a number of ways. Firstly, we will send you a quarterly newsletter, so you can catch up on what's happened and what we've got planned. We will aim to keep our new website editor supplied with a steady stream of articles. You can also follow us on Facebook and X (Twitter). In addition, we have instigated a WhatsApp group for Spokes members, so if you would like to be added, then please email [info@westberkshirespokes.org](mailto:info@westberkshirespokes.org) with your mobile number.

We hope you like the newsletter, please do get in touch if you have any feedback on how we can make it better, or if there are any local cycling related issues that you would like us to investigate.

**William Pitt**  
*Chair - West Berkshire Spokes*

### Spokes Committee

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**Publicity Officer: Vacant**

**Website Editor: Josh Kerry**

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If you are interested in any of the committee roles, then we would love to hear from you. The roles aren't very arduous and no experience is necessary  
Email: [info@westberkshirespokes.org](mailto:info@westberkshirespokes.org).

### Cycle Counts

A huge thanks to all Spokes members who have helped with the cycle counts this year. West Berkshire Council pays Spokes to undertake three counts in February, June and September at 17 sites across the district. Each site is counted twice on separate weekday mornings.

This is our main source of income and allows us to deliver our priorities. Projects that we have funded / supported include:

- Buying bikes from the Community Resource Centre to loan to children from low income families who want to cycle to school.
- Funding the training of new Bikeability Instructors.
- Commissioning Sustrans to appraise our feasibility study of the Eling Way cycle link.
- Seed funding for bids to improve sections of the canal towpath.

We couldn't do this without you, so as a small token of our thanks, we enter everyone who helped with the counts into a prize draw for a £50 Banjo Cycles voucher, with one voucher per count. This years winners are Rob, Dave and Stefan.

We always struggle to find enough volunteers to cover all the count sites, so the Council is looking to install automatic counters at a couple of locations in the east of the district that we find difficult to cover.

If you can help on at least one morning (7.30-9.30 in February and September, and 7.00-9.00) in June, then we would love to hear from you. Drop us an email at [cyclecount@westberkshirespokes.org](mailto:cyclecount@westberkshirespokes.org). The next count will be on 20-22 February 2024, so put the dates in your diary.



## NCN4 Update

### Aldermaston Wharf to Ufton Lane

A 1½ mile stretch of towpath and canal bank from Aldermaston Wharf to Ufton Lane was upgraded over the summer months.

The £1.2 million project was funded by the Department for Transport as part of Sustrans' Paths for Everyone programme. The improvements consist of an asphalt construction with a surface dressing to soften the appearance and make it more in keeping with the path's rural setting. This has created a fantastic, all-weather surface that will last for many years.

In addition to the new towpath surface, bank protection works have made it easier for boats to moor and have created habitats for endangered water voles.

### Dewe Lane, Burghfield

Sustrans is currently carrying out resurfacing, drainage, and other improvements on a 380 metre section of National Cycle NCN4 around Dewe Lane at Burghfield.

This section of the towpath is in a very poor condition, with deep mud and limited space for users to go around. It suffers from a high water table, a lack of natural light and poor drainage.

Two options are being explored to improve this section of towpath: a boardwalk solution, or raising the level of the path and installing drainage. Works started in November and are scheduled to be completed by February 2024.

This will build on the improvements works around Theale Quarry that were completed by Sustrans last year.

### Near Monkey Bridge, Newbury

West Berkshire Council is carrying out improvements to the canal bank and towpath in the vicinity of the Monkey Bridge which leads to Northcroft Leisure Centre.

This heavily trafficked section of the towpath suffers from poor drainage, leading to puddles and muddy sections, particularly in the winter months. Works are due to be completed by 8 December 2023.

## Ham Bridge to Bulls Lock, Newbury

Spokes has contributed £2,000 towards planned improvements of the towpath to the east of Ham Bridge.

Although NCN4 diverts away from the towpath between Ham Bridge and Thatcham Station, it remains a popular leisure route with cyclists and walkers. However, the westernmost section is of a very poor quality, with a rutted / uneven surface that regularly floods.

The works will raise the level of the towpath and improve drainage, as well as providing an all-weather surface. The scheme is expected to start sometime next year.

## Funding Challenges

Earlier this year, the government announced that it would be reducing the level of grant funding that it gives to the Canal and River Trust from 2027. The reduction of over £300 million in real terms, represents almost half of the current total public funding for the UK canal network.

The reduced funding comes at the same time as the costs of maintaining the canal network are increasing, due to the construction inflation and climate change, with more periods of drought and extreme storm events taking their toll on the ageing 250-year-old infrastructure.

The CRT has warned that the cuts may lead to canal closures. They have already started to make cutbacks, including reducing the number of vegetation cuts to just one per year on NCN4. This means that towpaths can be choked with nettles and other plants in the height of summer, making them virtually impassable.

At Spokes, we are concerned about what this means for the future of the towpath, which forms a central spine in the district's cycle network. We have long campaigned for substantial investment to address structural maintenance issues and bring it up to a usable standard throughout its length. We have even put our money where our mouth is, to kick-start improvements, such as to the east of Colthrop. However, all that will have been in vain if there is insufficient funding for even basic maintenance.

What is needed is a large injection of cash to address the huge maintenance backlog on sections of the route and ensure its future for years to come. Spokes has written to Laura Farris MP to express our concerns and to ask the government to change its mind on planned funding cuts.



## Cycling Schemes Update



### Stockcross Linkway

Construction is underway on Stage 1 of a link between Stockcross and Speen. This first section consists of a shared pedestrian and cycle path, running along the north side of B4000 and connecting Stockcross village to the existing footway at the A4 roundabout. Significant contribution towards this scheme received from Active Travel England. Plans are available here, for information:

<https://www.westberks.gov.uk/stockcross-to-a4>

Spokes would have preferred to have a facility on either side of the B4000 to prevent the need for cyclists to cross the B4000. As such, the scheme is unlikely to appeal to confident cyclists.

A feasibility study is underway for the next section from the A4/B4000 roundabout to Speen Lane using funding from Active Travel England.

### A4 Crown Mead, Thatcham

West Berkshire Council's proposals are with Active Travel England for their comment. Due to space constraints and exorbitant utilities cost, it is currently envisaged that the scheme will consist of on-carriageway lanes.

This is disappointing, since physical segregation of cyclists and motor vehicles is vital to make people feel safe and confident when cycling. However, the utilities costs are truly eye-watering and it seems that there is no alternative.

### Western Avenue Stage 2, Newbury:

The concept design is underway for the next section of the Western Avenue route from Waitrose roundabout to the Chestnut Crescent estate, mindful of potential for onward connections to east and north.

### Old Bath Road, Speen / Newbury

Outline design is underway for the section from A4 Western Avenue to the eastern junction of Speen Lane/ access to Goldwell Park. The scheme will better connect the Western Avenue Stage 1 cycle facilities (which form part of Linkway 7) to the shared path along the west side of Goldwell Park.

## Robin Hood Roundabout

Modelling has been commissioned to assess the impacts of at-grade crossings of the A339 and A4 to help cyclists navigate this busy roundabout and reduce the barrier effect of the A339.

### Theale to Calcot Connector

A feasibility study is underway for a potential replacement of the pedestrian bridge to the west of Junction 12 of the M4 with a new structure suitable for cycling as well as walking.

### A4 London Rd / Newbury Manor Hotel

This scheme remains contingent on completion of legal discussions for land transfers, coupled with resolution of utility issues.

### Eling Way Extension

Outline design work is continuing for a 1km extension within Hermitage village itself.

West Berkshire Council wrote to the landowners throughout the section from Hermitage to Newbury along/immediately parallel to the former railway alignment, offering the chance to meet and discuss potential scheme, building on earlier feasibility work by Sustrans and Spokes.

Nil or negative reaction has led to exploration, with the Public Rights of Way Team, of scope to upgrade/restore the existing Bridleway and footpaths in the area south of Hermitage as an Interim measure. However, Bridleway SHAW/3/1 which becomes CHIE/34/1 is very undulating, with some sensitive sections, and there is an ongoing landowner issue.

Another potential alignment, using an existing public right of way has been identified. However, this could only form one part of a potential route south from Hermitage and further landowner engagement would be needed for a roadside section.

Regarding a potential northern extension towards Compton, options are being explored for a path to run alongside the proposed Hampstead Norreys flood alleviation scheme. A favoured alignment has been identified, but it would cross multiple landholdings.



## ROWIP Consultation

West Berkshire Council recently consulted on its Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). This sets out the Council's strategic goals and priorities for public rights of way in the district.

It is based on a full assessment of the needs of the public in using public rights of way, now and in the future, and sets out a statement of action.

The ROWIP has been informed by extensive engagement with stakeholders and the public, with a full consultation and call for evidence completed back in 2021. The Rights of Way Team has also undertaken a thorough review of available evidence.

## Eagle Quarter Planning App.

The latest planning application for the Eagle Quarter sets out ambitious plans for the redevelopment of the Kennet Centre. Spokes reviewed the application to see what provision was proposed for cyclists and we submitted comments accordingly.

While cycle parking is proposed within the site for use by residents, we highlighted issues with some of the locations where cyclists would have to ride through the undercroft car park, or through the pedestrianised area within the site to access them. Also, we raised concerns about the number of doors that cyclists would have to negotiate to access some of the cycle parking areas.

We were disappointed that the transport assessment assumed there would be sufficient on-street cycle parking around the site, without having done an audit, so we asked that this be addressed. There were also a few inconsistencies in the way that the transport assessment considered access by bike to a range of local facilities, which we also highlighted.

Significant changes are proposed to the road layout, with Bartholomew Street becoming two-way between Market Street and the new car park access. Although it is technically not legal for cyclists to travel south between Bridge Street and Market Street, many cyclists do this

The Spokes Committee felt it was important to respond to the consultation. Key points that we highlighted were:

- Ideally, conditions surveys should be undertaken more frequently than once every 10 years, with high priority routes prioritised for more frequent surveys.
- The Kennet and Avon Canal towpath is in a very poor condition due to a lack of maintenance by the Canal and River Trust, and the situation is likely to deteriorate further due to significant cuts in government grant funding from 2027. A massive investment programme is needed, to bring this up to scratch and this should be recognised in the ROWIP.
- The extension of the Eling Way to Newbury should be a top priority in the ROWIP's action plan.
- The ROWIP should recognise the benefits of long-distance cycling routes such as Eurovelo 2, National Cycle Network Routes and the King Alfred Way, which pass through the district.
- There are already a number of disparate groups who undertaken maintenance activities on public rights of way (particularly the towpath), but there is no coordination of these groups, which is inefficient. This may be an area for the Council to explore.

The public consultation closed on 26 November. Feedback will be used to shape the final ROWIP. A detailed action plan, will be put forward for approval by spring 2024.

when the pedestrian and cycle zone is in force between 10am and 5pm. The proposed change would help to improve cycle permeability through the town centre. and we have indicated our support for this.

The proposed travel plan for the site is fairly basic and uninspiring, and we have made some suggestions for improvements. However, there is provision for a cycle workshop within the site, which we support. Ideally, this would be run by a local organisation such as Newbury Community Resource Centre.

Further information on the Eagle Quarter proposals can be found [here](#). If you would like to view / comment on the planning application, you can do so [here](#).

The application is likely to be considered by the Council's Western Area Planning Committee early in the New Year.



## Spokes Strategy Workshop

Our strategy workshop held on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> October was well attended - most of the Spokes committee were there plus a good number of regular members. Thanks to everyone who attended - hopefully you all felt that your time was well used.

Since Spokes was formed in 2002, there have been various internal changes. Although we have grown to around 170 members, various committee members have come and gone, so our capacity has ebbed and flowed.

There have also been changes outside of Spokes, for example changes to other local cycling organisations and overlaps with what we do. Hence it was time for a re-group and to look how we can focus our mission, which could be crudely put as "getting more bums on bikes", by playing to our unique strengths and looking to partner where we need help to achieve our objectives. Our mission statement was felt to be still fit for purpose, but with a few minor tweaks

The day began with introductions, followed by a review of the current status of the organisation, our mission, what our successes have been over the years, a summary of what other local groups do, and some thoughts about the successes of other, similar organisations.

Next, we performed a SWOT analysis, looking at our inherent Strengths and Weaknesses, and the Opportunities and Threats that could impact on Spokes fulfilling its mission.

After the coffee break, we discussed: which of our current activities we should continue to do; which activities we needed to start (or re-start); and if there are any that we should stop doing.

Most of the things we do today, we decided to continue

with, such as:

- Cycle counts (thanks to all those that help with these)
- Social bike rides (but with more support for new cyclists, e.g. 'Couch to 50k')
- Attendance at the Cycle Forum (one of the reasons Spokes was formed)
- Campaigning on cycling issues
- Responding to consultations
- Extension of the Hermitage to Hamsstead Norreys Cycle Route towards Newbury

Things we need to start, re-start or get better at:

- Communications and publicity
- Commenting on major planning applications
- Developing a Cycling Charter (taking inspiration from Winchester)
- Addressing our demographics (attract more young people, women, and ethnic minorities)
- Assist with clearing overgrown vegetation on cycle routes (e.g. NCN4)

In terms of things we should stop doing, the suggestion was that we pause rather than stop. Except for the cycle counts, we will focus on the western part of the district, but once we have a few more active members, we will aim to cover West Berkshire more fully.

If you are interested in helping with any of the above activities, then please reach out to us at: [info@westberkshirespokes.org](mailto:info@westberkshirespokes.org), or, pop along to our [monthly meetings](#), on the first Wednesday of each month at the Bowler's Arms in Wash Common.

Full minutes from the workshop are available on our website [here](#).

# Spokes on Tour



This is the first of a short series of articles about the Spokes' big adventure cycling down to Spain. We wanted to share our experience in case it is of interest to those of you planning your own adventures.

It might sound a bit hardcore, particularly when I mention it was about 1,000 miles with no rest days (we won't be doing that again), and we camped most nights. However, we have worked up to this on previous shorter trips.

Our trips typically start in October, with a seed of an idea and a basic route from Kevin. Mostly this has been to go and see a few stages of the Tour de France. We saw 'Le Tour' in 2014, when it came to the UK. That was our first trip together.

Most of our previous trips have been to see Le Tour in Northern France, which means a cycling to Portsmouth, or a train ride to Exeter then cycling over Dartmoor (as you do) to Plymouth, followed by a ferry over to France.

Once in France, a few days of cycling to catch several stages, and then cycling to a different port to catch the ferry back to Portsmouth. The ferry arrives late in the day, so we have always had a lift back with Ed's wife having kindly driven down to the port.

The non-TdF trips included a train ride to St Austell, followed by a cycle back to Newbury; and a cycle to Swindon, train to West Wales. and a cycle back from there.

The core group is Ed Cooper (Spokes Treasurer), Kevin (Spokes Member) and me, but other Spokes members and family members have joined us for part or all of the trip.

Kevin has always wanted us to take a trip to see a few stages of a tour, French or Spanish, in Northern Spain. Given that Le Tour was not visiting Northern France (again) this year, and was starting in Spain – the seed of "let's cycle down to Spain to see the Tour" popped into Kevin's head. And, so the planning for our big Spanish adventure began in October 2022.

Planning is typically used as an excuse for socialising at a local pub, and then a little homework for some finer details. The top three initial items to sort out are:

1. A basic route of daily mileage and stops (assuming there will be a campsite – there are many in France).
2. When do the ferries sail, and can we take a bike plus get a cabin for the overnight crossings (we have had difficulties in the past, hence why we have gone from Plymouth before).
3. Permission from one's better half.

Once these are in place, then it's the detailed planning of the route and confirming there's at least one campsite for each overnight stay. We have stayed at B&Bs and Youth Hostels for a few trips, but we do mostly camp.

A good use of Google Maps and Street View, [Camping France](#), and [France Vélo Tourisme](#) are used. I have a Garmin and so the use Garmin Connect app as well.

Spain does not have quite the same culture around camping as France, and I didn't find a useful site. So, it was a little more trial and error on Google search, coupled with eye-balling the Google map for tent symbols.

We were also in a few more remote areas, so along with the campsite I also checked the local areas for places to eat, and local supermarkets. I noted closing times for these establishments too. It would be quite frustrating to arrive at the campsite, set-up, shower and walk down to the last chance supermarket to find it had just closed!

However, it's always best to carry some emergency food, in case every place is closed. And, if you want to avoid potentially digging into the emergency supplies you can always pick up food at the last big town's supermarket before you cycle off to a more remote campsite.

*Day One – Newbury to Portsmouth:* We have done this about six times now but never the same route twice! The first few trips, we just used maps and the last few times with a Garmin. I would have re-used the same route as last time, but the GPX files for the full route has been lost.

Starting with a partial route, with a bit of tweaking, I devised the first day's ride - about 60 miles and over Watership Down, past Micheldever Station, New Alresford (about half way, stopping for a snack from the Mange2 artisan bakery), West Meon, then up and over the downs through Waterlooville, Cosham and then Portsmouth.

Day one is always slightly strange. Thoughts such as: "did I do enough training", "will I keep up", "hope I stay well", "did I pack everything", "did I pack too much", "whose mad idea was this" pop in your mind. Of course, you have checked your bike and tested it out with all the panniers to check handling, but on the road anything can happen.

Arriving at the ferry with fish and chips from a shop a few miles back (a very welcome meal whilst queuing to get on the boat), all was well. We had made it on time, and looking forward to our last sleep "inside" after a short night of ferry entertainment.

*Next time: France, camping equipment and the Belgium contingent.*