

Transport in Congleton

A report by Stephen Joseph Associates
for Congleton Town Council

SJA

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Transport in Congleton: A report for Congleton Town Council

Introduction

Congleton has a variety of transport and traffic issues, with reliance on cars for many journeys and limited alternatives. The town council wishes to explore options for transport in the town and has commissioned this scoping report on possible ways forward. Preparation for this report has included a literature search of key transport and other planning documents for Congleton and the district – however, it should be said at the outset that the author has no links to and has little on the ground knowledge of Congleton. Instead, the report makes use of work that the author has carried out with the University of Hertfordshire’s Smart Mobility Unit, which has been looking at transport options for places outside cities, including market towns like Congleton. It will highlight examples of initiatives that have been taken on transport in places like Congleton, including by town councils like Congleton Town Council. It concludes with some suggestions for ways forward.

Summary and recommendations:

Congleton sees high levels of car use in and around the town. This of course brings benefits to people and the area, but there are downsides including congestion, air pollution, road danger and anti-social behaviour. There have been plenty of plans to tackle transport issues in Congleton and improve alternatives to car use, but these have not seen much progress. Poor public transport, limited priority for active travel and recent car-based development have all led to car use being a default option for many journeys in the area. This report suggests some ways forward.

Transport and new development: A starting point is the large amounts of new development in progress or planned for the town. These risk adding to traffic, pollution and car dependency – but this is not inevitable. Increasing the density of developments, influencing the levels and design of car parking, and building in the provision of local services, public transport, active travel, electric vehicle charging and new mobility services like car clubs can reduce car travel from new developments.

Recommendation: Some of these issues can be addressed in Congleton’s neighbourhood plan, which is currently being revised. Opportunities for bringing in best transport practice in the major development sites could be explored between the Town Council, Cheshire East and developers. If there are options to take these forward, contacts can be made with relevant groups with expertise in this area.

Better public transport: the report sets out options for improving public transport in Congleton. These include:

- The town council initiating, funding or even running its own town bus services (as other similar town councils do).
- Coordination of current specialist transport provision like school buses, dial-a-ride (Flexilink) and social services transport, and turning some of these into public services
- Exploring options for demand responsive buses, similar to the “go-too” service currently running around Nantwich
- Developing and marketing better the existing bus services in the area

Recommendation: discuss options for improving public transport with the council passenger transport team, operators, the contractors for services (especially schools) and software providers to explore potential.

Improving active travel: there is already a Congleton Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plan (LCWIP) but there has not been much progress in implementing it. The report suggests some ways forward:

- Getting Congleton schemes submitted for future funding from Active Travel England;
- Include active travel routes in the neighbourhood plan;
- Use some of the revenue from parking fees to pay for active travel routes;
- Consider a Business Improvement District (as in Northwich) to improve the public realm and the walking environment.

Recommendation: the Town Council could revisit the LCWIP plans and priorities and reaffirm them as having public support. It should seek to explore other funding options for them, as part of the wider town centre vitality strategy. It should also seek contact with Groundwork, Sustrans, Living Streets and other charities who can support active travel schemes.

School travel: There is already a lot of work going on in Congleton on school travel and Cheshire East has the “Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Strategy” (SMOTS) strategy and a school travel team. More could be done with travel plans at individual schools. **Recommendation: audit travel plans at Congleton Schools and seek to improve provision for alternatives to car access. Discuss with schools options for managing traffic and new initiatives to increase sustainable travel access. Depending on interest, work with a pilot primary and secondary school to develop initiatives.**

Commuting: most journeys to work by Congleton residents are by car, though some are fairly short. Many employers and business parks have travel plans, with the aim of reducing single-occupancy car commuting. Looking at the commuting journeys and main employers in and around Congleton, and seeking to develop travel plans with them, could reduce single-occupancy car commuting in the town. **Recommendation: look at options for travel plans for major employers/business parks around Congleton.**

New mobility options: these include **car clubs**, which provide a car or van when needed, with an hourly or daily charge, and reserved parking on streets or in town centres; **bike share/bike hire schemes**, and **e-cargo bikes**. Once reserved for major cities like Manchester and London, these are now being seen in much smaller towns (for example, the Pennine towns of Todmorden and Hebden Bridge have an e-cargo bike delivery service). **Recommendation: the Town Council could make contact with providers of such mobility services, potentially through CoMoUK as the trade body for shared mobility service providers, to see what the options are for such services in the town. It could discuss with Cheshire East whether frameworks for such services could be established for the district as a whole.**

Managing traffic: the report notes that to make the most of alternatives to cars and to tackle traffic problems, ways of managing road traffic in the town will need to be considered. Options include redesigning roads/streets, reserved parking for car clubs and bikes, lower speeds, school streets and neighbourhood traffic management schemes. It is noted that these kinds of measures are often resisted because of fears of increased congestion; however, the completion of the link road, which has removed some through traffic from the town, means that Congleton has the opportunity to consider the reallocation of road space with more space for pedestrians and provision for cycling and possibly new mobility options such as car clubs and shared bikes. Managing car parking – a currently contentious issue – needs to be considered as part of a wider transport strategy for the town.

Measures to give people alternatives to car use should go alongside (and potentially be part funded by) car parking charges.

Taking advantage of new funding opportunities: until now: there has not been funding for the many programmes and schemes in the various transport plans. However, the Government has announced new transport funding for Cheshire East in the wake of its cancellation of the northern leg of HS2. £180m has been allocated to “Local Transport Funding” from April 2025. For Congleton to take advantage of the LTF and other future funding, it will be essential to have an agreed priority list of projects and clear delivery frameworks for them. Of course, much of this depends on decisions by the next Government, but the principle of agreeing a set of priorities for future funding when available seems worthwhile.

Next steps: This report has identified a number of ways in which transport in Congleton could be addressed and some short-term progress made. The Council could pursue these individually – and even under current frameworks and funding some practical initiatives could be developed with partners which will offer alternatives to single occupancy car use in Congleton. However, the report suggests that the Council could go further and seek to bring individual initiatives together through forming a **Congleton transport partnership**, bringing together the Town Council and Cheshire East councillors and transport officers, maybe with others. This could:

- make contact with organisations and initiatives mentioned and seek to take forward ideas that seem relevant to Congleton;
- develop an agreed set of priorities within the various transport plans as the basis for bids for funding, especially for a Congleton share in the LTF or other central Government funding as it becomes available, and
- seek to influence the design and shape of the new developments in Congleton, and their links to the rest of the town, in ways that make them less car dependent.

It is noted that the Harpenden Town Council in Hertfordshire is developing such a partnership.

Conclusion: this report sets out some practical ways forward to tackle traffic and transport issues in Congleton, with links to organisations that might offer help. It highlights new funding opportunities and the importance of having a framework and agreed priorities to take advantage of these. It suggests that these are not just issues to do with traffic and transport – they are about what sort of community people want Congleton to be, and how people want it to look and feel. Ultimately, it is for people in Congleton to determine these issues. A Congleton Transport Partnership could allow discussion on this, but, as important, the Council can use the links set out here to develop practical alternatives to car use for the journeys people are making.

A final point: there are places in the UK where alternatives to car use have been provided and are used. Car use is not fixed – travel patterns can be different and can change.

Transport in Congleton

Starting point: plenty of plans

The literature search has shown that there is in fact a range of plans for transport in Congleton:

- The Congleton Transport Development Plan, which is one of eleven plans coming out of the Local Transport Plan (May 2022)
- The Cheshire East Bus Service Improvement Plan (Aug 2021) and the enhanced partnership plan and scheme
- Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan: Congleton, Macclesfield and Wilmslow (February 2021)
- Congleton Town Centre Vitality Plan (December 2022).

In addition, there is a 2015 masterplan for the new development areas in north Congleton, which was intended as a framework for the individual new developments near the Link Road. A neighbourhood plan has been drafted and further amendments to it are in preparation.

Between them, these plans set out a number of ambitions for improving transport in and around Congleton. Were they to be implemented, Congleton would have:

- A joined up active travel network
- Better bus services around Congleton, including to surrounding residential and employment areas and to other nearby towns
- Better links between the railway station and the town centre
- A thriving town centre

However, these plans have not really seen much progress – for example, in the Transport Development Plan, the appendix B makes clear that nearly all the proposed measures are unfunded and are in the medium (2-5 year) term.

This report does not aim to second guess or revisit these plans and the work that has gone into them. Instead, it covers three main areas:

- The transport aspects of the proposed new development areas to the north of the town by the link road
- Immediate initiatives that could be taken to address traffic and transport issues in and around Congleton
- Possible new sources of funding, and the need for a process to support bidding for these.

In particular, the report suggests the creation of a Congleton transport partnership or forum, bringing together the town council, Cheshire East, businesses, community groups and transport providers, to take forward some of the immediate suggestions and to firm up priorities so as to be ready to bid for funding when opportunities arise.

The case for action

There are high levels of car use in and around Congleton. Across Cheshire East generally traffic was increasing until the pandemic hit – Government figures show that levels of car traffic and vehicle traffic generally have recovered, but not yet to pre-pandemic levels. Pre-Covid, around 60% of commuters in the district commuted to work on their own in a car, just under 10% were lift sharing,

around 13% were working from home, 9% walked to work and just 4.5% used public transport ¹. The Town Centre Vitality Plan says that 32% of residents travel less than 5km to work.

This high level of car use creates problems, of which **congestion** is an immediate concern. Congleton has of course recently had the link road completed, and this has reduced congestion in the town, but maps still show congestion in the morning peak in parts of the town centre.

There are wider impacts, including **air pollution**. Motor vehicles produce pollution, from their exhausts but also from their brakes and tyres. The pollutants - especially particulates and nitrogen oxides - harm human health in a variety of ways; the latest scientific research links pollution from motor vehicles to health issues in unborn babies as well as to asthma, heart conditions and dementia. There are internationally set (World Health Organisation) standards for air quality with limits to these pollutants which aim to reduce these health impacts. The High Street in Congleton has air pollution that exceeds 3 WHO guidelines and is in the 63% most polluted postcodes in the UK. The levels of nitrogen oxides and small particulates (PM2.5) are double the WHO recommended safe limits².

There is also **road danger**. There are crashes, deaths and injuries on the roads with excess motor traffic – 48 in Congleton itself over the last 20 years – including 9 involving deaths and serious injuries³, and a recent search found 1 fatal and 1 serious injury crash in the last 3 months. Cheshire East as a whole was identified as having high numbers of crashes in a Cheshire Policy response to a Freedom of Information request in 2021⁴. Beyond the immediate impacts of these on family and friends of victims, in general the danger posed by road traffic puts people off walking and cycling and this adds to car trips and congestion.

Anti-social behaviour by car drivers adds to these concerns. In a soon to be published study by Professor Ian Loader et al on safety and security in Macclesfield⁵, speeding and other traffic behaviour, such as pavement parking, have been identified as among the top issues making people in the town feel unsafe. These issues were bigger concerns than traditional anti social behaviour and other criminal activity (and much bigger than cycling). The authors point to high levels of car use for local journeys (around half of journeys within Macclesfield are by car), in a town not designed for high car use or ownership. Congleton is of course different from Macclesfield, but some of the same issues are present and a common theme is that, as in Congleton, the town council in Macclesfield has voiced concerns about these issues but has not been able to make progress on them.

There is an overarching concern: **climate change**. Transport contributes about 27% to UK carbon emissions; it is the highest emitting sector now, and reducing these emissions is essential to meet UK targets for tackling climate change. The overall target is to reduce emissions to “net zero” by 2050, but there are interim carbon budgets as stepping stones towards the 2050 budget and the Committee on Climate Change, which oversees these budgets, is saying that the UK is not on track to meet them (and recent Government announcements may make these more difficult to achieve). Congleton has relatively high levels of carbon emissions from car driving; for example, in Congleton East, car driving accounts for 1560 kg of CO2 equivalent per person per year, against an average in

¹ <https://www.mobilityways.com/map/>

² <https://addresspollution.org/results/031ed275-67cb-4ad8-b677-78b9d0d202d4>

³ <https://www.crashmap.co.uk/Search>

⁴ <https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/hundreds-accidents-involving-cyclists-drivers-22903635>

⁵ <https://securityinplace.org/>

England of 962⁶. Alongside this, carbon emissions from commuting in Cheshire East as a whole are high, though not much above national averages.

The reasons for the high levels of car use are fairly general across market towns like Congleton:

- **Trends in travel costs:** until recently, the cost of motoring has risen by less than inflation, helped by freezing fuel duty, while public transport fares have increased by more than inflation. However, recent events have changed this – fuel prices have increased, under pressure from international events, making it more expensive to drive, and bus fares have been reduced, with a £2 fare cap on single journeys, introduced by the Government and now extended until the end of 2024. These new trends are yet to fully work their way through to travel behaviour.
- **Poor public transport services** within the town and between the town and surrounding areas, which do not offer an attractive alternative to many car journeys people make. Bus services have been reduced over time, with Arriva withdrawing local services this year (though some have been picked up by other operators, with some support from Cheshire East Council). The railway station, which is 20 minutes walk from the town centre, has an hourly service to Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent; previous longer distance services by Cross Country trains have not resumed after Covid.
- **Limited priority for active travel** on the roads, and poor conditions on pavements, tend to encourage car use for short journeys within and around the town and discourage walking and cycling. This means that despite the compact nature of the town, there are low levels of cycling, and walking is also not as general for short journeys as it could be (note: there have been really worthwhile routes developed for active travel by the Congleton Partnership and others, but these seem to have been isolated projects rather than part of a network).
- Much **new development is being focused around car access**, with plentiful car parking being provided. There are also a lot of town centre car parks, which are relatively cheap or free.

This means that overall car driving has been relatively cheap and easy, while alternatives are not convenient or in some cases available. This ends up creating “car dependency”, where car driving and car use move from being a choice to a necessity. This has impacts both on those with cars – who, especially now, find that their car use is adding to cost of living pressures – and those without, who find themselves excluded from society because access to key services and facilities, and to friends and family, is difficult or expensive.

Ways forward: Transport and new development

Congleton is set to see significant new development in the next few years. A series of development sites to the north of the town have been earmarked for development, with over 4000 houses and also some business developments, and the new link road has been partly justified to provide access to these sites.

The design and servicing of these developments will have a potentially major impact on traffic and transport in Congleton and the surrounding area. If they are designed and laid out with plentiful car parking, few or no local facilities, limited or no public transport, poor conditions for pedestrians and no provision for safe cycling, they will generate significant extra car traffic which risks overwhelming the link road and the rest of the road network. However, this is not inevitable – there are examples

⁶ <https://www.carbon.place/#9/53.2433/-2.3763>

from elsewhere, in the UK and other countries, which show that less car-based development is possible⁷.

These developments have as noted already been part of a 2015 masterplan for the whole area and many now have at least outline planning permission, with some having full permission. Several developments are under construction. The Town Council has objected to some of them, including on transport grounds.

To the extent that future development can be influenced, key issues to consider include:

- Overall density: the 2025 masterplan suggested a density of 30 dwellings per hectare (dph) which is quite low by urban standards. The effect of low density is to spread out developments and thus encourage car use.
- Levels and design of car parking: many new housing developments have very high levels of car parking, sometimes at the expense of green space and gardens. While car parking is desired by many residents, the dominance of parking tends to add to car use. Even where high levels of car parking are desired, they can be provided in less intrusive ways – the developments at Poundbury in Dorset and Nansledan in Cornwall have been able to provide high levels of parking but by moving it away from street frontages have created a much less car-dominated landscape.
- Provision for electric vehicle charging: this should be standard in new developments of all kinds, given the Government's recent confirmation of a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars after 2035, but at least one developer in 2022 was suggesting that just 14 charging points out of 206 car parking spaces in an industrial development was sufficient⁸
- Provision of local services and facilities: having local services and facilities people can walk or cycle can significantly reduce car use. Local shops, schools, health facilities and community centres should be part of new developments and included in early phases rather than left until last.
- Provision of public transport: as already noted, public transport in and around Congleton is limited. If the sizeable new developments being built do not have good bus services from the time of the first residents moving in, people there will be forced to rely on cars for most journeys. It is possible to provide such services – New Lubbesthorpe near Leicester has had a bus service funded by the landowner since the first residents moved in. This was started as a demand-responsive service, which faced severe challenges during Covid but has now evolved into a mix of DRT and fixed route services⁹.
- Design for walking and cycling: the layout of roads in new development and the provision of good direct walking and cycling links to facilities within developments and to the surrounding area are critical if shorter journeys are not to be entirely car-based. As the Transport for New Homes research has shown, many new housing developments are now being built without provision for walking (some even without pavements) and some developers use inappropriate highway design standards which are intended for major trunk roads, as opposed to the Manual for Streets design guides for local roads. Provision for secure parking of bikes in new homes and in commercial and retail developments is also

⁷ There is detailed information on the impacts on transport of new housing developments, especially of urban extensions like those at Congleton, from the organisation Transport for New Homes, www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk (note – the report author is a TfNH director).

⁸ <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/planning-approval-for-macclesfield-homes-congleton-industrial/>

⁹ <https://www.newlubbethorpe.co.uk/getting-about/>

important. The issue of a cycling and walking route in the new Congleton developments and on the Link Road has been raised as part of discussion on planning for these developments.

- Provision of new mobility services: as noted later, there are now new options for transport services, which include car clubs and bike hire. These are being incorporated into some new developments as part of “mobility hubs”, which bring together different transport options (conventional public transport, bike hire, cargo bikes, car clubs) but also have community facilities - cafés, workspaces, parcel delivery/collection points etc, with “community concierges” as staff. In some developments elsewhere, it has been successfully argued by the relevant planning consultants that provision of such services, along with good active travel routes, can reduce car use sufficiently to avoid the need for major highway development and car parking.

Some of these issues can be addressed in Congleton’s neighbourhood plan, which is currently being revised. A toolkit on neighbourhood planning and transport was produced by the University of Manchester Urban Institute in 2022 and includes policies and wording in various neighbourhood plans (including ones in Alsager and Malpas that promote transport decarbonisation¹⁰).

Recommendation: it may be that decisions about the major development sites in Congleton have already all been taken. However, opportunities for bringing in best practice in the areas outlined should be explored between the Town Council, Cheshire East and developers. If there are options to take these forward, contacts can be made with relevant groups:

- CoMoUK, which have been active in promoting mobility hubs¹¹
- Create Streets, which promotes good design and “gentle density” for new developments¹²
- Transport for New Homes
- Go-Travel Solutions, which supports the New Lubbesthorpe development¹³.

In addition, if funding is available, transport consultants that support less car-based development, such as Vectos/SLR, PJA Associates and Stantec, could be commissioned to review travel plans for the new developments and suggest amendments. Use could also be made of the Transport for New Homes checklist for new housing developments¹⁴.

Ways Forward: starting points

While as noted there are plans to improve transport in and around Congleton which have not yet been funded, there are opportunities to make progress in the short term on transport in the town and to start to provide alternatives to car use. The suggestions that follow have been based on projects that have been applied in market towns elsewhere in the UK, some with support from town and parish councils.

1. Better public transport

There are some possible approaches that the town council could initiate to improve public transport in the town.

¹⁰ <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/mui/spal/research/UoM-Neighbourhood-Planning-Transport-Decarbonisation.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.como.org.uk/mobility-hubs/overview-and-benefits>

¹² <https://www.createstreets.com/>; see in particular <https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Road-to-Nowhere-110324.pdf>, which looks at alternative approaches to housing development in Chippenham, Wiltshire.

¹³ <https://www.go-travel-solutions.com/>

¹⁴ <https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/the-project/checklist-for-new-housing-developments/>

First it could follow other town councils and **initiate, fund or even run its own town bus services**. Examples where this happens now include:

- Witney in Oxfordshire, where the town council is supporting local bus services with help from the Co-operative movement¹⁵
- Sevenoaks town council which initiated two services: a vintage bus linking the station with Knole Park (a National Trust property), and a town service no 8 (so-called because it does a figure of 8 around the town linking outlying housing estates to the town centre. The council worked with Kent County Council and a local bus operator to research the need for and to introduce this service¹⁶
- Harpenden Town Council pays for a volunteer-run “Harpenden hopper”, which provides up to 5 journeys a day on weekdays for people with mobility difficulties¹⁷.

In addition, there are many community transport providers¹⁸ who provide local services, ranging from lifts in cars through community car schemes to conventional local bus services, and some of these get funding from local town and parish councils¹⁹. It should be said that these kinds of services are different from the many cases where parish/town councils own and hire out minibuses for community use, as in Disley.

Second, it could seek to **co-ordinate current specialist transport provision**. In Congleton, as in any rural area, there are many bespoke transport services to support public services, including those for home-school transport, transport to school and elsewhere for those with special educational needs, social services transport (for example bringing older people to day centres) and non-emergency patient transport (e.g. for patient requiring dialysis). In addition, in some areas employers contract transport services to bring employees to and from work.

This means that, while mainstream bus services have declined, there are a number of specialist services providing transport and there is significant provision across the district. The provision of these in Cheshire East as a whole in these areas appears to be substantial. Cheshire East Council itself provides a number of school buses, including five services to Congleton High School. It also provides transport for 3500 SEND pupils, and taxi and minibus travel for school students with no commercial bus services available. There are also buses run by Eaton Bank Academy and by Reaseheath College, which says that its overall transport budget is over £1.5m a year. There is also the “Flexilink” dial-a-ride service, primarily for older people (over 80s) or people with disabilities, run by Cheshire East.

Turning some of these into public services, or finding ways in which the funding currently going to them could support mainstream bus services, would improve public transport provision in the town and make use of vehicles and seats in them that are currently not being used. It is noted that Cheshire East Council has been consulting on broadening Flexilink and integrating it more with mainstream bus services.

Third, and linked to the Flexilink proposals, the Town Council could with Cheshire East **explore options for more general demand responsive bus services**. These services, which are like

¹⁵ <https://www.woct.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <https://www.sevenoakstown.gov.uk/No.8Bus28441.aspx>

¹⁷ <https://www.harpendenhopper.co.uk/>

¹⁸ The Community Transport Association is the national community transport charity, see <https://ctauk.org/about-cta/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/publications/3070-the-good-councillor-s-guide-to-transport-planning-1/file> gives further case studies.

combinations of taxis and buses, have grown significantly in recent years, and new technology, which enables booking of journeys online and on mobile phones, has made them easier to provide.

In fact there is already a DRT service running in Cheshire East, in the area around Nantwich. The “go-too” service²⁰ is run by Ansa Transport and Via under contract to Cheshire East Council and funded by the Government’s Rural Mobility Fund. There could be discussions with these on extending this towards Congleton, or setting up a neighbouring operation. Indeed, the Cheshire East Bus Service Improvement Plan does mention DRT options for Congleton, connecting the areas south and west of Macclesfield with the business parks and industrial estates in Congleton, so this could be the start of a discussion on DRT options.

Although there isn’t at present direct funding available for this, the creation of a single platform for running the bespoke transport services, and pooling the funding currently going into them as suggested above, might make this worth exploring (Hertfordshire has a DRT “HertsLynx” service with its dial-a-ride and some other services on the same technology platform). There are a number of software providers in this area, including Via, Padam, Ioki and Voyagerr, and discussions could be opened with these to explore options. The goal here would be to share vehicles and drivers, so the same vehicle might do a school/college journey in the morning, a social services journey in the middle of the day and a commuter pick up at the station in the evening.

Finally, the council could seek to **develop and market better existing bus services in the area**. As in many areas, there is limited marketing and promotion of bus services, so the town council could with Cheshire East seek to brand local services and support marketing of them (“Network Congleton” or similar). This could be developed through a Congleton subset of the Cheshire East Enhanced Bus Partnership.

There are examples of all these in other places and making progress on any of these, or in combination, might result in improved public transport for some of the journeys currently done by car – or for people currently without transport services and who therefore don’t travel at all.

It should be noted that there are examples elsewhere of high-quality rural transport networks. Cornwall Council (a rural unitary council like Cheshire East) has developed a “one public transport network for Cornwall”, with capped fares, tap on/tap off tickets and integrated timetables²¹. As well as capped fares across the county, it has daily caps in its town zones of £2.50 (£1.50 for under 19s).

Recommendation: discuss options for improving public transport with the council passenger transport team, operators, the contractors for services (especially schools) and software providers to explore potential.

2. Improving active travel

As noted already, Congleton is a fairly compact town and many journeys in it could be walked or cycled. As noted already there is also a “Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan” (LCWIP)²². This identifies the opportunities in Congleton for increased active travel – it suggests there is potential for increasing the journeys to work by bicycle in Congleton by 116% and an extra 1600 journeys to work in the town on foot. “Desire lines” for journeys in Congleton were mapped and

²⁰ <http://www.go-too.co.uk/home.aspx>

²¹ <https://www.gocornwallbus.co.uk/transport-cornwall-funding>

²²

<https://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/ecminutes/documents/s83625/Local%20Cycling%20and%20Walking%20Infrastructure%20Plans%20-%20app%202%20NE.pdf>

network plans reflecting these were identified, with “Core Walking Zones” and audits of walking routes. Potential cycle routes were also proposed. From this a set of plans for the town centre to improve crossings, footways and cycle provision was developed, with suggested priorities and sequencing.

Some of the messages and ideas in the LCWIP were repeated in the Town Centre Vitality Plan, including creating a walking and cycling route through the town centre.

However, there has been limited action on these schemes. Work on the Congleton Greenway, which was supposed to be part of the sustainable development for the housing in North Congleton, has been paused because of cost increases, which have taken the budget beyond what could be afforded by the Council, even including funding from developers.

There are opportunities to move forward on the schemes and projects identified in these plans and in the North Congleton Masterplan.

First, the new body **Active Travel England** is funding active travel measures and indeed has already funded routes in Wilmslow, part of the same LCWIP plan. Congleton schemes could be submitted in future ATE funding rounds.

Second, it is possible to include **active travel routes in neighbourhood plans**, so as to make these more mainstream priorities for developer funding. A very rural example of this is the Deepings in Lincolnshire. The “Deepings Green Walk”, a network of local paths and footways linking key amenities in the villages, was designated as part of the neighbourhood plan, so as “to plan accessible and attractive safe routes in conjunction with housing and highways planning before new development begins”²³. As developments happen the new housing layouts will add new sections of the Green Walk and will contribute funding. The University of Manchester toolkit on neighbourhood plans and transport, cited earlier, includes other examples of support for active travel in neighbourhood plans²⁴.

Third, it is possible to use **revenue from parking fees** to pay for transport improvements. If there are increases in parking charges, as currently proposed, the Town Council could seek a proportion of the extra revenue for active travel routes.

Fourth, there are institutional frameworks that can support town centre schemes, such as **Business Improvement Districts**. BIDs are set up if local businesses vote to do so, and a levy of businesses pays for agreed projects to support towns and the business environment²⁵. Other Cheshire towns have BIDs – a long standing example is Northwich, where BID funding has been instrumental in improving the town centre²⁶. The Northwich BID and others are supported by the charity Groundwork in the North West.

It is worth noting that the coming of electric bikes is helping expand cycling to groups who have previously not used bikes much. E-bikes can also support longer and hillier journeys than many people will make on conventional bikes. We note below options for bike hire schemes which can help make e-bikes available.

²³ <https://www.deepingsgreenwalk.co.uk/>

²⁴ <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/mui/spal/research/UoM-Neighbourhood-Planning-Transport-Decarbonisation.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/business-improvement-districts>

²⁶ <https://www.northwichbid.co.uk/the-journey-so-far/>

Recommendation: the Town Council could revisit the LCWIP plans and priorities and reaffirm them as having public support. It should seek to explore other funding options for them, as part of the wider town centre vitality strategy. It should also seek contact with Groundwork, Sustrans, Living Streets and other charities who can support active travel schemes.

3. School travel

There is already a lot of work going on on school travel in Congleton and it is noted that there is a safer routes to schools programme with a dedicated school travel team at Cheshire East Council. The council has also adopted a “Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Strategy” (SMOTS) in 2018²⁷. As already noted, the secondary schools in Congleton have dedicated bus services. However, it is not clear whether the Congleton schools have a travel plan to manage travel to the school as a whole; the problem is the schools are often too busy to work on this issue, given the other pressures. Having said that, one enthusiastic teacher or governor can make a difference, so seeking out interest in one local school to work on this issue as a pilot might be a way forward and show others what can be done.

There are examples of good practice in this area²⁸, with limits on car access to schools along with “park and stride” initiatives to encourage dropping off students away from the school. Some primary schools have “walking buses” to make it safe and easy for children to walk to school together. There have also been “school streets” initiatives to manage traffic around schools²⁹.

Alongside Cheshire East itself, there are organisations that can help with school travel initiatives, including Living Streets (who run a walk to school challenge³⁰), Sustrans³¹ and Modeshift³².

Recommendation: audit travel plans at Congleton Schools and seek to improve provision for alternatives to car access. Discuss with schools options for managing traffic and new initiatives to increase sustainable travel access. Depending on interest, work with a pilot primary and secondary school to develop initiatives.

4. Commuting

As noted already, most journeys to work by Congleton residents are by car, though some are fairly short. Many employers and business parks have travel plans, with the aim of reducing single-occupancy car commuting. These start by looking at (anonymised) postcodes where employees live and seek to give them offers to reduce car commuting. In particular, car sharing for commuting can reduce costs and increase productivity; some employers support this by reserved parking spaces for car sharer and by guaranteeing a taxi ride home if for some reason the car sharers have illness or other problems³³. Employers can also offer tax-free cycle to work funding for bike purchase.

²⁷ https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/schools/school_transport/sustainable-modes-of-travel.aspx

²⁸ A new school in Harpenden, Katherine Warington, has an award-winning travel plan:

<https://kwschool.co.uk/travel-information/>

²⁹ <http://schoolstreets.org.uk/>

³⁰ <https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/products-and-services/>

³¹ <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/for-professionals/education>

³² <https://modeshiftstars.org/education/>

³³ Bentley in Crewe is an example of a Cheshire firm with a travel plan – see <https://www.ttc-transportplanning.com/post/ttc-help-bentley-motors-ltd-towards-implementing-sustainable-travel-plan-for-employees>

Consultancies like Mobilityways³⁴, Go-Travel Solutions and TTC work with employers and councils to develop travel plans.

Looking at the commuting journeys and main employers in and around Congleton, and seeking to develop travel plans with them, could reduce single-occupancy car commuting in the town.

Recommendation: look at options for travel plans for major employers/business parks around Congleton.

5. New mobility options

There are new options for transport services in many areas. These include:

- **Car clubs:** these provide a car or van when needed, with an hourly or daily charge, and reserved parking on streets or in town centres. A major provider is Enterprise³⁵, which runs its car clubs as part of its mainstream car hire business. Enterprise have established car clubs in many market towns like Congleton and in more rural settings; they have also placed car club vehicles at rail stations. Local authorities have sometimes initiated car clubs with Enterprise or others to give their employees alternative transport options for business travel.

There are many other car club providers and in some places there are community car clubs, set up by local community associations or as co-operatives³⁶. Importantly, cars in these clubs are increasingly electric, meaning that people can access electric cars without having to buy them.

Car clubs have been shown to reduce individual car use while giving people access to cars when they need one³⁷.

- **Bike share schemes:** shared hire bike schemes, once only found in major cities, are starting to develop in smaller towns. Towns like Watford, Bournemouth and Worthing all now have such schemes, with docking stations and systems to redistribute bikes between them, and more are being developed. There are a range of providers and funding arrangements³⁸. Older schemes tended to have bikes purchased by the local authority and then managed by a contractor, but increasingly contractors are offering leasing and maintenance arrangements. Congleton itself might be too small to support a hire bike scheme on its own; there could be discussions with Cheshire East and neighbouring towns to investigate a Cheshire East-wide framework but with individual schemes in each area (this is the approach Surrey County Council is using). Major travel generators like colleges, hospitals and business parks could be brought into a bike hire scheme.

In addition, Brompton, the manufacturers of folding bikes, are teaming up with rail companies to provide folding bike hire in lockers at rail stations, including relatively small ones³⁹.

³⁴ <https://www.mobilityways.com/>

³⁵ <https://www.enterpriseclub.co.uk/gb/en/home.html>

³⁶ See for example the Derwent Valley car club, <https://www.facebook.com/derwentvalleyclub/> and <https://www.co-wheels.org.uk/>

³⁷ <https://www.como.org.uk/shared-cars/overview-and-benefits>

³⁸ Transport Initiatives are a consultancy that helps set up bike hire and other such schemes - <https://transport-initiatives.com/>

³⁹ <https://bromptonhire.com/>

Separately, there is bike hire for tourism, and it is noted that there are already leisure bike hire operators in Chester, Northwich, Knutsford and elsewhere. These are different from the public bike hire schemes mentioned, but can be used to give visitors and tourists access to bikes to explore an area.

It is worth noting that increasingly the public bike hire schemes and leisure bike hire operators are running electric bikes. As already noted, e-bikes are attractive to a wider range of the population and are growing in popularity, and hire schemes can help spread this.

- **E-cargo bikes:** alongside conventional bikes and e-bikes, there has been a growth in e-cargo bikes. There are now e-cargo bike delivery services in even quite small towns, delivering goods for local traders but also bringing bulky goods to householders. An example of a small town e-cargo bike service is Cargodale⁴⁰, which operates in Pennine towns including Todmorden and Hebden Bridge. E-cargo bikes can substitute for some van journeys, and some places are looking at local consolidation centres, where parcels and other goods can be delivered and then taken to people's doors in e-cargo bikes. This is a fast developing area as e-cargo bike technology develops.

Recommendation: the Town Council could make contact with providers of such mobility services, potentially through CoMoUK as the trade body for shared mobility service providers, to see what the options are for such services in the town. It could discuss with Cheshire East whether frameworks for such services could be established for the district as a whole.

Managing traffic

So far, this report has discussed a range of options for improving transport services and choices open to those who live and work in and around Congleton, based on examples from similar places elsewhere. However, to make the most of these, and to tackle some of the issues outlined above, managing road traffic will need to be considered.

Many of the initiatives already mentioned will require the use of road space and kerbside areas – for example car clubs and bike hire schemes should have reserved parking spaces if they are to be available in places where people want them. Car share schemes for commuting work best if car sharers are given priority spaces in car parks.

In particular, many of the measures and projects to encourage active travel will require the reshaping and redesign of roads, especially in the centre of the town (the town centre vitality strategy and the LCWIP have some good illustrations of what the active travel schemes might involve in practice). Speeding up bus services and making them more reliable might involve giving them priority over other traffic, whether through bus lanes, bus gates or priority at junctions.

Other measures to manage traffic and reduce the dominance of cars in the town might involve:

- Lower speeds: there are some 20 mph areas in Congleton, but they could be expanded.
- School streets: these have already been referred to and involve restrictions on car traffic around schools at dropping off and picking up times.
- Neighbourhood traffic management schemes, including restricting through traffic in some areas with exemptions for some types of traffic.

⁴⁰ <https://www.cargodale.co.uk/>

More radical street redesigns are possible – Poynton has a shared space scheme⁴¹, which has redesigned the roads in the town to give pedestrians and vehicles equal priority. However, there have been concerns about the maintenance of the street paving and markings.

Often, measures to manage traffic are resisted because of fears of increased congestion. However, the completion of the link road, which has removed some through traffic from the town, means that Congleton has the opportunity to consider the reallocation of road space with more space for pedestrians and provision for cycling and possibly new mobility options such as car clubs and shared bikes.

The issue of the availability and cost of parking is particularly important. Some but not all residential areas have controlled parking schemes with permits for residents. As already noted, Congleton has a mix of free and charged car parking, but the charges for parking are not very high. Cheshire East Council is consulting on increases in parking charges in the car parks it controls in Congleton (and elsewhere in the district), but there is a concern that parking will migrate to free car parks outside the town centre.

Car parking should be addressed as part of the wider transport strategy for the town. Measures to give people alternatives to car use should go alongside (and potentially be part funded by) car parking charges.

New funding opportunities

It was noted above that there are many plans for transport in Congleton, but that funding has not been available for many of the programmes and schemes in them.

However, this may be changing, and indeed new funding for transport in Cheshire East has been announced. In the wake of the Prime Minister’s announcement cancelling the northern leg of HS2, a “Network North” strategy was announced with funding for other transport programmes in the North of England and elsewhere. In particular, councils outside the city regions in the North, including Cheshire East, are promised Local Transport Funding from April 2025, to fund local transport schemes and initiatives. Over a seven-year period, Cheshire East will get £180.7m for transport, based around three priorities:

- Better connectivity within our towns, suburbs and cities
- Better connectivity between our towns and cities
- Improving everyday local journeys for people⁴².

There have been other funding streams for transport projects. Levelling Up funds, Towns Funds, Active Travel Funds, Housing Infrastructure Funds and the Covid recovery fund have all been used to fund local transport projects. Cheshire East has successfully bid for some of these, though not for Congleton projects.

For Congleton to take advantage of the LTF and other future funding, it will be essential to have an agreed priority list of projects and clear delivery frameworks for them.

Of course, much of this depends on decisions by the next Government, but the principle of agreeing a set of priorities for future funding when available seems worthwhile.

⁴¹ https://www.poyntontowncouncil.gov.uk/Shared_Space_35342.aspx

⁴² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/local-leaders-to-receive-47-billion-to-transform-transport-across-the-north-and-midlands>; <https://alsager.nub.news/news/local-news/cheshire-east-council-responds-to-new-ps180-million-transport-funding-222258>

Moving forward

This report has identified a number of ways in which transport in Congleton could be addressed and some short-term progress made. The Council could pursue these individually – and even under current frameworks and funding some practical initiatives could be developed with partners which will offer alternatives to single occupancy car use in Congleton.

However, depending on capacity and interest, the Council could go further, and seek to bring individual initiatives together. This would be through **forming a Congleton transport partnership, maybe coming out the Town Council's integrated transport group, but with others involved. In particular such a partnership could bring together the Town Council and Cheshire East councillors and transport officers. This partnership would have three main roles:**

- **Making contacts with organisations and initiatives mentioned here and seeking to take forward ideas that seem relevant to Congleton.**
- **Developing an agreed set of priorities within the various transport plans as the basis for bids for funding, especially for a Congleton share in the LTF or other central Government funding as it becomes available. This would in effect become a pipeline of schemes and should allow for phased development of projects as funding becomes available.**
- **Seeking to influence the design and shape of the new developments in Congleton, and their links to the rest of the town, in ways that make them less car dependent.**

The partnership could also involve others in Congleton: businesses and business interests, schools, developers, transport operators, community groups and user organisations. It can also enable debate and discussion on major issues, such as parking provision/ charges and changing road design and layouts.

A similar partnership is being formed in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, following a report like this for the Civic Society there⁴³. There the Town Council is taking the lead but has found interest and support from both St Albans District Council and Hertfordshire County Council.

The report has also highlighted the potential for neighbourhood plans to include policies on transport. As Congleton's plan is being revised, the opportunity should be taken to include policies supporting measures that may increase active travel and new transport options and reduce single-occupancy car use in the town.

Conclusion

This report has endeavoured to set out some practical ways forward to tackle traffic and transport issues in Congleton, with links to organisations that might offer help. It has also highlighted new funding opportunities and the importance of having a framework and agreed priorities to take advantage of these.

It has also suggested the need to consider the role of car traffic in the town, and the priority on roads. Proposals to change the design of roads and give more priority to people on foot or bikes can raise major arguments. However, these are not just issues to do with traffic and transport – they are about what sort of community people want Congleton to be, and how people want it to look and feel. Ultimately, it is for people in Congleton to determine these issues. A Congleton Transport Partnership could allow discussion on this, but, as important, the Council can use the links set out here to develop practical alternatives to car use for the journeys people are making.

⁴³ https://www.herts.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/376446/1568-UH-Harpenden-Transport-Report_P3.pdf

A final point: there are places in the UK where alternatives to car use have been provided and are used. One example is Kesgrave, outside Ipswich, where 86% of students at the large secondary school there walk or cycle to the school. A network of cycle lanes around the school, built into the original housing development there, give parents the peace of mind to allow their children to make their own way to school. This suggests that places like Congleton have choices. Car use is not fixed – travel patterns can be different and can change.