



Motorcycles and Bus Lanes. Should this Idea Be Supported?

In the early 90s the Motorcyclist Action Group and other motorcycle organisations mooted the idea of motorcycle access to bus lanes in the County of Avon. The idea was approved as part of the strategy of the Avon Motorcyclist Forum and gained the support of local councillors and highway engineers.

This led, in June 95, to the introduction of a six-month experimental scheme in Bristol. The scheme was granted permanent status at the end of the experimental period, during which, no accidents or adverse road safety effects had been observed. There are no current plans to review the scheme.

Concerns have been raised about further plans for motorcycle access to urban bus lanes. MAG contends that these concerns can be resolved by dialogue between interested groups. MAG is concerned that arguments against motorcycles in bus lanes appear to be based more on poorly informed conservative reactions than on any firm evidence. Indeed, articles that have appeared on the issue from some quarters are often badly researched and contain an alarmist element that is entirely unacceptable in the context of rational debate.

Support and opposition to bikes in bus lanes generally comes from three main sources:

- Highways officers (engineers or road safety staff) working for the local authority.
- Local police force traffic management officers.
- Other bus-lane users or would-be users (cyclists, pedestrians, taxi or bus companies).

However, MAG has found that any or all of them can be very supportive, either from the start or after dialogue. This is because concerns about motorcycle use can be addressed, simply by the interested parties entering into discussions with an open mind.

Some of the objections that have been raised are outlined below.

The Department of Transport won't allow it.

The Department of Transport guidance referred to was issued some years ago. Although it does advise motorcycles should not normally be among those vehicles permitted, it also says that local authorities are able to allow any type of vehicle. This point was confirmed by John Bowis the Minister for Road Safety in the last government. In a letter to Sir David Knox MP, dated 6th November 1996 he said:

'Local authorities already have the power in law to introduce bus lanes, and allow them to be used in addition by other types of traffic. They must use their judgement of local circumstances as to what is appropriate in a given situation.'

There's no suitable road sign in the official traffic signs manual

The Department of Transport gave its backing to the original experiment in Bristol and approved a revised version of the standard road signs used to advise which vehicles may use a bus lane.

Motorcycles are dangerous, we don't want to encourage them

The common assumption is that because motorcycle users, pedestrians and cyclists are vulnerable, they - and not the vehicles that hit them - are dangerous. The perversity of this argument is that most motorcycle user casualties arise from collisions with other vehicles, usually cars, in built-up areas, where the motorcycle has right-of way and is travelling below the speed limit. Allowing motorcycles to travel independently of these other vehicles helps reduce potential conflicts.

Pedestrians would be put in danger.

Allowing motorcycles to travel outside the main traffic stream would make them more visible to people crossing the road. This is more likely to improve pedestrian safety.

Cyclists would be put in danger.

Pedal cycles and motorcycles are both narrow and manoeuvrable; their riders share a common understanding of the need to give each other room. Added to this, being overtaken by a motorcycle is less hazardous than is the case with buses, taxis, etc.

Bus schedules will be disrupted.

Given the manoeuvrability and space efficiency of motorcycles, adverse effects should not be experienced, indeed motorcycles in bus lanes are not adding to congestion elsewhere on bus routes.

Enforcement will be more difficult

Seeing motorcycles in bus lanes does not encourage drivers of other vehicle types, eg: cars and goods vehicles to invade the bus lanes. Road signs used to designate bus lanes clearly identify which vehicles are permitted.

Motorcycles break speed limits, allowing them to use bus lanes would encourage this.

A lot has been made about the problems of speeding motorcyclists, with some commentators painting a picture of out of control motorcyclists creating urban chaos. The reality is somewhat different.

Motorcyclists are all too often on the receiving end of the results of bad driving (Over 60 % of urban motorcycle accidents are caused by other road users). Because of this, motorcyclists have a keen sense of self-preservation. This is supported by novice motorcycle training that is of a higher standard than that of most other road users. Riders are aware that a rogue car or erratically ridden cycle could pull into their path at any time and, in the main, ride defensively and at a sensible speed.

The speed of commuter traffic tends to be self-regulating, with the speed of all bus lane users further regulated by the speed of the buses that use them.

Department of Transport figures show that motorcycles are more likely to comply with urban speed limits than cars. 1995 figures show that the average speed of motorcycles in urban areas was 30 mph, whereas the average for cars was 33 mph. 48% of motorcycles complied with 30 mph limits as opposed to 28 % of cars. This does not mean that motorcyclists can avoid their responsibilities on the overall speeding issue, but given that a massive 72 percent of cars are driven over the 30 mph limit, worries about speeding motorcyclists should be put in context with the overall picture before alarmists views are propagated.

Problems with speeding motorists of all classes should be solved by a combination of education and more effective enforcement measures.

*Further information on motorcycles in bus lanes can be obtained from: MAG UK, PO Box 750, Rugby, CV21 3ZR.
Phone: 0870 444 8 448. Fax: 0870 444 8 448 Email: public-affairs@mag-uk.org*

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