

# **Why does utility cycling represent such a minor proportion of urban journeys made in the UK?**

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## **Introduction**

Utility cycling, or cycling as a means of transportation rather than for recreation or leisure, has long been a cheap and convenient way to get around for some. However since the 1950s, the proportion of people making journeys by bicycle in the UK has been steadily decreasing (Cavill and Davis 2007). Reasons for this include the dominance of the car, increases in wealth and living standards and longer commutes. This is the opposite of the situation in most European countries where cycling remains a popular form of urban transportation.

During the B1 module, Peter Harper's lecture looked at some of the reasons why CAT was formed in the 1970's; issues that are still relevant today. Climate change and environmental damage were mentioned during the course of this lecture. The transport sector is responsible for 25% of the United Kingdom's total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (HM Treasury 2007) as well as producing localised environmental damage through road building, emissions, congestion and noise pollution. Cycling is seen as one of the ways of replacing some of these journeys especially given the fact that 23% of car journeys are less than 2 miles (DfT 2008a); a distance that could be cycled in around 15 minutes. So why do people not make these journeys? Have they abandoned the bike for a more comfortable and perceived safer way of travelling?

In this essay I am going to examine why the UK performs so poorly compared to other countries for journeys by bicycle. I will look at cycling and government policy, some of the attitudes and issues that may be stopping people from cycling and possible solutions for the future.

## **The situation in the UK**

The United Kingdom is the most car dependant country in Europe with most towns and cities lacking a basic cycle network (Martens 2004). There has been a huge decline in the number of journeys made by bicycle since the 1950s, from 11% of passenger journeys in 1952 to below 2% in 1996 (DfT 2007a). Changing employment patterns such as the decline in traditional manufacturing has meant that people now commute further and cycling to work may be less viable for many. The most recent National Travel survey (DfT 2006) showed levels of cycling had declined further from 1.6% of all trips to 1.3% between 1995 and 2005 whilst car journeys rose from 39% to 42%. Only 15% of these trips are for commuting and on average only £1 is spent per head of population on cycling infrastructure in the UK compared to £5 on average in Europe (Martens 2004).

An attitudinal survey in Scotland showed the main reasons for not cycling were the number of cars on the road and inconsiderate driving (TPRG 2005). Rising levels of car traffic increase the perception that roads are dangerous for cyclists. This is why journeys associated with the school run have increased

whilst over the same period the numbers of children cycling to school has declined (Cycling England 2007).

Investment in cycle lanes and traffic calming measures has never been a high priority of government although there have been some recent moves to remedy this. A national cycling network of over 12,000 miles now exists through the work of the charity Sustrans however this is mainly used for leisure activity. Although now long distance links are in place, the focus has shifted to improving links within local communities which may benefit commuters. London has seen rapid growth in cycling kilometres in recent years mainly due to the introduction of the congestion charge and a further investment of £500 million has recently been announced (O'Hagan 2008).

### **Why Cycle?**

Every journey made by bicycle rather than a non-human powered means of transport saves energy and reduces urban pollution. A 10-fold increase in cycling could cut carbon monoxide by  $\frac{3}{4}$  million tonnes and prevent 160 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> being emitted (Cavill and Davis 2007). Air pollution from transport is responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in European countries (Woodcock et al. 2007).

In a country where sedentary lifestyles are becoming the norm and obesity is on the rise, cycling can be of enormous benefit to an individual's health (Cavill and Davis 2007). A Danish epidemiological study of cyclists showed direct evidence that "those who did not cycle to work were likely to have a 39% higher mortality rate than those who did" (Cavill and Davis 2007). Gorman et al (2002) showed the importance to health of a good cycling network in a town such as Edinburgh especially for those living in deprived areas of the city. Despite fears of safety whilst cycling the health benefits such as increased longevity far outweigh the negative aspects.

### **Is the government doing enough?**

The Conservative government's National Cycling Strategy (DfT 2006) aimed to quadruple the number of journeys by bicycle between 1996 and 2012, a target which has failed miserably. While this policy was in place the government were also embarking on a large trunk road building programme, privatising local bus services and dismantling the national rail network; not a good way of improving the environment in which to cycle.

A recent major study into the UK's transport infrastructure placed little value in cycling and walking saying they were "insufficient to tackle the scale of the transport challenges facing growing and congested urban areas" (HM Treasury 2007). Despite this, the Labour government has published several policy documents in the last 2 years and more funding is now being allocated to cycling (DfT 2008a, DfT 2008b, Cycling England 2007). 'Cycling England' was created in March 2005 with the simple aim of getting "more people cycling". (Cycling England 2007). Initially they were given £5 million a year but in 2008 this was increased to £140 million over a 3 year period. This is a large increase but needs to be viewed against the £5.1 billion cost of widening a section of the M1 motorway (Woodcock et al. 2007).

Part of the mandate of Cycling England was to create six cycling demonstration towns (Dft 2008a) in which more money is invested per head of population than the current UK average; an increase from around £1 to £5. Although the full monitoring results are not yet available, initial findings show participation in cycling has increased (Dft 2008a). Emphasis is also being placed on getting young people trained to cycle confidently as part of the "Bikeability" scheme; a modern day Cycling Proficiency test. Schools will also be expected to have a travel plan and improved cycling facilities with the aim of reducing the number of parents driving their children to and from school by 5% by 2012 as well as increasing confidence in cycling (Cycling England 2007).

The "All Parliamentary Group on Cycling" is the voice of cycling in parliament but there have only been 2 debates on cycling in Parliament in the last 3 years. A Sustainable Transport debate in 2007 (Hansard 2007) discussed the major differences between the UK and other countries. In Denmark 35% of people arriving at train stations do so by bicycle whereas in the UK it is 2%. To put the differences in perspective, there are only 30 bicycle spaces at the new Eurostar station at St. Pancras in London.

Ministers seem to understand the concerns but do not appear to be promising any major changes. There is also a problem in that each local authority seems to give a different level of emphasis to cycling at the moment. Even Cycling England's own "Bike for the future II" document admits that at policy level there is still a barrier to entry for cycling which will have a profound issue on growth (Cycling England 2007).

### **Is Europe a cyclist's paradise?**

Across the channel, there has always been a greater interest and promotion of urban cycling with a greater emphasis on investment. In Holland and Denmark, more than 20% of urban journeys are made by bicycle and the infrastructure has been built up and maintained over the last 30 years despite mass motorisation (Buis 2000). A bicycle culture has been created where it is not uncommon to see executives or government ministers using a bicycle as their primary form of transportation. In the UK this could be seen purely as a gimmick. In the media, the cycling habits of David Cameron and Boris Johnson are generally viewed as "eccentric" rather than the norm.

Expertise gained from improving cycling as a means of transport in the Netherlands is now being exported to other countries across the globe through the work of the non-governmental organisation, Interface for Cycling Expertise. They aim to show how planning transport systems for other users and not just cars can remove the attitude that bicycles are not "backward" and just for the poor (Buis 2000). The focus needs to be on providing infrastructure and provision for cycling both on and off the road otherwise people will think of it as an inferior form of transport.

On a personal level, the author visited Freiberg in Germany as part of a field trip in October 2007 and was amazed at the difference in the infrastructure compared to the UK. There were hundreds of kilometres of dedicate cycle paths, secure bicycle parking for literally thousands of bikes within an

integrated transport system. 19% of journeys in this city are made on bike despite only 1% of transport funds being spent on the infrastructure (Brown 2008).

Integration with public transport is an extremely important way of improving journeys by bicycle. Martens (2004) showed that bike-and-ride systems in both Holland and Germany allowed commuters to cycle from home to a train station quickly and easily. This sort of short journey combined with train transport gives flexibility and can be quicker than car travel. The lack of integration in the UK is startling especially given the fact that 60% of the UK's 22 million bike owners are within easy cycling distance of a train station but only 1/15<sup>th</sup> of these are within walking distance (Hansard 2008). With even a meagre amount of investment in cycle parking and education, a large number of journeys could be started by bicycle.

Despite much better provision for cyclists, European towns should not be viewed as a utopia for cyclists. Even in these cycling towns, around half of journeys still use cars. However the trend to cycle is still on the rise and is likely to continue in the face of increasing petrol prices and effort to "force" people out of their cars.

### **Four wheels good, two wheels bad?**

The car industry is very powerful and has spent decades marketing the idea of personal, safe, convenient transportation using the motor car. Despite high levels of cycling during childhood, most are quick to start using a car once in their late teens. Bicycles are not taken seriously in this country as a form of transport and those who use them may be seen as "greenies" or "hippies". There is a status issue here and attitudes like this are very hard to break.

Fear of injury or death from cycling is a factor that puts people off from getting back on the saddle, but statistics actually show a drop in cycling related deaths and injuries between 1991 and 2004 (Dft 2008a). Recent studies have shown that safety in numbers is an important factor; once more people start cycling, the visibility and numbers make people more confident and drivers more aware.

There are of course many other reasons for not cycling. The terrain can play a large part in cycling take-up. Some towns and cities are much flatter than others, as seen by far greater numbers of cyclists in towns like York, Oxford and Cambridge; although high student numbers may also be a factor here (Martens 2004). The UK's maritime climate is also an issue. A Scottish survey reported that the main barrier to cycling was the weather (Gorman et al. 2002). Bergstrom (2003) showed a drop in cycling during a Swedish winter by nearly half. Although British winters are neither as cold nor snowy as Sweden, climatic differences are a factor. There is a hard-core of cyclists who will cycle in all weathers but even if we were to see a big shift in cycling on pleasant days, what happens on a wet morning when everyone shifts their journey to car or public transport needs to be considered.

There are also issues of gender and cycling. Females are less likely to cycle in countries like the UK where there are low levels of cycling (Garrard et al. 2007). Although we have mentioned that safety and injuries whilst cycling are not as

bad as people think, psychologically it still plays a part. Garrard et al (2007) showed that women were more likely to agree with the statement that "aggressive drivers put me off walking or cycling". There is also an age factor to be considered. Over 50% of those aged over 65 gave their age as a reason why they didn't cycle. However in some circumstances cycling may be easy for the body than walking.

### **A brighter future?**

One recent success from 2007 was the launch of city rental bikes in European cities such as Paris (Brown 2008). Subsidised by advertising revenue, the 20,000 bikes are available from 1,450 docking stations across the city and are free for the first 30 minutes. Jack Oortwijn (2008) described this as a "worldwide revolution for bikes". Despite his bias as being editor of a bicycle trade journal, he sees a renaissance for the bicycle industry as transport pollution and climate change become increasingly mainstream issues. The idea is that once a critical mass of cyclists appears on the streets, other road users are more aware of them. London is going to be the first city in the UK where a similar scheme will appear in the next few years (Russell 2008).

The days when building roads to achieve economic growth are hopefully consigned to the past as government now appears to understand the environmental externalities and costs associated with transport. Congestion costs the UK around £8 billion in lost GDP every year (HM Treasury 2007) and costs to the NHS are now also being factored into policy decisions. The benefit/cost ratio of cycle investment has been estimated at 3.2 (Dft 2008a) which compares well with other types of transport infrastructure.

For most of the last century, the road was the domain of the motorcar but the recent Manual for Streets (DfT 2007b) has been used to focus design of residential areas on pedestrians and cyclists first. Shared spaces have been used in London and Brighton to show how the street can be a place for all users, not just cars. The government is also pushing ahead with eco-towns in which there will 20mph zones throughout and most facilities will be within 10 minutes walk or cycle (DfT 2008b).

Increasing petrol prices may be making people consider the car journeys they make, but it will require foresight and planning to achieve significant reductions in journeys made by car. Transport was the only sector where CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were higher in 2007 than 1990 (Brown 2008). As Brown (2008) points out, a country with a well developed transport network supplemented by a good proportion of journeys taken by bike or on foot is much more resilient in the face of increasing oil costs. This is an area in which the government still appears to be failing.

## **Conclusions**

Government has always seen the bicycle as a second-rate form of transport, a policy which is now only slowly starting to change through the creation of organisations such as Sustrans and Cycling England. However despite some funding there is still a lack of money when compared to other transport infrastructure projects such as the building of trunk roads. Previous attempts by governments to improve the numbers of cyclists have failed, so they do not have a good track record of turning policy into reality.

It is not just a shift in government policy but social and cultural changes are needed to increase the proportion of cyclists on our streets to anywhere near European levels. This will require both infrastructure to be in place and for attitudes of both cyclists and other road users to change. Cycling does not just benefit an individual's health but also the local environment.

With the creation of new eco-towns and new design guidelines for residential areas, we may start to see a step-change in our whole transport infrastructure. If we do not prepare for rocketing oil prices our economic resilience may be tested.

## **Limitations and Wider Context**

During the research, I found that a large proportion of the documentation found was government policy documents and there was a real lack of impartial third party material. There also appears to be a lack of UK specific studies on cycling habits. Also it was impossible to find studies on perceptions of car drivers which I think would have been useful to see if the usual stereotypes are true and why this is the case.

Getting people out of their cars and cycling is one of the cheapest ways of getting fit and active. More needs to be done in educating not just school children but the wider population. The attitudes of parents may be the hardest to change but this will be crucial in improving the numbers cycling. Local Authorities need to be aware that improving cycling provision and infrastructure is a cheap and economic way to reduce congestion and improve the local environment.

Western governments are not sending the correct message to developing countries where car usage is increasing dramatically. China and India in particular have a burgeoning middle class and the bicycle is increasingly seen as a means of transport for the poor. Cars are seen as a status symbol despite the damage they can cause to society. Car usage is currently predicted to increase 15-fold in China by 2037 (Brown 2008). As oil resources become scarcer and more expensive, retaining a cycling infrastructure may be one of the most important things these countries can do.

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