



Cycling Towns today

England's Cycling Demonstration Towns have seen cycling levels rise by 27%. But there's much more to be done, say CTC Right to Ride representatives

Boost investment in cycling and you'll get bums on bikes. That was the theory behind the Cycling Towns project, which was the brainchild of Cycling England, the Government's advisory body on cycling issues. When they started five years ago investment in cycling amounted to little more than £1 per person per year across the UK. Other parts of Europe, meanwhile, had achieved huge increases in cycling through sustained investment in cycling at around £5-10 per person – for decades. Cycling England decided to channel much of its original budget into just six towns to see whether heavy investment in a few areas could replicate the growth rates seen elsewhere.

The towns – Aylesbury, Brighton and Hove, Darlington, Derby, Exeter and Lancaster with Morecambe – spent around £10 per person per year in cycling. The results have been impressive: an average 27% increase in cycling at a time when cycling levels have been static in similar towns. This equates to an annual increase of 4% over the last five years – about the same as that achieved in leading German

and Danish cycling towns during the 1980s and 1990s.

In Summer 2008 the Government announced that the programme was being extended to 11 more towns, and one cycling city, namely Bristol (the full list and further background is at www.cyclingengland.org.uk). Some of these towns, such as Sefton and Colchester, made a feature of their partnerships with CTC as part of their successful bids – e.g. through our Cycling Champions and Workplace Challenge programmes – and our newly appointed Bike Club officers are now active in several others.

Yet despite the positives, we still need to keep a watchful eye on how the Cycling Towns are progressing. After all, if we want to make the case for greater investment in cycling, then the last thing we need is for this initial funding to be spent on ill-considered projects which fail to deliver the promised benefits.

CTC's Right to Ride representatives are providing a vital 'on the ground' reality check in many of the Cycling Towns. In general they are pretty happy with at least some of what has been delivered, even if by no means all of it. They tend

(Above) Brighton's Madeira Drive cycle track looks nice but isn't essential: it's next to a quiet road. And it can be closed off

to favour 'smarter choices' type projects – i.e. those aimed at influencing attitudes and behaviour and giving people an opportunity to give cycling a try. These include cycle training, individualised marketing and promotional events in schools and workplaces, many of them undertaken by CTC and other local or national voluntary sector groups. Yet even in these Cycling Towns, CTC's campaigners are often still critical of poorly designed cycling schemes, the unwillingness of traffic engineers to listen to their input, and particularly the lack of political will to tackle the root causes of the problems cyclists face: too much traffic travelling too fast.

We invited some of our Right to Ride reps to provide three different local perspectives. This is what they said.

LANCASTER AND MORECOMBE: MATT HODGES

Lancaster and Morecambe are two towns divided by a four-mile traffic jam but joined by the Greenway, a high quality railway path. Cycling is the quickest way between the two centres and there were plenty of cycle commuters before the Cycling Towns project began. But the city centre was not cycle friendly. It had a large pedestrian area from which cyclists were excluded, surrounded by a very busy and intimidating gyratory system.

The major obstacle to getting more people cycling is the fear of cycling on the roads with fast motor traffic. Tackling this has been the great missed opportunity – not for want of trying. The city council asked for city-wide 20mph speed limits on all residential roads but this has been consistently blocked by county highways.

Better cycle path provision

As for the city centre, only now, in the fifth year of the project, have any significant improvements been made with cycle lanes and vehicle lane realignment on parts of the gyratory. These improvements should have been made two or three years ago.

We have just got one pedestrianised street on the edge of the pedestrian area opened for cycling. We should have had the whole area opened years ago. This is a key requirement as the pedestrianised streets could provide vital links to avoid the gyratory. Sadly the support from the highway authority has been halfhearted and directed at getting cyclists onto circuitous or off-road routes.

On the plus side, the city council have backed the project to the full but have had to focus on areas that wouldn't be blocked. A new byelaw opening Morecambe Promenade to cycling has been a great success, as has the tarmacking of several miles of the canal towpath.

Improved links from the Greenway to residential areas and several short off-road links have proved popular, while better routes to the station and the provision of bike lockers have resulted in demands for more of them. The canal and a few quiet roads linked by bits of off-road track provide an almost car-free route around the city centre, but it is tortuous and highlights the fact that the roads are the vital link between homes and travel destinations.

Soft measures have played an important part, with open events, Dr Bike and women's introductory rides all helping



to raise the profile of cycling. The Bike It officer's work has generated a lot of enthusiasm, particularly in primary schools, and it seems to have succeeded in bringing some parents out on bikes. Attempts to involve major employers in supporting cycle commuting have produced mixed results.

City centre shortcomings

So, have we raised the numbers of cyclists to European levels? Not yet! There certainly seem to be more bikes about but not as many as I had hoped. Automatic counters on cycle tracks show an increase but few of the figures are strictly comparable with the baseline figures as new route options divert existing cyclists. I don't think there has been a big increase in cycling on the roads yet there do seem to be more parked bikes about.

I have been frustrated by the lack of work to improve conditions for cyclists on the roads in and around the city centre. Full opening of the pedestrian area and 20mph limits on residential streets remain distant hopes. But at last new cycle lanes are appearing and have already made a great improvement for me. They will, I am sure, help many commuter cyclists. All told, like the curate's egg, it is good in parts.

(Top) Cyclists benefit from the extra space carved out for them on Dalton Square
(Above) Cycle parking at Sainsbury's

BRIGHTON AND HOVE: BECKY REYNOLDS & TONY GREEN

Brighton and Hove city council initially obtained Cycling Town (CT) funding for 'West Brighton and Hove'. With later funding, the area was extended east to the A23, but this still excludes a third of the city.

After the news of the original successful bid, we met with council officers and agreed that the priority for action was a fast and unpleasant dual carriageway, the Old Shoreham Road. With several adjacent schools, there was good potential for cycling. Instead, plans for an expensive segregated cycle route were pushed through for Grand Avenue where no one had asked for anything! The council committee paper stated that CT funding would be jeopardised if this were rejected. So it was approved and built, and the council's Cycling Strategy was abandoned.

The Madeira Drive cycle track was also built despite the unanimous verdict by Brighton and Hove Cycle Forum against spending money there. It is a quiet road and easy to cycle on. We now have a £600,000 cycling facility, financed by CT money, with a sign to say that the track can be closed for 'events' (which happens on many summer weekends).

Bikeability and Bike It successes

There is good news too. There are several successful schemes such as Bike It (cycle to school promotion run by Sustrans), Bikeability children's cycle training, Advanced Stop Lines, on-road cycle parking and the widening/resurfacing of a section of the seafront cycle track.

New Road is hailed for its use of shared space, though cyclists must be careful to avoid pedestrians, particularly children. The road design has received transport awards, but there are concerns about how the visually impaired

cope in such an unstructured environment. It is also subject to closures.

Council cycling promotion has been extensive, with grants, free bike lights, Dr Bikes and arty cycling performances. On Car Free Day 2009, we would have liked to see restraints on car usage. Cycling was actually impeded by the closure of several small roads for events where there was 'no cycling' on Health and Safety grounds!

Buses versus cyclists

The council's transport strategy is about bus priority. Many central roads are bus dominated, and cyclists lose out to pedestrians in the competition for the space that's left. We battled to retain North Street Quadrant, a useful slip road. Despite the results of a public consultation in favour of allowing cycling, this is now being turned into an exclusively pedestrian area.

Cycling in Brighton and Hove has increased by 27% since 2006 according to automatic cycle counter data, although the data for 2006 and 2009 is incomplete. We agree that cycling is increasing, but think that demographic, economic and other influences have not been fully recognised. It is also noteworthy that the council previously stated that cycling increased by 47% between 2000 and 2005. This was before CT funding.

There are now overdue plans to improve cycling on the Old Shoreham Road. To date Portslade and Mile Oak in West Brighton have shown little increase in cycling. The difficult road conditions have not changed.

What should have been done with the funding? A city-wide speed reduction to 20mph; all relevant council and police personnel to complete a compulsory cycling awareness course; all one way streets turned into two-way cycling; and the Cycling Strategy to remain a guiding document. It feels instead as if the city council have just done what they liked.

(Below left) Cycle facilities were needed not here on Grand Avenue but on Old Shoreham Road



RIGHT-TO-RIDE HELP

CTC is looking for volunteers from the ranks of its Right-to-Ride campaigning volunteers' network to join the Right-to-Ride Advisory Group. The group oversees the development and implementation of CTC's Right-to-Ride strategy, policy, procedures and action plan, and liaises with local campaigners. Most of the work is carried out by email. Contact Alec McCalden on 01483 238 323, righttoride@ctc.org.uk. For more, see www.ctc.org.uk/righttoride/remit





BRISTOL: STEVE KINSELLA

Stand at the city centre at 5:00 pm as the commuters and students fly down steep Park Street, and you can see that compared with many towns Bristol has lots of cyclists.

So what do they think of the £22million, two-and-a-half year Cycling City project for Bristol and part of South Gloucestershire? The first thing people mention is the increase in cycle parking. They welcome the news of forthcoming 20mph areas. A few may have seen publicity for cycling, such as the traffic information signs proclaiming 'GIVE CYCLISTS SPACE'. There are more children on bikes – perhaps some of the 9,000 children trained under the project.

Battling Highway Engineers

Bristol's executive member for transport and sustainability, Councillor Dr Jon Rogers, and senior officers, clearly show a commitment and desire for an environment that matches Continental 'cycling cities'. But 50 years of putting the car first have taken their toll, and car-centred attitudes prevail in the highway engineers' workplace. Consequently the ideas put forward by cycling officers and campaigners have been eroded because priority is given to 'keep the motor traffic flowing'.

Infrastructure for cycling is still seen as the means of getting cyclists out of the way, and the fundamentals that benefit cycling – car restraint; lower traffic speeds; continuous smooth routes with no stops or give-ways; conformity with National Standard cycle training practice; and a legible signing system – are yet to be given priority.

So far infrastructure work consists of improvement schemes selected because they were do-able in a short time. One short off-road path has been completed, and some 24 schemes are to be finished by Spring 2010. We are hopeful that an initiative to incorporate cycle friendliness in the design of the Greater Bristol Bus Network will mean improvements on main roads.

If proposals for two 20mph areas (about 8% of the total

urban area) pass the formal consultation stage, they will represent a major success for campaigners. Initially, the plans included only narrow streets where speeds are already low, but campaigners rallied to back Dr Rogers' support for including streets where lower speed would really make a difference.

Volunteers are best value

Ironically, the things that have inspired some people the most are elements that encourage volunteer work and cost the least. Cycle Bristol CTC's successful Get Gorgeous rides were assisted by a few hundred pounds' worth of publicity. Similarly, Bristol Cycling Campaign's Discover Bristol rides were welcomed by the council and got some more people cycling while needing little financial help.

In 2008 the two authorities estimated that the project needed to generate between 100,000 and 150,000 new regular cyclists in order to double cycling by 2011. Progress

(Top left) New cycle parking is welcome (Above) It's the right message but the infrastructure still needs work

The things that have inspired people are volunteer led, like Cycle Bristol CTC's Get Gorgeous rides

towards this target is unknown, but there seem to be more cyclists about than a year ago.

Incomplete financial reporting makes it hard to see where the money is going. But on the whole, the Cycling City project has diluted its impact by being spread patchily over a large urban area, and by not restraining car use.

Bristol may not be much changed by 2011 but I'm hopeful that the Cycling City experience will help bring about changes in how transport is viewed, ultimately making Bristol better able to become a more civilised urban environment in the coming decade.