

FEATURE
The £42m
Question



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THE £42M QUESTION

Cities and National Parks in England are bidding for Government money. **Chris Peck** spotlights two contenders: Manchester and the South Downs

Pressure from the Times and the All Party Cycling Group – greatly aided by CTC’s campaigning – squeezed additional funds for cycling in England from the Department for Transport in 2012. One wedge – £30m – is for revitalisation of the ‘Cycling City’ programme, with another £12m to help cycling in England’s National Parks.

Bids from across England were submitted in April this year, and the winners will be announced shortly. They have 18 months to spend it: a very tight timetable when the money must be spent on infrastructure, the construction of which cannot always

be guaranteed to fit within set time constraints. Here we’ll examine a couple of possible bids, from Greater Manchester and the South Downs.

CITY CYCLING

Originally, Bristol was the Cycling City, blessed with £22m of funding from the Department for Transport to build new routes and promote cycling. Even with that money, it would be generous to say it was transformed into Cycletopia. But now a new city could receive the Cycling City title, with the strongest contender looking to be Manchester. Like Bristol, Manchester has managed to double cycle commuting in a decade, probably for similar reasons: an increase in population

and a cultural shift, linked to small, but sometimes significant, attitudes in local authorities and organisations.

An urban generation is emerging for whom car ownership is not only financially difficult, but also undesirable. For many, cycling has not just lost its social stigma, it is an aspirational as well as functional means of transport. Cities around the world are detecting the same trend and catering to this market: bright, young minds are important when your city’s economy is, as so many now are, based on creativity and culture, rather than heavy industry.

In total, 22 cities have bid, but the grant will be split among just a handful, with the bulk of the funding



Right: Paul Gregory



going to just one major conurbation: Manchester, Birmingham or Leeds. Unlike its predecessor programme, which ran from 2006-2011, and which was covered in a previous article (Cycle Oct/Nov 2012), this 'Cycling City' fund will have a much shorter time scale. It still requires cities to produce a strategy that articulates their longer term ambition for cycling.

MANCHESTER UNITED

Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) only received overall responsibility for cycling across the 10 councils of the conurbation in 2011, and they are now on a bit of a roll when it comes to acquiring funds. They have already received two large sustainable transport grants from the DfT, around £15m or so of which is already going on cycling over three years, with the first projects – high quality secure cycle parking facilities – already in place.

Initially, the focus is very much on central Manchester and the construction of 'segregated spokes'

In the photos
1 Manchester will focus on radial cyclepaths
2 £30 million is little compared to £1.5 billion for the tram network
3 Manchester now. Take care in the wet!
4 Secure Cycle Hubs have arrived
5 Towpaths form part of Manchester's existing segregated network

from surrounding areas in order to relieve road and public transport congestion. These routes would be suitable for 'anyone aged 8-80' not just 'lycra-clad commuters' – an echo of Boris Johnson's recently announced £913m plans for new routes in London.

Nick Vaughan, Head of Transport Planning at Transport for Greater Manchester, explains. 'We took the view to focus our efforts initially on where we were strongest – within the M60 ring, where there are 850,000 people living, many of whom are students.'

But in following years they want to turn their attention to similar networks in other areas of the conurbation – sketching out similar radial commuter routes for other regional hubs like Bolton and Bury. There they must also target a different demographic: the population in the wider region is aging, whereas in central Manchester the average age is falling. Nick Vaughan points out that across Greater Manchester 800,000 people commute by car, compared to just 24,000 by bike. Thirty per cent of those car commutes are 5km or less: if just one in ten of those short car commuters could be persuaded to shift their habits, cycle commuting numbers would double.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE LINES

Local campaigners – such as the Greater Manchester Cycling Campaign and Pete Abel of Love Your Bike, a Friends of the Earth local campaign group – have been lobbying to ensure that the bid is ambitious. Pete Abel has some praise for TfGM's performance on cycling: a good new bus and bike corridor, with cycle tracks and restricted motor traffic, is currently out for consultation, following advice from Dutch cycling experts. However, he is concerned that many of the councillors from the 10 local councils that control TfGM are dismissive of cycling: 'They are mostly aged 60-plus and think transport is buses, train and trams; they don't do bikes.'

The change to adopting segregated facilities rather than promotion also reflects the move – across Britain – to learn lessons from how our European neighbours have achieved steady growth in cycling. Manchester has established close ties with Berlin, where cycle use increased from 6% of trips to 13% over the last decade or so. In its strategy, Manchester aims for 10% of trips to be made by bike by 2025 (in line with the Get Britain Cycling report recommendation), with an ambition to continue spending at £10m per year over the >

“THE NEW CYCLE ROUTES WOULD BE SUITABLE FOR ‘ANYONE AGED 8-80’ ”



> next decade or so, if it can find the funds.

Pete notes that money for cycling, while admirable, is insignificant when placed against the £1.5bn being spent on expanding the tram network, or the £290m for a new road linking Stockport to Manchester Airport: 'We told TfGM that it's not about the availability of funding; it's about the political will to spend it on cycling.'

CHALKING UP DOWNS PLANS

At the other end of the country, and in a rather more rural setting, another bid, for around £3.8m, is from the South Downs National Park, in only its second year of existence. With almost two million people living within 5km of the Park boundary and over 46 million day visits per year – 83% of them by car – the National Park Authority is keen to maximise the use of sustainable modes to access and travel within the park.

Allison Thorpe, Access and Recreation Strategy Lead at the South Downs National Park Authority, says: 'We're talking to people about what they want and they tell us they need more family and leisure routes, and this has shaped our bid.' Their bid will turn existing bridleways and discontinuous routes into properly surfaced cycle paths. Like Manchester, they are aiming high, hoping to reach 12% of trips to work by bike in the next 20 years or so.

CTC's local campaigner Mike Ashton, who was involved in building grassroots support for a new cycle route through the South Downs, and formerly a district councillor in the area, suggests that many of the staff in the National Park Authority 'are pro-cycling and push very hard' but there are problems in the highways departments of the local authorities who must carry out the work, with some engineers unwilling to follow good design guidance.

'It's going to be up to us to keep up the pressure and ensure that highways departments do a good job,' he says.

18 MONTHS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Where both Manchester and the South Downs' bids are at greatest risk



Photo: Chris Juden

“THE £3.8M BID FROM THE SOUTH DOWNS WOULD TURN EXISTING BRIDLEWAYS AND DISCONTINUOUS ROUTES INTO PROPERLY-SURFACED CYCLE PATHS”

is in the fact that both, ultimately, depend on a mosaic of local councils working together and remaining committed to the project over such a short funding timescale. Both organisations are dependent on the local highway authorities to implement the schemes. And the funding, if secured, must be spent by March 2015.

Allison Thorpe has longer term, but as yet unfunded, plans for several new or improved routes across the Downs, the easiest ascents of which are dominated by A-roads, including possible re-openings of old railway tunnels.

'We've already been working with the local highway authorities for 18 months,' she says, 'so if we get the funding we are ready to start work.'

Even at £10 per head, per year, as suggested by the Get Britain Cycling report, 18 months of investment isn't going to create Cycletopia. In addition, all of the funding must be spent on capital, which is less effective if it isn't also linked to ongoing revenue to promote and maintain any routes built. Retrofitting of routes into existing roads or old railway alignments is a very expensive process, and acquiring land or rights of access can take years



of negotiation.

Local authorities need to know if they are going to have funding four or five years in the future before they can embark on large scale projects – something CTC has urged the Department for Transport to plan for properly. Governments don't expect local authorities to build a road in a year and a half, but somehow this is the expectation when it comes to cycle routes.

In Manchester, however, Nick Vaughan remains optimistic: 'We think we are on the point of great opportunity for cycling – now we need to draw together the things to make it happen.' 🌟

In the photos
6 The South Downs Way
7 The size of the South Downs means many councils must work together