

Isabelle Clement's handcycle

Isabelle is the Director of Wheels for Wellbeing, a partner charity in CTC's Inclusive Cycling project. She rides a power-assisted handcycle



My clip-on handcycle attaches to the front of my wheelchair. I chose it because I was looking for some way of keeping up with my four year old when we got him his first bike. I knew he'd be faster than me in my wheelchair at the local park. Compared to my wheelchair, the clip-on handcycle lets me freewheel easier and go on muddy or uneven terrain much more easily – without getting mud (or dog pool) up my arms.

I was also looking for a way to be active; I didn't want to use a mobility scooter. I am totally unспорty and get bored to tears with physio exercises. It was a revelation to discover that I could handcycle, and I've

enjoyed the endorphins produced from sustained effort.

Three years ago, I upgraded to a power-assisted version of the clip-on handcycle and became a utility handcyclist. Before that, I stuck to parks, greenways, and pavements, as much from fear as anything else. As an unfit, novice cyclist, I didn't feel confident taking to the streets of London without the certainty that I could get off quick enough at the lights, especially at the bottom of a hill with a lorry behind me! Power-assist gives me the confidence I can cycle anywhere. However, I only use the battery when I really need it, as I cycle mainly for the exercise.

Transport logistics

I cycle to work, local events, and around central London – where I can't generally find disabled parking. I don't have much time for cycling so I weave it into my life whenever I can. If I'm going to a meeting or out for a meal, I will often drive to the river, park, and then cycle the rest of the way.

When you're disabled, getting about can be a real headache, so having several travel

options is really important. It's not just how you reach your destination, it's whether you'll have what you need when you get there. I can't ride a one-piece, sporty handcycle to a meeting as then I wouldn't have my wheelchair. And I can't cycle somewhere unless I can store the handcycle attachment securely or go indoors with it. That – like riding on pavements to get into buildings – is seldom a problem.

I have cycled inside some amazing places because people can see my cycle is my mobility aid: the House of Lords and the Dutch Embassy, for example. Others, who use tricycles or standard bicycles as mobility aids, are often not so lucky. Several disabled cyclists have been told: 'You can't cycle here. And anyway, if you were really disabled, you wouldn't be on a bike, you would be in a wheelchair!' To be a disabled cyclist, you need to be organised, assertive and a bit of a lateral thinker! This is why Wheels for Wellbeing is helping disabled cyclists to connect with each other.

Disabled cyclists seem somehow to threaten the stereotype of what disability is. We are so *not* expected to cycle that if we do so, we somehow turn, in some people's minds, into benefit cheats who should either stop pretending or stay at home and be properly sad and dependent...

In 2012, Transport for London found that whereas 22% of non-disabled people in



“I have cycled inside some amazing places; people can see my cycle is my mobility aid”

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“We need to stop thinking that cycling on roads is just for sporty people in lycra”

the capital cycled for transport, only 9% of disabled people did so. I believe that this is mainly due to the general perception that if you can't cycle on two wheels, you can't cycle, which is far from the truth. It is partly because people don't know where to go to find advice about finding the right solution.

Changing old attitudes

It's not just about mechanical solutions, however. For transport cycling to become easier for disabled cyclists, we need a revolution in attitudes to cycling, nothing less. This isn't just about disabled cyclists; it's about the place of cycling in the UK's psyche. We need to stop thinking that cycling on roads is just for sporty, adrenaline-pumped people in lycra. I constantly get asked 'How fast do you go on this?' I have no idea how fast I go and I don't care! And when people realise I have power-assist, they often say 'Oh well, that's cheating then.' How is it cheating when it means I get to exercise so much more? Long term, I will be saving the NHS a significant amount of funding. Does that make me a lesser cyclist?

We need to be a lot less macho about cycling. I don't cycle to keep up with courier cyclists; I cycle to get exercise, to listen to the birds, and to feel happier. Once we start thinking about transport cycling being for all, from little children to elderly people, and for all kinds of journeys, we will make sure that the infrastructure is welcoming for us all. For everyone to cycle, we need infrastructure

that is built around wider and longer cycles – tandems, tandem trikes, handcycles, trailers, cargo-cycles, etc. And we need to flush out apparently acceptable anti-cyclist attitudes. It's not okay to 'hate cyclists'.

Having said that, handcycling does generate positive reactions. I love it when people go 'wow!' as I cycle past, or when kids say 'Mum, I want one of those!' I love my route to work too. Most mornings, I take in Brockwell Park, Brixton Market, and lots of back streets rather than the bus/car park that Brixton Road is in the morning. Though I'm cycling in inner London, I meet coots and ducks along the way, children on their way to school, dog walkers... I smell flowering lime trees in the spring and get to admire the seasons as they change. You don't get that in a car or on a bus. ●

For more about Wheels for Wellbeing, see wheelsforwellbeing.org.uk



Tech spec: Isabelle's power-assisted handcycle

This probably makes me a lesser cyclist in the minds of some 'proper' cyclists, but I have little clue about the bits it's made of.

MODEL: Cougar, by Team Hybrid **FRAME AND FORK:** no idea **WHEELS:** it's only got one; the other two are my wheelchair wheels. **GEARING:** it's got 7, Shimano I think... **BRAKES:** standard bike brakes **STEERING & SEATING:** seating, my Cyclone wheelchair; steering, no idea. **ACCESSORIES:** fluorescent pink Cyclone wheelchair.

Dan Joyce adds: I'm pretty sure Isabelle's handcycle attachment is a Cougar Ez Pedelec 7-speed, which costs £2800. See teamhybrid.co.uk for details.

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