



ARTICLE FROM THE BOOK:

Cyclists & Cycling Around the World – Creating Liveable and Bikeable Cities

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Cycle Route Networks – Sustrans creates popular cycle routes through public involvement

By Tony Russell, Sustrans, England

Introduction

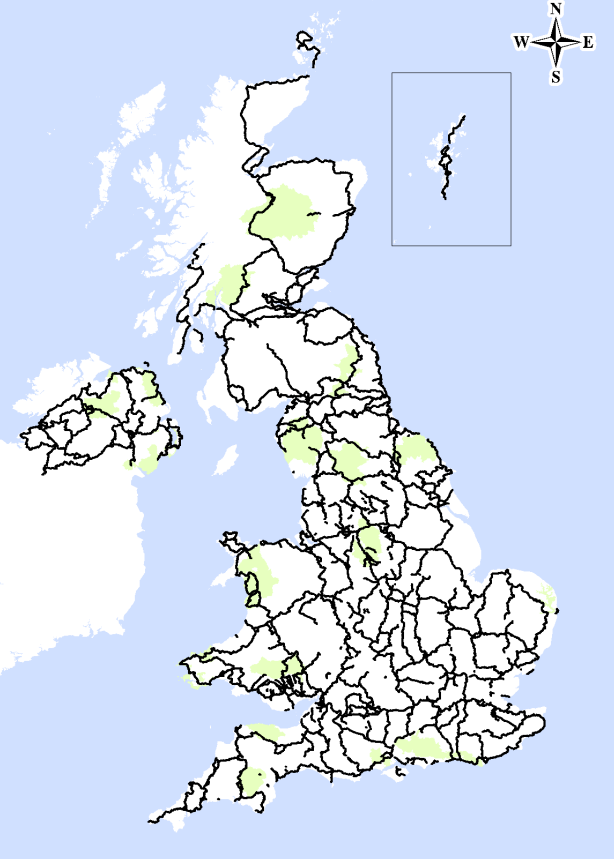
For many years, cycling in the UK declined as car traffic increased and the government saw no reason to attempt to reverse this trend. It was only in the mid-1990s that the many benefits of cycling were recognised by the government and steps taken to encourage it.

Even so, since then provision for cyclists in most of the UK has been largely piecemeal and opportunistic and, with some notable exceptions, has attracted low levels of investment. This has resulted in routes being discontinuous with gaps where satisfactory provision could not be easily achieved, and levels of cycling remaining low – at around 2% of journeys.

In this context, the development of a National Cycle Network (NCN), coordinated by Sustrans (a sustainable transport non-governmental organisation), was seen as a catalyst to promote more cycling – as a strategic initiative to raise the profile of cycling at the national level and to demonstrate the quality of provision required at the local level.

For experienced cyclists, almost all the highway network is available for use. However, many roads are not suitable for the less confident cyclist due to the speed or volume of motor traffic unless a degree of segregation is provided. Thus, whilst many quieter roads are suitable for cycling, considerable investment and political will is required to link these into a coherent network of routes that are safe, convenient, direct, continuous and attractive.

In discussing cycle route networks, this chapter briefly outlines the development of the NCN and its importance for route development at the local level. It then focuses on some particular features of the NCN that are seen to have contributed to its success.



A strategic intervention:
National Cycle Network map of UK
Graphic: Sustrans

The national network as an exemplar project

In 1995, the National Cycle Network was launched in the UK and is now over 21,000 km in length; about 30% of it is along routes free from motor traffic, with the remainder being on public highways. Its heaviest use is within urban areas, where it is generally signed through the town / city centre - passing within 1.6km of 55% of the population. Several of the NCN routes are also designated as EuroVelo routes, part of a network of long distance cycle routes across Europe.

From its earliest days, the NCN was always conceived as a strategic initiative to raise the profile of cycling at the national and local level, as well as providing a place where both adults and children could learn to cycle. As such it has provided an important mechanism to engage with government more widely than just transport departments, in particular with health and education.

The NCN has been developed through several hundred separate projects under the coordination of Sustrans. Partnership working has been fundamental to this, embracing local and central government along with a wide range of other public sector, private sector and non-governmental bodies.

Within built up areas, national routes provide direct access to residential, commercial, retail, education and employment areas forming part of the local cycle network.

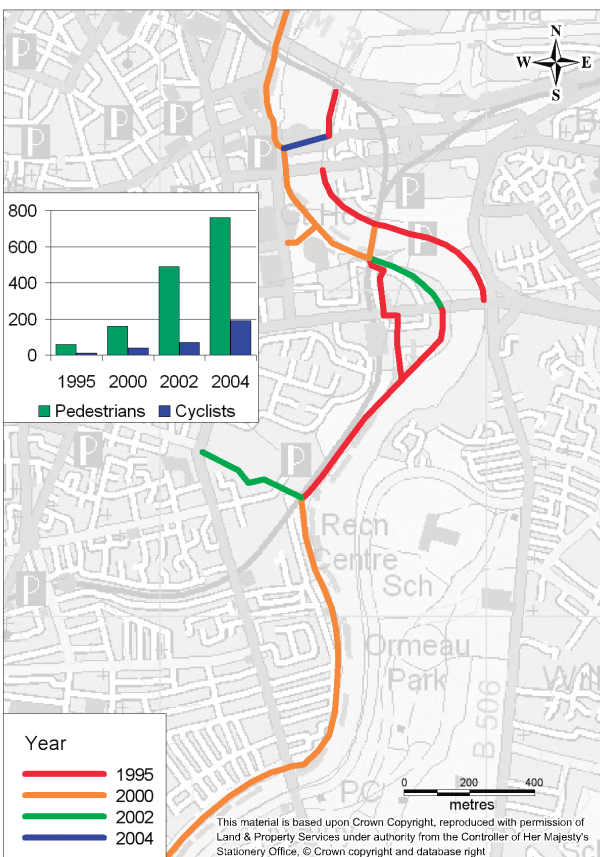
Outside these areas routes are aimed mainly at touring cyclists with others linking small rural settlements to each other. Some of the recreational routes bring substantial economic benefits to the areas they pass through.

In order to provide the appropriate physical environment to achieve the goal of encouraging more cycling, Sustrans published design guidelines (Sustrans 1997). These call for NCN routes to be suitable for use by a less confident adult cyclist, a family with young children or a sensible, unaccompanied twelve-year-old. Routes should be of a particularly high quality and be:

- safe, continuous and attractive to encourage new cyclists
- useful for all manner of routine journeys for local people and existing cyclists
- so memorable for visitors and tourists that people starting with a recreational trip are persuaded to cycle more

Longer sections of traffic free route can serve as an attraction in their own right, providing a safe environment where novices can develop confidence before cycling in a highway environment.

Developing links onto an NCN route is seen as critical for increasing its level of use. The graphic below illustrates how, in the city of Belfast, usage of the NCN has increased as more connections have been provided into the surrounding areas.



Total usage of the NCN has increased year on year, and in 2011 Sustrans recorded its biggest ever growth in the number of people cycling on the NCN – an 18% increase.

Art and the travelling landscape

A key aim of the NCN is to popularise cycling in the UK, and the Art and the Travelling Landscape programme enhances the experience of using the route, through artwork and careful design. The programme is based on 20 years of experience in pioneering and commissioning innovative art in public places across the UK, and reflects the enthusiasm, interest and commitment to enhance the Network. Sustrans works with local partners and communities to enrich the walking and cycling travelling experience, making the journey as memorable as the destination.

Many projects have involved working with local children on a series of practical art workshops, perhaps taking them to visit the path and the artist's workshop during the fabrication process. The children may collect information to highlight the significance of a new feature on an important local walking and cycling route, and also to nurture a sense of care and ownership for the surrounding area. They learn to value the experience of slower travel – “when walking or cycling you get to see more. It all just zooms by when you're in a car”.

During one evaluation of artworks along a route by a group of young people, they were especially attracted to works that were interactive, large scale, and colourful and also works that had meaning and references:

- (I like art you can) “play with and learn stuff”
- (it was) “huge, massive, go under it so you're involved”
- (to question about what would attract from a website) “would go and see fish and pencils because they're big”
- (it) “had deep meaning, gives insight into what it used to be here”

In developing the Network, Sustrans has worked with around 100 artists to create over 90 artworks along 14 unique and memorable outdoor linear art galleries that tell people something about the areas they are passing through as they travel along the Network.

Local networks as part of an integrated strategy

Sustrans has always intended that the NCN should stimulate local authorities into creating their own local networks. Indeed, more recent Sustrans programmes focus on completing local links of comparable standards (Sustrans 2009).



A "travelling landscape": public art can enhance the experience of using a route
Photo: Kai / Sustrans

Local cycle network development took a step forward when, in 2005, the government established Cycling England, a non-governmental public body set up to support cycling with the aim of getting more people cycling, more safely, more often. Between 2005 and 2011, Cycling England funded a programme of Cycling Demonstration Towns. The underlying principle of this programme was to demonstrate that, with funding levels of between £10 and £20 per head per year – not untypical in countries with high levels of cycling – substantial sustained year on year growth in levels of cycling could be achieved. Monitoring of the programme has shown encouraging results, with growth rates comparable to other places that have achieved large increases in cycling.

The bulk of this funding went in to improving and extending the existing cycle networks in each town, which in many cases had been little more than the NCN routes. From the outset, Cycling England recognised that this should form part of a much wider strategy that integrated these infrastructure improvements with a wider range of complementary, or "smarter choices", interventions backed up by a strong commitment by senior officers and elected members.



Improved permeability: contraflow cycling
in a one-way street, Bristol
Photo: J. Bewley / Sustrans

Development of local networks

Both demand (existing and potential cyclists) and supply (the quality of existing routes and opportunities for improvements) need to be considered in the development of a local cycle network. Sometimes a useful first stage is to grade the whole of the existing road network to identify which roads are suitable for the less confident cyclist.

There is no standard methodology on how to develop a local cycle network. In some situations, particularly in smaller urban areas, it may be satisfactory to draw up a network plan using local knowledge of the main trip attractors within the area and of the existing and potential routes that could be developed for cyclists. Elsewhere, a more sophisticated approach may be appropriate, assembling data, analysing the potential market, engaging with stakeholders and auditing existing provision, to develop a network development plan and an associated marketing / public engagement strategy, as is being done in Cardiff (Cardiff Council 2011).



Raising the profile: highly visible cycle parking at key attractors, European Parliament
Photo: P. Insall / Sustrans



Effective public engagement increases the sense of community ownership of a route
Photo: J. Bewley / Sustrans

Central to the successful development of a cycle network will be an effective programme for public engagement. Sustrans has developed a range of engagement strategies for different scenarios, the most sophisticated being the DIY Streets project that brings communities together to help them redesign their streets, putting people at their heart and making them safer and more attractive places to live. It's an affordable, community-led alternative to the home zones design concept. DIY Streets was successfully piloted in eleven communities in England and Wales and is now being trialled as a larger neighbourhood-wide scheme in a London Borough.

"As a residents group, DIY Streets helped us to listen to each other. We researched, discussed, disagreed and proposed all sorts of ideas. We held our first ever street party when the project was completed and we plan to keep on celebrating our street." - local resident

Management and maintenance

The traffic free sections of cycle route, and those using former railway routes in particular, provide valuable space for biodiversity to flourish. Managing these corridors has been shown to attract greater biodiversity as a result of opening up areas that had become dark and thickly wooded strips of land especially in previously neglected urban areas. The NCN passes through some carefully managed land, to which the public now has access and can enjoy the biodiversity present.

The proper maintenance of cycle routes is essential if they are to be attractive, but poses many challenges. Sustrans set up a volunteer ranger programme as a means of maintaining the NCN and liaising with the local community along a route, in particular where Sustrans had a management responsibility or local authorities were reluctant to look after the routes. That programme now has about 3000 rangers.

Rangers are assigned a section of the NCN and undertake practical activities to help to maintain and increase usage of the Network and to encourage the community to walk and cycle more. These include basic path maintenance such as litter picking, vegetation cut backs and ensuring signing is clear and well maintained. They report any issues that they are unable to deal with so they get sorted quickly. Some Rangers act as signing champions and have a particular responsibility for ensuring that routes are adequately signed. Rangers are looked after by a Group Coordinator in each region

As one ranger says “we are especially keen to take the Sustrans message into workplaces since most work journeys are so short and could easily be made by bike or even on foot. But I will also be doing my bit to make sure the routes are well signed and looked



Volunteer rangers undertake minor route maintenance
Photo: Robert Ashby/Sustrans

after so more people can use them. I have also been encouraging our friends and family members to dust off their bikes and rediscover the road. It's taken time but I think they are beginning to take me seriously and think about the way they choose to travel in their daily routines."

The role offers challenges and rewards, as one group co-ordinator says "it's marvellous to see people out on their bikes on routes I've helped to create but there's still plenty to do. You have to try and think laterally and maybe my career has helped me do that. When you see a problem, you try and solve it."

Tony russel

tony.russell@sustrans.org.uk