



Making cycling work for women: Five steps for local authorities

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Introduction

Cycling offers healthy, affordable, emission-free transport. But women are missing out on these benefits. The latest figures for England show that men made almost three times as many cycle trips as women, traveling 4.5 times the distance.¹

Put off by fear of traffic, poor lighting and harassment, nine in ten women are afraid of cycling in UK towns and cities.² 58% of women still think their cycle journeys are limited by safety concerns and a lack of suitable infrastructure.³

Without attention to this issue, half the population risk missing out on the benefits cycling brings. And by designing with and for women, we make our streets, routes and infrastructure better for everyone.

Despite strains on budgets, local authorities can help. In this paper we set out some of the easy wins local authorities can deliver for women's safety. While significant and sustained levels of infrastructure investment are required to build high-quality, safe cycle routes and undo decades of car-centric planning, **there are things local authorities across Britain can do today.**

Threaded throughout these actions is the need to draw on women's experiences, gather data that captures how travel and experiences differ, and support the diversification of the transport workforce and councillor representation.

We set out five steps for local authorities.

1. Work out where you are

Women's voices, data and design have been historically invisible in the transport sector.⁴

There are immediate steps to take to start reversing this trend and build on the progress made as a first step:



- **Ensure your data collection enables you to understand how men and women travel differently:** including outside peak hours and purely commuter routes. Why? Women are more likely to make multi-purpose trips with caring responsibilities throughout the day and night, instead of a 9–5 commute.⁵ Capturing this data means women's travel needs come into view.

Of London's 89 cycleways, 52 have sections considered "unsafe after dark" according to research by London Cycling Campaign's Women's Network. The sections include canal towpaths and off-road routes through industrial sites or greenspaces – highlighting the "impossible choice" between a poorly lit, threatening route or a busy main road.⁶



- **Audit the sense of safety on your cycle network for women and update your plans:** conduct a social safety review of your existing and planned cycle network and set out aspirations to enhance it. To avoid busy roads, people cycling are often routed through unlit parks, along waterways or uninviting underpasses. We trade in personal safety for road safety. Routes that unlock cycling for women must be protected from traffic and feel safe from harassment or crime: well-lit, well-used and well-overlooked. This baseline is essential.⁷

"I've found that cycling in Cardiff and surrounding areas can leave me feeling isolated on some sections of the roads. I have had quite a bit of abuse from cars or vans, with drivers shouting at me and beeping their horns. It makes me think 'Yeah, this isn't the safest route I could've taken', which isn't right."

Asha, Cardiff (Walking and Cycling Index 2023)

1. Work out where you are (continued)



- **Understand whose voices input on policy development, planning and design:** Report on consultation participation from different demographic groups to understand whose voices are being heard and think about strategies to expand participation. Find ways to build gender into existing review panels, stakeholder groups and non-executive roles. Set your teams up to engage and consult widely, targeting a diversity of external views.

“...women, girls and gender diverse people have been systemically excluded from urban decision making around urban infrastructure and that their experiences and needs have therefore been ignored.”

Greater London Authority⁸

- **Light the way:** review lighting and address gaps and deficiencies. Engage women and girls to draw on lived experience to supplement technical readings. An engagement exercise with your communities could gather information on hot spots and places that are avoided after dark. Studies suggest a preference for warmer, layered lighting that avoids glare and over-lighting with good sight lines, fewer blind corners and visible building entrances.⁹

“There are cycle paths I won’t use at night. There’s one right behind my house, but I won’t go through it alone in the dark. I know I can out-cycle most people, but it’s not worth the risk. I don’t think men understand those issues we face. I don’t think the people that design cycle ways think too deeply about these issues either.”

Tina, Stevenage



2. See where operations can be tweaked

Changes in the way everyday council-run operations and asset management practices can be small but add up to a big impact on women's safety. Applying a gender lens to maintenance, enforcement and signal priorities can reveal a way forward:



- **Prioritise short trips for seasonal maintenance:** understand your current maintenance regimes and who they benefit. With women more likely to walk and travel locally, maintenance regimes should focus first on clearing and maintaining local footways, cycleways and roads. Whether its spring and summer vegetation growth, autumn leaves or winter ice and snow.

Sweden's Association of Local Authorities and Regions note that three times more pedestrians than motorists are injured in single vehicle incidents in icy conditions. The costs of the associated hospital care and lost productivity outweighed those of winter maintenance 4-to-1.¹⁰ To address this, a municipality now prioritises clearing and gritting around infant schools first, female-dominated larger workplaces second, walk and cycling routes to schools third. Only when these were completed would the remaining streets be cleared – making the winter more accessible for everyone at no extra cost.¹¹

2. See where operations can be tweaked

- **Enforce against any illegal parking that blocks pavements, paths and cycle lanes:** place-based civil enforcement campaigns help to build compliance. Tackle problem parking that blocks:
 - **Pavements:** for people walking, wheeling or pushing buggies.
 - **Cycle lanes:** forcing people cycling out into an intimidating main flow of traffic.
 - **Double yellows:** blocking crossings, sightlines or routes.
 - **Zig-zag markings:** can endanger people attempting to cross, or children and families on the school run.



- **Rebalance traffic signal times:** historically, motor-traffic flows have been prioritised over people flows. Audit signal timings and frequencies across the authority to shorten crossing times for people walking and cycling. When journeys are short, long wait times reduce access and attractiveness of active travel.

Greater Manchester achieved a 12 per cent increase in pedestrian satisfaction by reprogramming lights, increasing green crossing times, significantly reducing waiting times and linking dual-carriageway or staggered crossings to work together. The only investment was officer time.¹²

3. Set up community support for success

Local Authorities play an active role in the community support that helps people to start and sustain their cycling – often involving free cycle training and pop-up repair sessions. Broadening this strategy to engage more women can achieve great results.

When Khadija began cycling on her own in Bolton in 2022, she used to go out at 5am because the roads were quiet with no traffic, making sure there was no one to beep their horns at her or judge her. Now with Cycling UK funding, she runs Big Bike Revival sessions, maintenance classes and has inspired many other women to follow suit.

- **Support ‘bike buddy’ schemes:** bike buddy schemes facilitate people in your community to support each other. These peer-to-peer support sessions can build confidence in a way formal training simply cannot.

“The maintenance session was really helpful and has given me confidence to do little things on my bike, like looking after it and fixing a puncture... The fact that the project is run by two women encourages more women to come along.”

Irene, Aberdeenshire



- **Support women’s cycling groups in the community:** community cycling groups are empowering women to take to two wheels and support each other to overcome the different barriers they encounter in everyday cycling.
- **Offer women’s cycle training:** the prospect of a women-led cycle training session can be much more attractive to women looking to boost their cycle skills knowing their trainer is more likely to relate to their experience.
- **Expand access to e-bikes and e-cargo bikes:** with women making many trips as caregivers, transporting children, food and other things, and making multiple stops along their way, e-cargo bikes offer enormous potential to boost health and cut travel costs for families. Local authorities are supporting this shift through low-cost loans, trials or try-before-you-buy schemes.¹³



4. Take small steps toward big shifts in attitudes

Starting with smaller schemes and activities can build in-house knowledge and experience, while also changing attitudes in communities toward bigger changes required to truly create a safer environment for cycling.

- **Roll out Play Streets and School Streets:** both play streets and school streets provide the opportunity to see a street and its purpose differently. While play streets offer communities the chance to take a road back for community use, school streets prioritise children's safety where drop-offs can often be fraught with dangers from traffic. Together they help communities see and feel how streets could be used differently for a short time and help us test the impacts in real life.



- **Work to stop misogyny and harassment:** clearly signal that misogyny and sexism are unacceptable, while equipping people to intervene when they see someone being made uncomfortable, harassed or in danger. Seen as a key part of a strategy to improve women's safety when out and about in public, they support women cycling just as much as women walking or taking public transport, while also enhancing social safety for those who fear harassment for their age, ethnicity, gender, disability or otherwise.¹⁴

“Some 71 per cent of women in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, with this number rising sharply to 86 per cent among women aged 18–24.”

APPG for UN Women, 2021

5. Get infrastructure investments going further

Infrastructure that enables cycling is fundamental to close the gender gap, with women expressing greater preferences for separation from motor traffic than men.¹⁵ Long-term, sustained investment in your infrastructure may be beyond the means of many authorities without third-party funding, but there are things officers can do with today's modest budgets.

- **Practical, well-placed cycle parking:** a cycle parking strategy that learns from and listens to women's experiences. This might typically see:
 - Accessible public stands around community facilities, services and local high streets and shopping parades, not just city centre spots, with space for non-standard cycles, cargo bikes and buggies
 - Well-lit and visible places that feel safe after dark
 - Secure, affordable, on-street residential cycle parking in areas where people lack driveways, garages or step-free, street-level storage
 - Planning policies that see developments delivering high-quality cycle parking

"There's nowhere really to safely lock up a bike. I would go to the shops if I had somewhere to lock the bike up."

Melanie, Essex



- **Safer 20 mph streets:** slower speed limits are proven to reduce road collisions, casualties and fatalities. After Wales introduced its 20mph default speed limit, casualties declined by almost a quarter (24%).¹⁶

London's schemes have seen serious injuries and fatalities fall by a third, including halving of the number of children seriously injured.¹⁷ In places where people live, work, study and play, 20 mph streets quickly deliver results.

5. Get infrastructure investments going further

- **Transformational Liveable Neighbourhoods:** going further than 20mph, Liveable Neighbourhoods restrict through-traffic to create calmer, safer and quieter streets. Using measures like planters, bollards, one-way systems or camera-enforced gateways, Liveable Neighbourhoods reduce motor vehicle dominance and unlock streets as calm, quiet, public places for communities. They're associated with:
 - Improved health from more active travel, particularly walking^{18, 19, 20, 21}
 - Major reductions in road-traffic injuries on affected streets, as well as no change in risk on boundary roads^{22, 23}
 - Marked reductions in motor-vehicle traffic within the areas and on boundary roads²⁴



- **People-friendly side streets:** redesigning side roads and minor junctions to reflect the new highway code – using raised table surfaces to make them accessible, tightening the corners to shorten the crossing distance and reduce driving speeds. This can be done alongside new development with planning obligations, or a rolling strategic approach with capital funding²⁵. Local authorities in Wales will soon have powers to install zebra crossings on side road junctions.

The freedom to cycle

Women deserve the freedom to cycle without fear, but too many are held back by unsafe roads and poor infrastructure.

By addressing cycling's gender gap, local authorities can unlock the benefits of cycling for everyone in their areas – quicker journeys without the carbon, more access to job opportunities without the congestion and simply fairer places to live.

My ride. Our right is calling for safer streets, better cycling networks and a transport system that truly works for women. Small changes – like improved lighting, lower speed limits and well-placed bike parking – can make a big difference.

Lead the change in your area to ensure that women not only are safe but feel safe too.

Contact Cycling UK or your local cycling advocates to discuss this further: campaigns@cyclinguk.org

Map of volunteer local representatives: cyclinguk.org/can

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