

How to encourage cycling in parks

INTRODUCTION

Parks are community spaces. They're green and usually pleasant hubs of local enjoyment, fresh air and exercise, especially in built-up areas. Parks are often the first choice for parents for family riding and particularly for training youngsters to cycle in the first place. Once children grow more independent, the park may become their favourite place to ride with their friends, and as they progress towards their teenage years, they may well search out some BMX-type challenges – official and unofficial. Then, years later, some of those who thought they had left their cycling days behind them, may be tempted to return and have a few preliminary practice sessions away from it all - in the park.

Parks have the potential to resonate with positive, encouraging – and hopefully lifelong – messages about cycling. But park cycling is not just about fun and exercise for their own sake - it's about transport and local utility trips too. Paths through parks may provide a welcome, direct and convenient interlude in a cycle-commuting or shopping journey, and may also be an obvious link in a 'safe routes to school' network.

However, parks are precious places and people are often very protective of them, and understandably so. This, combined with concerns about loss of tranquillity and predictions that walkers, picnickers, children and duck-feeders will all be put at risk by fast moving, reckless cyclists, can make park cycling a highly contentious local issue. So, creating a cycling route, or persuading the park authority and council to remove a ban and the public to support the move, is not always easy.

Before we start, however, it is worth noting that park routes should never be seen as the panacea for all urban cycling problems. However useful and attractive they are likely to be, they should not be allowed to distract or detract from all feasible efforts by councils and campaigners to improve on-road conditions for cyclists on alternative routes outside the park, which people may still have (or prefer) to use.



THE CHALLENGE

Our local campaigners tell us that these are the main challenges they face:

- Natural resistance from representatives of walking groups or those with disabilities (particularly people with impaired vision or hearing);
- Fears that cycling will lead to loss of tranquillity or present hazard to other users;
- Pedestrians and dogs straying into the path of cyclists;
- Inadequate width; unsuitable surfacing (perhaps due to poor workmanship by contractors or because the chosen materials are not cycle-friendly);
- Lack of maintenance (failure to sweep up broken glass or cut back vegetation etc);
- Failure to develop routes fully as logical links to popular destinations;
- Resentment over the installation of not only expensive, but excessive and visually intrusive signage/over-engineering;
- Lack of publicity leading to poor understanding of rights and codes of behaviour on shared use routes;
- Opening and closing hours that reduce the usefulness of a cycling route at peak times.

IDEAS INTO ACTION

• **Get help**

If you are not a member of Cycling UK's local campaigning 'Right to Ride' Network, contact 01483 238323/ righttoride@cyclinguk.org.uk, to find out who your local representative is. Get in touch with him/her for advice and help.

• **Do your research**

• **Bye-laws - double-check:** a lot of work was once put into campaigning for a route across a certain park, only for its advocates to discover that they could cycle there anyway. (But don't stop there - if it's not obvious that cycling is permitted, there is probably scope for better publicity, signage and upgrading).

• **Council contacts - identify and approach:** find out which council officers/department have responsibility for Parks and if there's a 'Friends of xxx Park' group. Make sure you understand how and by whom a decision will be made and the processes involved.

• **Assess opposition/support:** write to the above plus your local councillor(s) to make preliminary enquiries and find out what they think. Their contact details will be on your council's website. Even if the council agrees with your idea in principle, you may both have to justify it to others (e.g. park users). Preparing a robust case is well advised.

• **Survey the park and your favoured route(s):** carry out an honest survey, perhaps inviting decision-makers and/or influencers to accompany you. On your site visit, don't forget to look at the whole park for its cycling potential - you may decide that it would be sensible to open up, within reason, most of the space to cyclists, not just dedicated routes. With regard to the paths, look at their good and bad points. Measure what exists against the ideals set out for shared-use routes in good practice guidelines. Look at the width, access, surrounding terrain, surface, signage requirements, etc. Assess the potential for cyclist v pedestrian collisions caused by poor visibility (shrubs, features, twisting paths); also, watch out for hazardous inclines, rivers, barriers, etc. Consider personal security issues for those using the path at off-peak times; lack of lighting,

poor sightlines etc. Think about conditions at different times of the year: if surveying in spring, imagine the autumn. If surveying in winter, predict how sightlines might be reduced when trees are full with leaves. Ice and snow could well be another problem.

- **Think about solutions:** what needs to be done to cure the problems you have identified - path widening, pruning vegetation, surface treatments, gritting in winter, new gates, toucan crossings to help people access the route from outside? Maybe encouraging increased traffic, on foot or bike, through the park could help discourage crime and reduce the fear of it? Consider the feasibility of a dedicated 'wheeled' route round the edge of the park to provide a good transport link for cyclists, skaters and wheelchairs (if there's room). This would perhaps avoid fears that cycling would disturb the park's tranquillity or put playing children or others at risk. Maybe the display of a concise 'code of conduct' for all users could help avoid unease?
- **Survey the area:** consider the surrounding roads and demonstrate the park route's importance as a link to shops/schools/workplaces etc. Look at access and exit points to the park; note down any problems (nasty junction? no dropped kerb?). Again, think about solutions.
- **Take photographs:** compile an album of images to back up and enhance your surveys. Don't confine yourself to the park – take a few persuasive photographs of cyclists trying to use an alternative route outside it, if it's a difficult or hazardous one to negotiate on a cycle.
- **Park-opening hours: check.** After dark till dawn closures, for example, won't help accommodate winter early morning/ evening rush hour.
- **School travel: assess potential.** For routes that may attract school children in particular, Sustrans may be able to offer advice on best practice etc: www.sustrans.org.uk / 0117 926 8893.
- **Council's cycling targets: read up & take notes.** Most councils have a policy to encourage and increase cycling and you should be able to use this as a basis for your own arguments. Developing and enhancing options for existing and potential cyclists should go a long way towards boosting a council's own aspirations. Ask to view the Council's 'Cycling Strategy' and their Local Transport Plan (LTP).
- **Disability groups: contact.** Find out the views of those who represent people with impaired vision or other disabilities. Detailed design considerations will be especially important to these groups. Liaise constructively and sympathetically with their representatives.
- **Case Studies: quote.** Find out about successful schemes elsewhere. Choose those that best reflect your own park's situation. Sustrans will also be able to tell you more about the numerous National Cycle Network (NCN) routes that traverse parks.



- **Surveys of public opinion: to do or not to do?** These may or not help: they may only serve to reflect a fear of sharing routes with cyclists, which is by no means always based on real experience. Take care with surveys, therefore, but do think about them and make sure they ask the right questions, maybe emphasising the fun and freedom of cycling in parks. Bear in mind that, if the Council conducts a formal survey, the results may also be skewed by misperception and prejudice.
- **Conflict research: read up & take notes.** Research studies showing that conflict between walkers and cyclists is often perceived rather than real: see our briefing *Cycling & Pedestrians*: www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/pedestrians
- **Collision statistics: read up & take notes.** Find out from the police, or local authority, what the statistics are in the area with respect to pedestrian v cyclist collisions on paths. The number of such incidents is usually negligible.
- **Benefits to community: gather evidence.** Research the strong, general case for the benefits to the community and council of promoting cycling – allowing cycling in parks would be a means to this end. See Cycling UK's briefing, *Cycling and Health*: www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/health-and-cycling

• **Marshall your arguments & make constructive suggestions**

Write a concise report detailing your research findings and recommendations. Send it to the relevant council officers and lobby your local elected councillor(s) – you should know by now who these are. In your report:

- Suggest that the Council implements a temporary, well monitored trial. Opposition often fades away once the prospect becomes reality.
- Offer to help with a code of conduct for users, e.g. stressing the need for courtesy, or asking fast cyclists either to slow down or use suitable alternative routes, inside or outside the park.
- Although most people will cycle on dedicated routes, remember to ask the Council to permit cycling throughout the park as far as is reasonable. This is less limiting to, for example, children learning to cycle (see also 'Care with bye-law wording' below).
- Above all, paint an enticing picture: commuters cycling healthily to work, children riding safely to school or even learning how to cycle in the first place; families out at the weekend on their bikes to enjoy the green space. This all adds up to more people utilising and enjoying the amenity.



- **Upon approval, monitor implementation**

Make sure that the route will benefit from:

- **Best practice path construction, in accordance with your recommendations:** this means adequate width, good, preferably bound surface on the path etc (check, for instance, whether the surface is to be upgraded and how. You won't want anything too gravelly, sticky, sandy or lumpy. Sustrans has developed guidelines).
- **Code for users:** publication of and publicity for any codes, ideally produced as a joint effort by all parties, to encourage amicable interaction between all users. Cycling UK has endorsed Sustrans' Code of Conduct for shared use routes - www.sustrans.org.uk/resources/in-the-news/code-of-conduct
- **Appearing on local cycle map(s)/leaflets.**
- **Clear signage** that makes it evident to all users that cycling is legally permitted and that everyone should be aware that the route is shared. There should also be clear route directions, with an idea of distance. *Caution:* over-engineering and over-signing may be counterproductive - people may resent the expense, the associated 'clutter' and visual intrusiveness.
- **Good, safe, signed access** to and from the route from the roads around the park.
- **On-going maintenance**, e.g. gritting in winter as part of the council's maintenance programme.
- **Sensible opening hours.**
- **Care with bye-law wording:** one London Borough, upon updating its park bye-laws on cycling, once opted for: *"No person shall without reasonable excuse ride a cycle in the ground except in any part of the ground where there is a right of way for cycles or on a designated route for cycling."* These restrictions caused difficulties for parents teaching children to balance etc., even, indeed for the Borough's own cycle preliminary roadcraft classes, because of the need for a wider training ground than specific paths. We therefore encourage local authorities encouraged to allow cycling throughout most of the park, not just along prescribed routes.

