Ten common questions about cycling, with answers

Are you ever put on the spot by someone who’s not sympathetic to cycling?
Don’t worry, we’ve compiled ten of the most common questions along with some persuasive answers.

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Q1: Cycling's far too dangerous, isn't it?
A: No, it isn't.

Cycling, in fact, reduces the chance of suffering from life-threatening diseases. Not only that, but its health benefits far outweigh the risks.

- One of the most famous statistics about the benefits and risks of cycling comes from a 1990s' calculation suggesting that the health paybacks of cycling (life years gained) outweigh its risks (life years lost) by around twenty to one in Britain.\(^1\) The ratio is probably higher nowadays, given the drop in the number of cyclists hurt per billion miles since the 1990s.
- More recently, a researcher reckoned that for urban commuters shifting from driving to cycling: “on average, the [health] benefits of cycling were about 9 times larger than the risks of cycling [...]”\(^2\)
- Physical activity in general is good for you, reducing the risk of developing serious conditions that are costly to treat, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer.\(^3\) Cycling, though, is a particularly convenient way of helping adults and children meet NHS physical activity guidelines because you can exercise at the same time as travelling around.
- A large study (2020) found that compared to commuting by car, cycling was associated with a lower chance of dying from cardiovascular disease (-24%) and cancer (-16%).\(^4\)
- Exercise also helps guard against putting on too much weight. How many calories cycling in particular uses up depends on your age, weight etc., but on average it burns around five calories a minute. It could therefore help save the NHS money – it spent around £6.1 billion treating diseases related to being overweight or obese in 2014/15.\(^5\)
- To put the risks of being injured while cycling in perspective, on average a year from 2014-2018 (GB):
  - over a distance equivalent to 1,000 journeys round the world at its widest point, one cyclist was killed and 33 cyclists killed or seriously injured.\(^6\)
  - the general risk of injury of any severity whilst cycling is just 0.05 per 1,000 hours of cycling. (Over three-quarters of these injuries are slight). \(^7\)
- Also, the more people who cycle, the safer it is likely to become (given the right conditions). One reason for the ’safety in numbers effect’\(^8\) may be that drivers grow more used to seeing cyclists about, interacting with them and sharing the space safely. They may also be more likely to cycle and have a better grasp of cyclists’ needs.

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3 https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/
7 DfT. Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, Table RAS30001 (link above) & National Travel Survey Table NTS0303.
Q2: Shouldn’t cyclists be made to wear helmets?

A: No.

Cycling UK believes it’s up to individuals to decide whether to wear a helmet – we’re pro-choice, and don’t believe in making helmets compulsory.

- The only known effect of enforced helmet laws is to substantially reduce cycling. For example, in the immediate aftermath of compulsion, cyclist numbers dropped:
  - by 60%+ in Nova Scotia, Canada
  - by 21% in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia
  - by 22% among adults and 55% among children at road intersections in Sydney, Australia
  - by 91% among girls at secondary schools in Sydney.

- You don’t have to reduce cycling by much to make serious inroads into its enormous benefits (remember that these are thought to outweigh the risks by 20:1 (Q1)). So, even a tiny drop is likely to shorten many more lives than compulsory cycle helmets could possibly save, even if they were 100% effective (which they’re not).

- Many reports find that helmet laws have failed to reduce the overall risk for people who aren’t put off cycling, and there are even cases where their safety seems to have worsened as helmet wearing rates increased.9

- It’s important not to overestimate what cycle helmets are designed to do: standards dictate that they must cater for an impact velocity of 20 km/h (12.5 mph)10, the sort of impact that cyclists may experience if, for example, they fall from a stationary bike, something that young learners might do. Helmets may also protect the head from minor knocks and scrapes (e.g. from branches). They are not, however, designed to withstand the sort of impact a cyclist could suffer if hit by a speeding car.

- To improve conditions for cycling, it makes better sense to tackle dangers at source. This means effective traffic law enforcement and driver education, 20 mph speed limits for most roads, cycle-friendly highways and junctions, plus moves to deal with the risks posed by lorries (e.g. introducing ‘direct vision’ cabs). Cycle training also helps give adults and children the skills and confidence they need to ride safely on the road.

For considerably more detail, see our formal policy and collected evidence on cycle helmets.

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9 See Appendix B of Cycling UK’s overview of the evidence on cycle helmets. 

Q3: Cyclists should all be wearing hi-vis, shouldn’t they?

A: No, not really.

If wearing a fluorescent yellow jacket helps people feel safer when they’re cycling and more willing to do it, then that’s a good thing. It is, though, hard to prove whether hi-vis makes a significant impact on safety, and there is little evidence to support the argument that it does.

- It may help drivers spot cyclists more readily – but, it seems, spotting is one thing and driving safely around them another.¹¹ One academic study, for example, found that whether a cyclist is wearing hi-vis or not makes very little difference to how closely motorists overtake them.¹²
- On the other hand, research does imply that retroreflective accessories designed to make you more conspicuous in the dark - especially ankle straps that move when you pedal - are probably worth the investment.¹³
- Contrasting colours (i.e. colours that contrast with the background) seem to make a difference to drivers’ detection of motorcyclists – e.g. riding in a black outfit against nothing other than the sky. This may be true for cyclists as well.
- Again, it is important to point out that people at the wheel of a large, heavy vehicles capable of high speeds, must be trained to spot vulnerable road users and expected to stay alert.
- It’s also important for cyclists to understand how to keep themselves within a driver’s sightline and for drivers to appreciate why cyclists need to adopt certain road positions to stay as visible as possible (e.g. when they move into the middle of the lane).
- In reported collisions involving cycles, the police allocated nearly 10,000 contributory factors to the parties involved in 2018 (GB): only half of these were all located to the cycle, and only 3% put down to ‘rider wearing dark clothing’.¹⁴

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¹¹ A review of hi-vis (i.e. fluorescent / retroreflective) found it made a difference to drivers' ability to detect and recognise pedestrians (& presumably cyclists), but it was impossible to tell by how much, and there is no evidence to show whether it makes them any safer. Kwan I, Mapstone J. Interventions for increasing pedestrian and cyclist visibility for the prevention of death and injuries. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2006, Issue 4. Art. No.: CD003438. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD003438.pub2. www2.cochrane.org/reviews/en/ab003438.html. A similar lack of detectable benefits was found by JM Wood et al, (see ref below), and Miller P, The use of conspicuity aids by cyclists and the risk of crashes involving other road users. 2012. http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/12855/.


¹³ Wood, JM et al. 2010. Perceptions of visibility do not necessarily match reality. http://eprints.qut.edu.au/38338/14 DfT, Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS50005. www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-accidents-and-safety-statistics. Note on contributory factors (CFs): CFs do not attribute blame. They are recorded by police officers at the scene of a road traffic incident, rather than the result of subsequent forensic investigation, or a court case. It is not always easy for an officer to identify exactly what happened, however, and what contributed to it. CFs, therefore, should be treated with some caution.
Q4: Cyclists cause most of the collisions involving them, don’t they?
A: No, there’s no evidence to suggest that.
Contrary to popular belief, people on bikes are less likely to contribute to a collision than most other vehicle types:

- Cycles, along with buses/coaches, tend to be the vehicle-type least likely to have ‘contributory factors’ (CFs) attributed them by the police who attend collision scenes.\(^{15}\)
- In 2018 (GB), 50% of cycles and 55% of buses and coaches had no CFs allocated to them in reported collisions that involved them. Other vehicle types ranged from 33% (motorcycles) and 46% for HGVs.\(^{16}\)

It’s worth remembering that cyclists are vulnerable road users, so drivers to act with particular care round them. Although cycling is not as dangerous as many people think (Q1), cyclists suffer more injuries per mile than people in cars. Moreover (and hardly surprisingly), cyclists are much more likely to be hurt in a collision with a motor vehicle than the driver or passenger. In GB:

- From 2014-2018, cycling accounted for only 1% of distance travelled (and 1.7% of trip stages), but cyclists represented 6% of reported road fatalities and 14.6% of serious injuries.\(^{17}\)
- In 2018, out of the 13,823 reported collisions involving a car and cycle, no car occupant died. In contrast, 99.8% of the cyclists in these collisions were injured in some way, but only 1.2% of car occupants (forty-one cyclists were killed, and 2,646 seriously injured).\(^{18}\)

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\(^{15}\) DfT, Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS50005 (link above). See: Note on contributory factors above.
\(^{16}\) DfT, Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS50005 (link above). See: Note on contributory factors above.
\(^{18}\) DfT, Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS40040 (link above).
Q5: Cyclists put pedestrians at huge risk by riding on the pavement, and cause a major road safety problem by always jumping red lights, don’t they?

A: No, they don’t

Riding on the pavement

Motor vehicles are a far bigger threat to pedestrians than cycles, even in urban areas where they most often mix. In fact, it is very rare for a cycle to be involved in a pedestrian fatality anywhere, in the road or on the pavement (footway). This is probably why it often makes for headline news when it does happen.

From 2014 to 2018 (GB), in any location (i.e. road or footway, urban and rural): 19

- Motor vehicles (i.e. car, motorbike, bus, van, HGV etc.) were involved in 99.3% of collisions in which a pedestrian died, and 97.7% of collisions in which a pedestrian was seriously injured.
- On average a year, cycles were involved in three pedestrian fatalities, and 123 reported serious injuries - or 0.7% of pedestrian fatalities, and 2.3% of reported serious injuries.

Mile for mile, pedestrians are more likely to be killed by a motor vehicle than cycle. From 2014-2018 (GB): 20

- Per billion vehicle miles (bvm) on urban roads, where cycles and pedestrians most often mix densely, cycles were less likely than any other kind of vehicle to be involved in collisions in which a pedestrian died. On average a year per bvm, they were involved in one pedestrian fatality. HGVs were by far the biggest threat (16.5 pedestrian fatalities per bvm a year).
- For every billion miles they drove, cars were involved in 2.1 pedestrian fatalities a year.

Very few pedestrians are hurt by cycles on the pavement/verge. In GB: 21

- From 2008-18, of the 29 pedestrians who were hit and killed in collisions involving cycles, just four of them happened on the footway/verge = 13.8%.
- Over the eleven years between 2008 & 2018, eight years passed where no pedestrians were hit and killed in collisions involving cycles on the footway/verge.
- From 2016-18, of the 371 pedestrians who were seriously injured in collisions involving cycles, 88 were hit on a footway/verge = 24%.

Most reported collisions on a footway/verge with a pedestrian involve a motor vehicle. In GB:

- From 2008-18 (GB), 99% of pedestrian fatalities that happened in collisions on a footway/verge involved a motor vehicle of some kind.
- From 2016-2018 (GB), 93.7% of pedestrians who were seriously injured on the footway/verge were hurt in incidents involving a motor vehicle of some kind.

Note: it isn’t possible to tell from these figures who was at fault or whether the footway had been converted to ‘shared use’.

19 DfT, Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS40004 (link above).
20 DfT: Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, table RAS30018; Road Traffic Estimates TRA0104 & TRA0402.
21 Freedom of Information requests to DfT by Cycling UK.
Red light jumping

Red light jumping is an offence, but few cyclists commit it and it isn’t a major road safety problem.

From 2008-18 (GB):\(^{22}\)

- No pedestrians were killed by red light jumping cyclists, while around four a year were killed in total by red light jumping drivers and motorcyclists.
- Cycles were involved in 4% of incidents where a driver/motorcyclist reportedly jumped a red light and a pedestrian was seriously injured. The other 96% involved motor vehicles.
- Cycles were involved in 6% of incidents where a driver/rider jumped a red light and a pedestrian was slightly injured. The other 94% involved motor vehicles.
- In 2018 (GB), nearly 10,000 cycles were involved in incidents in which a police officer at the scene assigned one or more ‘contributory factors’ (CFs) to at least one of the parties. Officers assigned 119 CFs for disobeying an automatic traffic signal to the cycle, i.e. to just over 1% of them - about the same percentage as it was for cars.\(^ {23}\)

Q6: All cyclists' behaviour is inherently awful and incurable, isn’t it?

A: No, it isn’t.

No road user group is without its minority of mavericks, risk takers and bad apples. But, as discussed in Q4 & 5 above, it is important not to exaggerate the scale of misbehaviour by people who ride bikes, or the risks cycling poses to others. It is particularly unfair to assume that all cyclists routinely disobey the law – this is simply not true. Cyclists are vulnerable, and most ride with due care and attention as a result.

If any aspect of cycling behaviour is causing genuine problems to others, though, Cycling UK believes the first response should be to find out why it’s happening. Take cycling on the pavement for example: children especially are often too frightened to ride on the road and, typically with the blessing of their parents and guardians, opt for the footway instead.\(^ {24}\)

But no cyclist should have to choose between obeying the law and keeping themselves safe.

Once the root cause has been established, it makes sense to tackle it whilst bearing in mind that cycling needs to be facilitated and welcomed, not wiped out (see Q1). Here are some ideas:

- If road conditions aren’t or don’t feel safe, improve them through good infrastructure. For example, segregated cycle lanes (see Q9 below) are enormously helpful as is phased signalling at junctions that gives cyclists time to make their manoeuvres before motor vehicles do. (One of the most commonly cited reasons for disobeying an automatic traffic signal is because it helps riders get ahead into open space before the lights turn green and motor vehicles flood onto the junction).
- Other measures to improve road conditions include effective traffic law enforcement, driver education, lower speeds and measures to reduce the risks posed by lorries.

\(^ {22}\) Freedom of Information requests to DfT by Cycling UK.
\(^ {23}\) DfT. Reported Road Casualties Great Britain, Table 50005.
\(^ {24}\) It is illegal for any bike of any size to cycle on a pavement that hasn’t been converted into ‘shared use’.
• For nervous cyclists, a ‘Bikeability’ course should help. While no substitute for the above-mentioned measures, it complements them, helping to equip both adults and children with the confidence and skills they need to ride in today’s road conditions.

• Codes of conduct help explain the best ways for everyone to share the routes available to them. Cycling UK, for example:
  
  - supports Sustrans’ advice on using shared use paths
  - constantly promotes ‘Be Nice, Say Hi!’ guidance developed with the British Horse Society on how cyclists should interact with horse riders and horses
  - publishes a code of conduct for mountain bikers
  - provides advice on safe social distancing
  - offers pages and pages of advice on safe and considerate cycling.

Q7: Cyclists ought to have compulsory training, number plates and insurance, shouldn’t they?

A: No, this isn’t a good idea at all.

In Britain, the administrative cost of making training, registration, licences and insurance compulsory for cyclists/cycles would probably be as large as it already is for drivers and cars, and a huge burden on the taxpayer. It would be an unwarranted burden too, given that cycling doesn’t figure as anything like a significant road safety problem for others (see Qs 4 & 5 above).

• The system would have to keep track of millions of cycles, either already or potentially in use (rough, conservative estimate = 25.5 million). This isn’t far short of the number of licensed private cars (= 30.5 million).
• On a practical level, cycles change owners frequently and are more likely to belong to children than to adults (unlike motor vehicles). Keeping them and their bikes registered would be a headache for all involved.

• In 2018, the Department for Transport said that the costs and complexity of requiring cyclists to have a licence or third-party insurance “would significantly outweigh the benefits, particularly the requirement for a licence”.

• The laws on vehicle registration, tax and licencing would have to be changed because they don’t cover cycles and cyclists. This would be a convoluted and lengthy process that simply wouldn’t be worth the bother.

• The bureaucracy of registration/licensing could put newcomers or occasional cyclists off cycling, hardly good news for public health (see Q1). The same goes for making cycle training compulsory (encouraging training is a good thing, though, of course - and it’s a cost-effective investment).

• In countries famed for their high levels of cycle use, cyclists aren’t tested, licensed/registered etc. Prime examples of this are the Netherlands and Denmark, where 27% and 17% of trips are cycled, respectively.

• A variety of regulatory systems have been introduced in other countries or in cities elsewhere, but subsequently abolished because of the nightmarish bureaucracy necessary and the pointlessness of it (e.g. in Toronto and Switzerland); either that, or their main aim was or is to tackle bike theft through registration (e.g. in Japan), rather than irresponsible riding.

• There’s no evidence that registration would provide any safety benefits. Having to display number plates doesn’t stop large numbers of motorists from driving illegally and dangerously and, as mentioned, motor vehicles cause by far the greatest risk. In 2018, 3,187,286 findings of guilt at all courts, fixed penalty notices and written warnings for motor vehicle offences were recorded in England & Wales. This represents, of course, only drivers who were caught and whose offences were processed.

• Cyclists are subject to certain rules and regulations anyway (e.g. on lighting), and, like motor vehicle drivers, may be charged with riding carelessly or dangerously.

• Cycling UK recommends voluntary third-party liability insurance, however, and offers it free to our members. www.cyclinguk.org/insurance

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25 https://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2019-03-18c.1282.0
27 https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/whats-legal-and-whats-not-your-bike
Q8: Cyclists should pay road tax, shouldn’t they?

A: No.

- Actually, cyclists can’t pay ‘road tax’ because there isn’t such a thing. It was abolished in the 1930s for fear that it made drivers think they “owned the road”.
- What motorists pay is Vehicle Excise Duty (VED), now a standard rate tax on a vehicle’s CO2 emissions. Cycles, of course, don’t produce any CO2, so are exempt, as are zero emission cars.
- Until April 2020, VED revenue was not specifically earmarked for roads, but it now goes into a ‘Roads Fund’ (England) to contribute to the cost of the Strategic Road Network (SRN), i.e. motorways and some A roads.28 Little cycling (only 17%) takes place on major roads and all cycling is prohibited from motorways, so expecting cyclists to contribute to them by default is hardly fair.
- Instead, 83% of cycle mileage is concentrated on minor roads, the cost of which is mostly borne by local councils.29 This means that the majority of adult cyclists help pay for the roads they are most likely to use through council tax.
- The vast majority of adult cyclists (18+) also drive (85% in England), so are likely to pay VED if they own a motor vehicle which isn’t classed as zero emission.30 The majority of cyclists therefore do contribute to the SRN. Those cyclists who don’t pay VED because they don’t own a car are still likely to pay council tax so, as mentioned, are helping to pay for the roads they are most likely to use.
- Highway maintenance is very costly, but it’s motor vehicles and not cycles that cause roads to decline into disrepair. Damage from vehicles passing over the surface is generally estimated to be proportional to the weight over the axle to the power of four. Thus, a car with 500kg weight over each axle does over 15,000 times the damage of a 90kg rider + bike.

28 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vehicle-excise-duty
30 Figures from FOI made by Cycling UK to DfT 25/10/2018
https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/how_many_drivers_cycle_and_how_m?nocache=incoming-1267849#incoming-1267849
Q9: Shouldn’t cyclists stop slowing down traffic and stick to where they belong – i.e. on cycle paths/tracks off the road?

A: Let’s look at this from the point of view of someone on a bike.

Cyclists are legally entitled to ride on the road and don’t have to use alternative routes, all too many of which aren’t fit for purpose. In fact, protected space for cycling on the road itself is the optimal approach not just for cyclists, but for everyone breathing the air in a city or town.

- Since the late 19th century, bicycles have enjoyed the legal status of ‘carriages’, so they have the right to use the carriageway. In 1896, they were legally confirmed as a ‘vehicles’ too. So, when it comes to ‘traffic’, cyclists are not a separate entity, but a legitimate part of the mix.

- The Highway Code makes it clear that it is up to a cyclist to decide whether or not to use separate routes and other facilities: “Use cycle routes, advanced stop lines, cycle boxes and toucan crossings unless at the time it is unsafe to do so. Use of these facilities is not compulsory and will depend on your experience and skills, but they can make your journey safer.” (Rule 61).

- Cycling UK believes that it’s crucial to maintain a cyclist’s right to use his/her discretion over where to ride. Some routes alongside roads improve the cycling experience, but others are uncomfortable, too narrow, inconvenient, indirect, badly maintained and/or constantly interrupted by side roads, driveways and returns to the road itself etc.

- Consequently, all too many of these ‘facilities’ are frustrating for faster riders and hazardous for children and novices. This is particularly the case where they make cyclists face more junctions without priority than if they stayed on the road itself – around three-quarters of collisions involving cyclists happen at or near junctions.

- Staying in a cycle lane marked only by paint on the road can cause problems too, i.e. if it’s too narrow, directs riders into the gutter, over drain covers, out of drivers’ field of attention at junctions, and/or makes it harder to see what’s coming out of a side road.

- One of the best solutions is to invest in reallocating road space for high quality cycle lanes and segregating them physically from motor traffic. (Not only does that mean that cyclists are better protected, but pedestrians don’t have to share their space on the pavement, often a problem in tight urban situations and for people with impaired vision).

- Segregated cycle lanes are sometimes accused of making congestion and pollution worse, but this entirely misses the point: not only are they dedicated to zero emission vehicles, but also increase the carrying capacity of the road network. In 2017, central London’s segregated lanes were estimated to move five times more people per square metre than the main carriageways. Constructing them may cause some disruption, but the result is a very efficient use of space and, by making it easier and safer for people to cycle rather than drive, a congestion – and climate change and pollution – buster.

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31 In the case of a ‘furiously’ riding pavement cyclist in 1878 (Taylor v Godwin), judges ruled on appeal that a pedal cycle was a ‘carriage’ (and thus shouldn’t use the footway under the 1835 Highways Act). Section 85 of the Local Government Act 1888 also confirmed this status and, later in 1896, a judgement in consequence of the case of Ellis v Nott-Bower defined a bicycle as a ‘vehicle’.

32 The Highway Code is, at the time of writing, subject to a review: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-the-highway-code-to-improve-road-safety-for-cyclists-pedestrians-and-horse-riders

33 DfT. Reported Road Casualties Great Britain (analysis tool).

Q10: No one wants to cycle anyway, so why waste money on it?

A: Not true

Cycling has a lot going for it:

As touched on above, it’s highly convenient exercise because it doubles up as transport, making it easier to incorporate into the daily routine than going to the gym.

It’s also inexpensive, low carbon, zero emission, creates jobs and a proven, economically sound investment for public money.

Yes, people do need to be encouraged, especially by creating safer road conditions: around two-thirds of the population think it’s too dangerous for them to cycle on the roads.35

But no one can say, even now, that it has no appeal, worth or potential, or that adequate funding and political will won’t help the UK match the levels of cycle use seen in other European countries, e.g. 27% of trips in Holland, 18% in Denmark and 10% in Germany and Sweden:

- Cycling’s already flourishing in London, Britain’s biggest city. The congestion charge, public hire bikes, cycle superhighways and other incentives have unlocked much suppressed demand. Around 27,000 people cycled across the central cordon in 1977, compared to 172,000 in 2018 – well over six times as many.36
- Other cities and towns, especially if they’ve received Government funding for cycling, are equally inspiring examples. In the six Cycling Demonstration Towns (2008-2011), for example, there was an overall increase of 29% in cycling trips.37
- Cycling for leisure and sport is already a popular activity for people aged 16+, more so than swimming; and ‘cycling for fun/fitness’ is listed among the ten most prevalent activity for children.38
- During the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020, daily car use dropped and cycle use shot up, often doubling or tripling when compared to an equivalent day in February.39 Clearly, many people seized the moment to exercise and enjoy the much quieter roads.

The potential

- Over a third of the non-cycling population seems to be open to the possibility of cycling, agreeing that: “Many of the journeys of less than two miles that I now make by car I could just as easily cycle, if I had a bike.”40

- Many car journeys are so short that considerably more people could cycle them instead, and it wouldn’t take them long. Around a quarter of all car trips by drivers are under two

35 DfT. National Travel Attitudes Study. Table NTASA101a. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/national-travel-attitudes-study-ntas. This figure is for England in 2019, but it more or less matches the results of earlier, GB-wide surveys that asked the same question for years.


40 DfT. National Travel Attitudes Study. Table NTAS0201e
miles (even at the relatively slow speed of 6 mph on a bicycle, this would only take 20 minutes), and around three-fifths under five miles.41

- The appetite for more facilities for cycling is already significant: around three-quarters of people surveyed in twelve large British cities/city areas think that more cycle tracks along roads physically separated from motor traffic and pedestrians would be useful to help them cycle more, and over two-thirds support their construction even when this means less room for other road traffic.42

- A tool to help work out where cycling has the greatest potential to grow found that if people in England became as likely to cycle as people in The Netherlands, nearly one of five would cycle to work (about four in a hundred do so at the moment).43

- There is no shortage of bikes - around 42% of people aged five and over have access to at least one.44 For those who don’t, bike recycling projects are public hire schemes are proliferating.

- E-bikes are there for people who need a boost for some reason (health, hills, longer distances etc.).

- There’s also help and advice for people who want to cycle but are not sure about it because of a disability: see Wheels for Wellbeing, along with inclusive cycling programmes all over the UK.

So, why invest in cycling?

It’s good for public health (see Q1).

It’s good for the environment:

- You can’t get much more zero-emission than cycling (and walking), and they are far more pleasant companions on local streets than big, polluting motor vehicles. In 2018 (UK), road transport emitted a quarter of CO2 (most of it coming from passenger cars), and over a third of nitrous oxides, a harmful pollutant.45 All too many towns have serious air quality problems.46

- Cyclists have 84% lower lifecycle CO2 emissions from all daily travel than non-cyclists. The researchers who worked this out also found that: “An average person who ‘shifted travel modes’ from car to bike decreased lifecycle CO2 emissions by 3.2 [...] kgCO2/day, and using a bike as the ‘main method of travel’ gave 7.1 kgCO2/day lower lifecycle CO2 emissions than mainly using a car or van.”47

- If used to replace car travel, e-bikes could cut car CO2 emissions in England by up to 50%.48

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44 DfT. National Travel Survey 2019. Table NTS0608. This figure is for England, but it’s reasonable to assume from earlier, GB-wide data, that it reflects the wider picture. The table now combines ‘own’ with ‘have access to’, but the table from earlier years used to separate them. These showed that the ‘owning’ figure was always around 40%, the ‘have access to’ figure around 1%.
46 UK Air. Air Quality Management Areas.
It’s good for the economy:

- Investing public money in walking and cycling offers a ‘high’ to ‘very high’ benefit to cost ratio (BCR), the average return being around £5-6 for every £1 invested.49 (Research suggests that road building schemes – bypasses, widening, upgrades to motorway standards etc. – have repeatedly failed to live up to their economic promises).50

- The health benefits of cycling were valued at over £1bn in 2015.51

- In 2016, bicycle sales in the UK amounted to £1.28 billion, with the bicycle industry adding £373m gross value to the economy.52

- Retailers tend to overestimate the number of shoppers who drive: in Bristol, they thought two fifths did, but in reality it was only a fifth.53 Also, a 2016 report concluded: “• Cyclists visit local shops more regularly, spending more than users of most other modes of transport • Per square metre, cycle parking delivers 5 times higher retail spend than the same area of car parking • A compact town optimised for walking and cycling can have a “retail density” (spend per square metre) 2.5 times higher than a typical urban centre”,54

- Local businesses profit when more of their staff cycle (fewer sick days, for example), and because cycling helps tackle local congestion.55

- The TUC estimated that, along with energy efficient upgrades and reforestation, building cycle lanes and pedestrianisation came top for immediate job creation (direct and supply chain jobs) per £1 million investment.56

- For places with tourist attractions and/or set in tempting countryside or by the sea, catering for cycling visitors makes sense. Who wouldn’t want a share of the £520m that cycling and mountain biking is estimated to contribute to tourism in Britain every year?57

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51 SQW. The Economic value of the bicycle industry and cycling in the UK. 2017.
https://www.sqw.co.uk/files/6914/9406/9034/SQW_Economic_value_of_the_bicycle_industry_and_cycling_March_2017_FINAL.pdf

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Want to read more? See:

- Cycling UK’s Cycling Statistics
- What’s legal and what’s not on a bike (article)
- Cycling UK’s campaign for a safer Highway Code for cyclists

Want to get involved?

- Volunteer with us
- Join our network of local campaigners