



School-run cycling

Most children live within cycling distance of their school and want to get there by bike. **Alix Stredwick** examines what's stopping them – and how to tackle it

You must be mad! was the frequent response when I was a School Travel Plan Adviser at Hackney Council about six years ago, talking to parents about cycling to school with their kids. 'Look at the state of the roads!' they'd say, referring to the lumbering double-decker buses, careering tipper trucks, zooming mopeds, a myriad of manic cars, and gaggles of older pupils spilling out into the road.

When coupled with today's anxiety about stranger danger, and the criticism thrown at parents who let their children cycle unaccompanied (as reported in the last issue of *Cycle*), it's no wonder that the numbers of UK pupils cycling to school plummeted in the 1970s and 80s.

Sadly, this means that children are transported to school by other modes – particularly by car, whose use has doubled on the school run during the last 20 years. Childhood obesity has doubled over roughly the same period. In 1995-97 the proportion of cars on the roads

between 8am and 9am that were ferrying children to school was 10%. By 2009, the National Travel Survey shows it had risen to 21%. Everyone notices the extra traffic in September when the kids go back to school.

Getting schools cycling

It's not all bad news. As well as Government-run School Travel Plans and the legal requirement for local authorities to have Sustainable Modes of Travel to School (or SMOTs – no, not something that might fly into your eye!), there are now many schemes that are encouraging children and parents to cycle to school.

Mark Kiehlmann lives in Bishopbriggs, East Dunbartonshire, and has tirelessly pushed for cycling to school initiatives. He's now running three 'cycle trains' (think: walking bus) to St Matthew's Primary School. 'It's all about the parents,' he insists, having explained that the head teacher has been extremely supportive about

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overturning the local authority's restrictive approach of preventing pupils from riding in until they had undergone cycle training, which used to be so late in the primary school system that children weren't cycling to secondary school because they'd never had any practice.

‘If we can get them really young – and that means five or six, cycling on the pavement, accompanied by adults on the road, then they can cycle the same distance as the whole of Land's End to John O'Groats by the time they finish primary school,’ says Mark, who was CTC's Volunteer of the Year for 2009. He knows that his approach is a bit contentious, but maintains, ‘unless we have decent cycle paths, it's simply not viable for very young children to be cycling to school – and why should we be preventing them? My five year old wanted to do it, and now at our family cycling clubs we have small children cycling 40 or 50 miles, no problem.’

Overall in Scotland, surveys in September 2009 by Sustrans in collaboration with the local authorities' School Travel Coordinators have shown that cycling trips to school have decreased by 0.5 percentage points since 2008 to 2.6%. This is despite findings from 2008 that over 130,000 walking and cycling trips to school were made as a result of funding through the ‘Tackling the School Run’ programme, which saw a doubling of cycling and walking levels on paths that were created or improved around schools. East Lothian is currently coming up tops for sustainable travel to school, with fully 6.4% of pupils cycling to school and half the Scottish average of children driven to school, at 12%.

Parental support

Mark has got six parents who already cycle with their kids to school (and then on to work) to run the cycle trains, which have proved reliable and popular. This, and his work on providing family bike rides and training at the weekends over a three month period for two years in a row now, has meant he is really looking forward to the travel to school data this September.

‘We now have the most cycle-friendly schools in Scotland here in Bishopbriggs,’ he states, ‘and we've spread the activities at St Matthew's to other schools in the area. It's down to funding and committed individuals – and teaching at least three adults to ride has meant that cycling by the kids is now completely realistic. We've even got the female coordinator of an Asian Women's group ready to become a Bikeability cycle instructor.’

Other groups – such as those in CTC's Cycle Champions programme, and Sustrans' Bike It projects – have also recognised the need to get parents involved in ‘cycling culture’ to provide real support for children to cycle to school. In east London, STA Bikes in Hackney have been teaching parents – particularly mums – and children to ride together for a number of years. Key member Gail

Right to Ride to School

All children should have the right to cycle to school – that's the premise of CTC's campaign. The campaigning toolkit CTC has provided comes from the experience of parents who have pushed tirelessly for their school to revert to a ‘cycling is normal’ policy to allow their pupils the freedom to ride their bikes. A school may provide Bikeability training (below), but if this is used as a prerequisite to allowing a child to ride, and only offered in the final year of primary school, when pupils have dozens of other important items such as SATS and preparing for secondary school, cycling can become sidelined.

The kit summarises the key advantages children who cycle to school can gain. Kids need to get at least one hour of exercise a day, and cycling to school can easily contribute to this. Children who've cycled have better concentration. The Danish have found that children who cycle to school are 10% more physically fit than their classmates who are driven – and also those who have walked. Kids will also learn about navigating their environment, and have more autonomy and experience in decision-making.

The toolkit also goes into detail about the law on cycling to school, and techniques on how to persuade your school to be more enabling, even when those in positions of power are against it. You can download it from ctc.org.uk/righttoridetoschool and also join the Right to Ride to School Facebook group.



Bristow explains that ‘our focus is as much on improving people's lives as it is on cycling,’ by means of involving hard-to-reach groups such as those on very low incomes, those from ethnic backgrounds that have less propensity to cycle, and targeting mums to be trained both to ride and then to become cycle instructors themselves.

‘They can then be role models for their communities,’ says Gail, whose children cycle to the local primary school. ‘Mums have a huge sway over family travel decision-making. It's vital to get them cycling confidently so they can deal with traffic and are confident their kids can too.’

Incentives and deterrents

Perceived traffic danger and a lack of cycling skills are not the only problems facing children or parents wishing to cycle. I remember my secondary school days well. Witless timetabling resulted in one day of the week requiring not only my usual school bag bursting with heavy textbooks,



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but my violin, PE kit, and – on the way home – the usually inedible results of Home Economics.

In addition, the rusty bike sheds of our youth may now seem entirely inadequate for the security requirements of today’s flashy bikes. Or they may even be demolished to make way for something deemed more important – perhaps more staff car parking spaces...

And some schools may even ban cycling by pupils altogether. One Hackney secondary school banned cycling in 1982 because a pupil fell off and broke his arm. Schools can’t legally ban pupils cycling on the public highway, but CTC has been involved in numerous cases of schools effectively preventing children from cycling in by banning bikes being chained up on the premises. This has led to the launch of CTC’s Right to Ride to School campaign, which provides a toolkit for parents who need to tackle anti-cycling schools (see previous page).

School Travel Plans were the main thrust of the Government’s approach, working with schools to find out how the kids currently got there, what problems this entailed, and putting together a plan of how things could be different – with a range of funding mechanisms available. Hackney put in traffic calming measures, gave out badges for walking to school, and provided a range of cycling incentives.

Neath Port Talbot Council in Wales has come up with a good one – teaming up with the Apollo Cinema, they offered pupils who walk or cycle to school a free cinema

ticket. Now 70 schools have joined this ‘Footprint to the stars’ scheme (neath-porttalbot.gov.uk).

Roughly £20m per year in England and Wales was available in small grants for schools themselves to spend on items to make sustainable travel easier – cycle storage, better lighting, CCTV, or a pedestrian shelter to prevent soggy parents at the school gate. With impending budget cuts, this programme is in serious danger of being axed.

Bikeability training

And there’s a more fundamental problem. As well as driver behaviour, speed of cars, sheer volume of traffic and a road layout that appears to have completely forgotten about cycling, many children have never been taught to ride properly – or even at all – by their parents. Parents may have no cycling experience, or perhaps experienced poor cycling tuition. I remember our cycling proficiency volunteer urging us to ‘hug the kerb’ – not very good advice if you want to be seen.

If they are lucky enough to have a bike – many children in inner urban areas don’t own one – it may be cheap, clunky, poorly made, and even badly put together by someone with a lack of skills who’s been tasked with assembling a ‘bike-in-a-box’ from the internet.

These ‘lost generations’ are where Bikeability comes in – cycling proficiency for the 21st century, developed by CTC and others. These professional national standards take both children and adults through the whole process of learning to ride with confidence in a real street environment. It even goes through how you can check your bike to ensure it’s safe before you ride, and many courses make minor adjustments to children’s bikes such as making the brake levers easier for little hands to reach, putting the saddle at a suitable height, and the never-ending pumping up of squidgy tyres.

What is encouraging is that pupils still want to cycle to school. Even in this age of games consoles and gadgetry, kids are keen to ride their bikes. Sustrans got the ball

(Above left) As well as its practical and health benefits, children enjoy cycling to school. (Above) Mark Kiehlmann has transformed cycling levels at St Matthew’s Primary School in Bishopbriggs, East Dunbartonshire

Above left: J Bewley/Sustrans. Above: Ian McNicol, www.ianmacnicollimages.co.uk

“As the distances are longer, more secondary school pupils take the bus or get a lift by car”



rolling on their Safer Routes to Schools programme back in the late 1990s by showing that, as in the Netherlands, over half of UK children wanted to ride a bike to school... although here only 2% did so. When, as School Travel Adviser, I did the 'hands up' surveys with schools, most children would say they wanted to cycle to school. Many of my colleagues around the country would get the same results. A Bikeability survey in 2009 showed that up to 80% of children would prefer to cycle to school.

Riding to school together

Myra VanInwegen, her husband and their two young children live in Girton, a village about two miles from the centre of Cambridge. Myra uses the family's Thorn Voyager childback tandem to get the kids around, with Ellen (7) riding on the back of the tandem, and Luke (4) in a Burley D'Lite trailer towed behind. 'Luke is really excited about being promoted to the back of the tandem as a stoker when Ellen is riding her own bike to school,' says Myra.

And it's not that far to most primary schools, even with 'parental choice' meaning that you can send your child to a school the other side of the county if it'll have them. Myra explains that, 'Ellen's school is about one-and-a-half miles away, and we do have a car. But it sits on the driveway most of the time. Our bike arrangement gets us to school, to town, and beyond, perfectly.'

Distance to school varies a lot with age. A report for the Department for Work and Pensions in 2009 stated that nearly half of *all* pupils live within a mile of their school, and less than one quarter lived three or more miles away. Primary schools are smaller and therefore more plentiful and evenly distributed, so average distance away is less than a mile for over two thirds of children between age five and ten. The Work and Pensions survey revealed that, for those of secondary school age, only 38% of pupils lived within a mile. As the distances are longer, more pupils take the bus or are given a lift – just when they are more likely to have the skills and confidence to cycle to school.



(Left) Myra VanInwegen and daughter Ellen on their tandem, used for the short trip to primary school (Above) Yes, this is Copenhagen in Denmark, where a quarter of all cargo cycles are used to replace a car

Precious cargo

With pre-school children, a childseat, trailer or cargo cycle may be a better option for cycling together, and the latter can be useful for primary school pupils too.

One in four families with two children living in the cycling heaven that is Copenhagen owns a cargo bike, and nearly a quarter of all owners say that they use one to replace a car. The ubiquitous Christiania cargo trikes have become so popular that the Copenhagen Bicycle Account report of 2008 makes an 'obvious guess' that the congestion they cause on the city's excellent cycling facilities is why cyclists' satisfaction with the width of cycle tracks has reduced by 20% since 2006! And the city is taking the issue of cargo trike storage so seriously that it has been trialling an on-street lockable storage facility for up to four trikes. (The store fits into one car parking space.)

Cargo bikes are less well-known in the UK. Yet there are pockets of popularity in Britain. In Cambridge a bike shop called The School Run Centre has opened, showcasing a myriad of examples which you can try out for yourself.

And in west London, the Ealing Cycling Campaign has run an excellent loan scheme funded by a local trust. Trailers, child seats, and bicycle buggies have been available, along with advice and cycle training, for people who 'are left without a car when they start a family, as the other partner may use the car for work,' explains ECC coordinator David Eales. 'They then realise how difficult public transport can be with a very young child and the associated equipment of prams, bottles, spare clothing and so on. Cycling with the appropriate kit suddenly seems so much more convenient.'

Bram Gerrits and his partner Mirjam Langeveld have a little boy who's just turned three. They recently moved to the UK from The Netherlands, and get about using a De FietsFabriek two-wheeled cargo bike with the box at the front, plus a regular bike with a childseat on the back. 'Here in Cambridge I more or less go everywhere with Marius on the cargo bike,' says Bram. 'Nursery, supermarket, swimming pool... We keep the bike, rather than the car, in the garage. The car stays outside.'

Mirjam, with the childseat on the back of her bike, is a little more circumspect. 'The roads here are less made for bikes than in The Netherlands. It feels very cramped for bikes here,' she observes grimly, despite cycling in Cambridge, a (relatively) cycle-friendly city. 'There are far fewer cars in Amsterdam.'

If we're to reduce school run motor traffic in the UK too, cycling has to play a role.