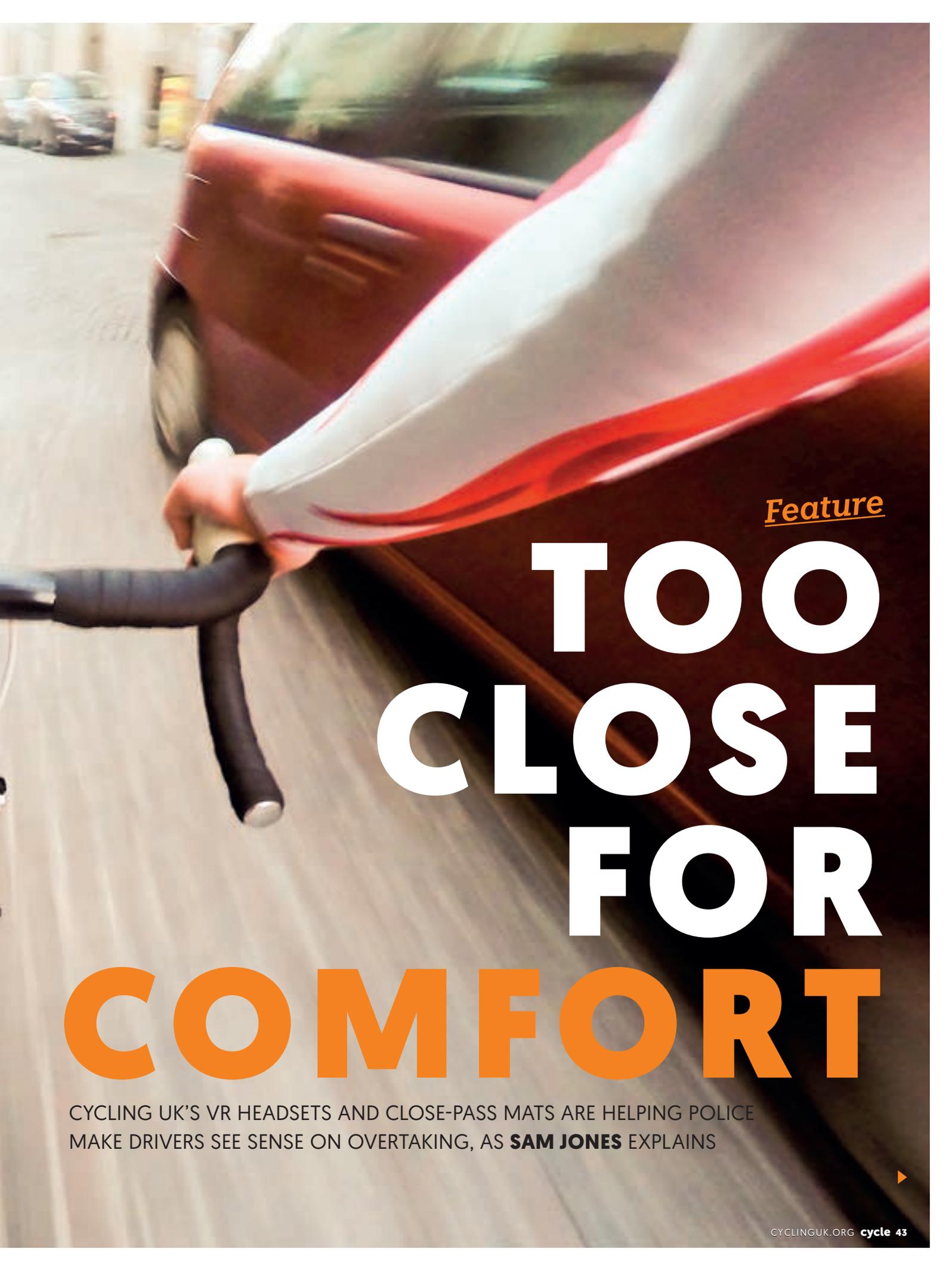




**SAM JONES**

*Sam is Cycling UK's Senior Campaigns and Communications Officer.*

When he's not campaigning, he does his utmost to be out exploring the world on two wheels.



*Feature*

# TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

CYCLING UK'S VR HEADSETS AND CLOSE-PASS MATS ARE HELPING POLICE MAKE DRIVERS SEE SENSE ON OVERTAKING, AS **SAM JONES** EXPLAINS



Previous pages: iStockphoto.com Others: Adrian Willis & Sam Jones

hat's changed my perspective – I'd never have thought to give that much room overtaking a cyclist." These were the first comments I heard from a lady who had finished watching Cycling UK's new virtual reality (VR) film on how to overtake

cyclists safely. Understandably, given that she was only watching this film after being stopped by the police, she did not want to give her name, but over the following hour-and-a-half I heard similar statements from eight other drivers pulled over by the police.

All of them also shared the same confusion about why they had been pulled over in the first place, and seemed shocked by the answer: they had overtaken a cyclist too closely.

As anyone who regularly cycles knows, one of the most threatening experiences is the close pass. You're riding along... and a tonne of metal hurtles past inches from your elbow. There's that sudden rush of fear, your heart starts pounding furiously, and you wonder just what on earth the driver was thinking they were doing by driving so recklessly.

It's an all-too-frequent occurrence, and it is one of the reasons more people aren't cycling. Close passes

reinforce the widely held belief in the UK that cycling is a dangerous activity, even when it's no more dangerous than walking – and far safer than an hour's worth of gardening, in terms of hospital admissions!

### MEASURING THE PROBLEM

Close passing happens more often to people who are taking their first forays out in to cycling world. Dr Rachel Aldred's Near Miss Project found people who maintained an average of under 8mph reported three times as many near misses per miles than those with an average of over 12mph.

More worrying is the impact of close passes on women cyclists. Cycling in the UK is still predominantly a male activity. According to the Department for Transport, in 2017 men reportedly cycled almost three times as many trips and almost four times further than women. The Near Miss Project found women are disproportionately affected, experiencing a 50% higher rate of near misses than men.

Clearly, if we want more people cycling, and to address the gender and age imbalance, then the threat and danger of close passing must be tackled. Decent infrastructure is a large part of a longer-term solution, but this cannot solve the problems cyclists face right now. The immediate issue that needs to be addressed is the root problem: driver behaviour.

Part of the problem is that most

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drivers aren't close passing out of malicious intent, but rather ignorance. While most people who cycle also drive, only 2% of all trips are made by bike, so most people who drive do not cycle, and therefore have no idea their driving can be intimidating and dangerous.

The Highway Code doesn't exactly help either. Rule 163 advises drivers to "give motorcyclists, cyclists and horse riders at least as much room as you would when overtaking a car", advice which Cycling UK has long said needs changing due to its vagueness.

Fortunately, one police force devised a solution which has helped change driver behaviour overnight...

### SAFETY: DRIVING IT HOME

In September 2016, West Midlands Police began running a time- and cost-efficient operation that tackled the problem of close passes head on. At its launch, Cycling UK's head of campaigns Duncan Dollimore called it "quite simply the best cyclist safety initiative by any police force, ever."

The police led a joint operation with the local fire brigade. Over the course of an hour, an undercover officer would be sent out to ride on a section of road that accident figures showed to be dangerous to cyclists. If a car passed too closely, the officer radioed colleagues. A police motorcycle despatch officer would then pull the driver over to a designated holding point.

There, using a 4m×6m close pass mat, officers from the local fire brigade would explain what the driver had done wrong – and, more importantly, how they could overtake cyclists safely, suggesting a minimum overtaking distance of at least 1.5 metres. The opportunity would also be used to check drivers' eyesight and whether the vehicles were correctly registered and insured.

A year after the operation's launch, the force had achieved a 20% reduction in casualties among vulnerable road users, bucking a national trend that had seen an increase that year.

PC Mark Hodson, from West Midlands Road Harm Reduction Team (RHRT), said: "Drivers who endanger vulnerable road users need to understand that we run operations to catch them... and if they avoid our officers, we can still prosecute them using footage provided by cyclists and other motorists."

This simple operation, education first backed up by enforcement when necessary, was the answer campaigners had been looking for. Duncan Dollimore said: "Cyclists have been campaigning about close passes for years, with limited success. The priority given to tackling close passes, and the appreciation of the danger they present for cyclists, had varied between police forces.

"What West Midlands Police did was develop a simple plan to combine enforcement and education to make sure drivers get the message that cyclists

### THE CLOSE PASS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

# 25%

OF SERIOUS COLLISIONS BETWEEN CYCLISTS AND LARGE VEHICLES INVOLVED CLOSE PASSING, SAY POLICE

# 1.5M

THE MINIMUM DISTANCE WE TOLD GOVERNMENT THAT PASSING DRIVERS MUST GIVE CYCLISTS

# £17k

THE CAMPAIGN RAISED OVER £17K FOR THE VR HEADSETS AND FILM, THANKS TO 929 SUPPORTERS



Above: We supplied all UK police forces with close pass mats

need space when being overtaken, and those who don't give them space risked prosecution for careless driving."

### CYCLING UK PASSES IT ON

Cycling UK seized on this idea and made sure all 45 police forces operating in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were not just aware of the West Midlands Police operation but had the means to carry it out too.

In May 2017, Cycling UK launched our Too Close for Comfort campaign, which had the goal of raising £12k to fund the supply of close pass mats for every force. Thanks to 970 supporters, we smashed our target in just 48 hours, and ended up raising just under £15k. Throughout 2017 and into early 2018, we worked to supply the 45 forces with mats and to encourage them to carry out close pass operations and awareness events.

Such has been the success of our campaigning that, on 29 June, Cycling Minister Jesse Norman MP met with the officers behind West Midlands' operation, PCs Mark Hodson and Steve Hudson, and announced his support for more close pass operations across the country.

One of the great benefits of this campaign has been the opening up of dialogue between the police and Cycling UK. It's given us greater insight in to how operations are working, and also what other

### Thanks. Fancy a cuppa?

Raising £15k in just over a week is an incredible achievement for us, and would not have been possible without you, our members. While our fundraising for Too Close for Comfort (TFC) has closed on Kickstarter, there are still ways to

make a contribution.

You can buy a limited edition TCFC mug from our shop ([shop.cyclinguk.org/too-close-comfort-mug](http://shop.cyclinguk.org/too-close-comfort-mug)) or donate to our campaigns at [cyclinguk.org/donate](http://cyclinguk.org/donate). Best of all, you could encourage friends and



family to join Cycling UK. The more people we represent, the more we can achieve. They can join online at [cyclinguk.org/join](http://cyclinguk.org/join).

**Behind the scenes**

Find out how the close pass film was made: [cyclinguk.org/makingvrfilm](http://cyclinguk.org/makingvrfilm)

► tools could be of use.

Following input from Sgt Phil Dix from Surrey and Steve and Mark from West Midlands Police, Cycling UK learned that, increasingly, forces are using virtual reality films to educate the public on a range of issues. West Midlands had looked into producing a film on close passing but the cost had been prohibitive. Would Cycling UK be able to help again?

The short answer was “yes.”

**SEEING IS BELIEVING**

In late summer 2018, we began working with a specialist VR film production company to produce an immersive film that would allow the viewer to experience the threat of a close pass without the danger. Assistance from cycle instructor and Cycling UK member Sarah Wood on the day ensured road positioning for our ‘stunt rider’ was correct. By the end of September we had a film our police contacts were itching to use.

We launched the film, and the second phase of Too Close for Comfort, at The Cycle Show at Birmingham’s NEC in September. We then began the fundraising push to recover partial costs for the film, and also finance enough VR headsets to supply all UK police forces.

It was a tall order but yet again Cycling UK members and supporters answered our appeal and delivered. In just over a week, 929 people dipped their hands into their pockets and helped us surpass our £15k target to raise £17,149. It was this success that led me to be standing in a pub car park in Sutton Coldfield on a chilly October morning, testing our new film out as West Mids ran a joint operation with colleagues from Woodgate Valley Fire Station.

“This was the first opportunity to put into operational use the new Cycling UK virtual reality film on close passing, and we’re pleased to say the film was well received,” PC Steve Hudson told me after the operation. “At West Midlands Police RHRT, we’re always on the lookout for the best ways to make our roads safer, and this short VR film will help people learn through experience the dangers of close passing.”

**LOOKING AHEAD**

By the time you’re reading this article, Cycling UK hopes to have delivered headsets to at least half of the UK forces. Our work is far from complete. While many forces are now taking close passes seriously and providing the appropriate tools is a win, the wider issue of unclear guidance in the Highway Code still exists.

The good news is that our campaigning last June has set this on the path for change too. More than 10,000 people wrote to the Department for



**Above:** West Midlands Police took the VR film on patrol

**Rewriting the Code**

Roads policing is just one aspect of the nationwide culture shift needed to put an end to close passing. Cycling UK has also been campaigning for changes to The Highway Code to clarify the ambiguous rules on overtaking and to require a 1.5m minimum when overtaking cyclists.

The Government has listened. After 10,000 people supported our ‘Cycle Safety: Make it Simple’ campaign, which included this recommendation, a Highway Code review has been promised.

While there’s work to be done to ensure our recommendations become reality, if we are successful this could signal another huge leap forward towards our roads being free from close passing.

Transport (DfT) in support of Cycling UK’s suggestions to make our roads safer. As part of our ‘Cycle Safety: Make it Simple’ campaign, we called for clarity on overtaking, new guidance to prevent car-dooring through the ‘Dutch Reach’, and supported British Cycling’s ‘Turning the Corner’ campaign, which looks to give priority at junctions for vulnerable road users.

People power worked. In October, the DfT announced their intention to amend the Highway Code and run a consultation on precisely these points. The exact scope of the consultation is still to be decided. Given the demands on Parliament’s time, we’re unlikely to see any changes until early 2020.

In the meantime, now the police are using the headsets and video, the next stage of the Too Close for Comfort campaign is making our film available to driving instructors and learner drivers. Cycling UK wants the driving test to take greater account of vulnerable road users, and this film is very much part of that process. We’re also considering producing more educational safety films on the Dutch Reach and on junction priority.

The coming year looks like it will be another busy one for our road safety campaigning. We’ll be trying new tactics all the time, so there’s always the risk that not everything will stick. But as Crew Commander David Price at Woodgate Valley Fire Station said after Operation Close Pass in Sutton Coldfield: “If only one person is educated and gives cyclists the space they need, it’s worth it.” ●

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