



Clockwise from left: At Pendower Beach, Cornwall, NCN 3 detours across rocks, roots and sand! Cycle path bollards can cause crashes. Lack of maintenance is an issue. John Grimshaw, standing where the first lorry dropped off stone for the Bristol and Bath route in July 1979. Some routes, like the newly-tarmacked Keswick to Threlkeld Railway Path, are fine for trikes or trailers. Others have near impassable barriers



or with a poor surface – things that bar non-standard cycle users or those who can't pick up their cycle.

While Sustrans has improved some of it – since 2019 switching 11 on-road miles here to traffic free, and 17 miles there to quiet ways; removing or redesigning 615 barriers; and delivering 50 'activation projects' to complete missing links – it is far from a proper, dependable network with a truly national reach. Sustrans aims to improve it further, increasing the proportion of train stations it connects to from a measly 42% to 60%, as well as linking to new homes and to green space, and improving routes to schools. There's currently no funding for this vision, however.

WHY IS IT LIKE THIS?

In the UK, as anywhere, a cycling network is delivered by a patchwork of agencies. In our case it ranges from local councils to National Highways (yes, the trunk roads to people), and from Sustrans to volunteers.

As with roads, those different agencies maintain it – in theory, at least. However, there's no sustained long-term funding for cycle routes in the UK. (The Scottish government did set out multi-year funding, before cutting its active travel budget by £23.7m in 2024.) Unlike roads, there's no maintenance budget for cycle routes either.

This means routes crumble over time or, as is increasingly common, fall foul of extreme weather. The Bath Two Tunnels route in Somerset was flooded for much of 2024, until the council eventually gathered the funds and equipment to pump the water out. Without maintenance budgets, Sustrans' CEO Xavier Brice pointed out to me that there's an active disincentive for councils to deliver new routes. Infrastructure without maintenance funding can simply be termed 'a liability'.

PEOPLE POWER

How did our cycle network come to be run by a charity using a seat-of-our-pants approach to government support,

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while roads and rail are overseen by government bodies with long-term funding settlements? You may well ask. Perhaps my favourite bit of writing a book on this was learning the amazing story of the Bristolian environmental campaigners who decided, in the absence of government or council support, to try to develop their own cycle routes.

What a job they did! With almost no money and a lot of free labour, in the six years to 1985 they built the Bristol and Bath Railway Path.