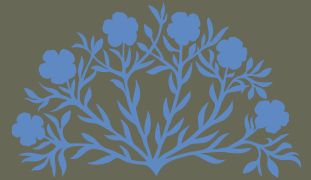


All-Party Group on Cycling

Short and medium-term measures
to improve safety and increase
uptake in cycling



Northern Ireland
Assembly



Prepared By:

we are
cycling
UK

in Northern Ireland

Forward



I am delighted to bring forward the report on short and medium term measures to improve the safety and uptake of cycling across Northern Ireland.

We all know Northern Ireland is heavily reliant on cars as the main mode of transport. Towns and cities across the region are overwhelmed with car traffic which adversely impacts on journey times, emissions and public health.

Belfast is one of the most congested cities in the Europe, and there has been a distinct lack of enthusiasm to introduce policies and measures to encourage the shift towards sustainable transport.

There is widespread recognition of the need to reduce car dependency, but progress to deliver this policy objective has not changed significantly in the last decade. We need to give people better choices in how they travel, which starts with implementing measures that address the longstanding barriers preventing the higher uptake of cycling.

Compared to other cities across the continent, Northern Ireland trails behind in the share of journeys cycled. In Paris, more people travel by bicycle than by car, and in London, 4.5% of all journeys in the city are made by cycling.

Despite the considerable difference between this region and others across the UK, Ireland and beyond, the vast majority of people support a modal shift towards sustainable methods of transport, as highlighted by the recent publication of the Eastern Transport Plan Engagement Report. The report also shows that, in the future, people want the option to be able to cycle to work or educational opportunities more than any other mode of transport.

Measures to shift the dial on cycling are urgently needed, to ensure that it is seen as a safe and viable method of transport for people of all ages. I hope that in sharing these interventions, we will cultivate cycle friendly towns and cities across Northern Ireland and encourage more people to get on a bike and go.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Peter McReynolds". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

MLA and Chair of the All Party Group for Cycling

Introduction

This inquiry has taken submissions from cycling organisations across Northern Ireland; Cycling UK, Sustrans, Cycling Ireland and Cycul. This report outlines some of the short and medium-term measures we should take to address the main barriers and make people feel safer about cycling. This inquiry does not discuss what should always be the main solution to encouraging more cycling, i.e. segregated cycle infrastructure. The APG wanted to focus on some of the quicker solutions and 'low hanging fruit' which Northern Ireland has so far failed to put in place.

Why dont more people across NI cycle?

Northern Ireland has long remained the region of the UK with the lowest reported levels of cycling, with just 0.8% of trips by bike from 2017-2019 (statistics for 2020/21 are harder to compare due to the higher uptake of cycling during lockdowns). This compares to around double that in England at 1.7% and Scotland at 1.5%.

The reasons for historical and current low levels of cycling in Northern Ireland are, as always, a combination of investment, culture, and history. The main barrier to cycling however, is consistently reported by populations as "the perception that our roads are too dangerous and uncomfortable, largely due to high volumes and high speeds of motor traffic".

Types of Cycling

Cycling sits across a range, from pure utility, i.e. transport from A-B, including carrying cargo, to exercise cycling, with leisure cycling lying somewhere in the middle. There is obvious crossover within this e.g. someone cycling for exercise can still be transporting themselves somewhere and someone cycling to work is still going to be getting exercise.

The difficulty for policy makers is that these different kinds of cycling require different infrastructure, legislation and enforcement in order to encourage ridership and keep people safe.

People who cycle solely for transport can tend to ride heavier, comfortable cycles at lower speeds, for shorter times and distances and will prefer segregated, protected cycle lanes and residential streets.

Exercise cycling is more often people riding more lightweight road bikes at higher speeds on roads, sometimes as part of a group.

What types of cycling do we want to encourage?

All types of cycling should be encouraged as they have a benefit to individuals and society, the health gains from any exercise put less strain on our NHS and enable people to remain independent and productive much later into life. Exercise cycling can also be a fantastic social activity, enhancing community cohesion and helping people discover and engage in their local area.

Utility cycling is a vital part of the future of transport. Over the last 70 years the vast majority of space, resource and time has been given to car driving as transport - as a result, the choices people have to use other options has diminished. Despite all the resources that have been put into supporting private cars, it is clear that it will not be an adequate solution to the transport needs of our population, with funding unable to maintain the existing road network, congestion and air pollution levels among the worst in Europe and the numbers being killed and seriously injured on our roads remaining consistently too high.

The most effective places to support cycling as transport are for local journeys in our towns and cities and to shift how people travel for shorter journey's.

01 20mph Speed Limits

IMPLEMENT 20MPH SPEED LIMITS AS THE DEFAULT IN ALL BUILT-UP/ RESIDENTIAL AREAS TO IMPROVE ROAD SAFETY AND ENCOURAGE ACTIVE TRAVEL.

The speed limit should be default rather than blanket i.e. highway authorities can make the case to change specific roads back to 30mph where appropriate.



- *Where has it been implemented?*

Wales and Spain have rolled out 'default' 20mph (30kph in Spain) speed limits country wide in built up/residential areas. Bristol and London are examples of local areas which have default 20mph speed limits.

- *How will it improve safety and increase the number of people cycling?*

Lower speeds result in far fewer fatalities in the case of a collision. If you are hit at 30mph by a driver there is an 80% chance of fatality, if you are hit at 20mph there is a 10% chance of fatality.

A 20mph speed limit is also far closer to cycling speed so there should be less urgency from drivers, reducing dangerous overtaking.

Reduced speed limits have not been shown to directly increase the number of people cycling, it has to be part of a package of measures aimed to increase safety for vulnerable road users.



02 Changes to the Highway Code

BEGIN REVIEWING THE NI HIGHWAY CODE WITH THE INTENTION OF INCORPORATING THE RECENT CHANGES TO THE GB HIGHWAY CODE.

Other than a handful of minor differences e.g. Restrictions on newly qualified drivers, HGV speed limits on rural roads, rules around trams, the Northern Ireland Highway Code is generally a carbon copy of the GB Highway Code and the NI Code has historically adopted any updates or changes made to the GB Highway Code. In January 2022 however, there were major changes made to the GB Highway Code, and nearly 2 years on these changes are yet to be considered for Northern Ireland. The changes focused on giving more protection to vulnerable road users i.e. people walking, wheeling and cycling.

- *How will it improve safety and increase the number of people cycling?*

While it is acknowledged that everyone has some responsibility for their own safety, the consequences of actions are not equal. The new Highway Code for GB now defines 'vulnerability of road users' in order to reframe the 'shared' or equal responsibility for all road users. This is under the 'Hierarchy of Users' and shows that people walking, wheeling and then people cycling are considered more vulnerable road users, and people driving cars, vans and HGVs carry the greatest responsibility as the consequences for their actions are much greater.

The rules around junctions have also been updated, moving from 14 rules around junctions to just 1. The new rule outlines that the person/vehicle which is continuing straight on has priority over any vehicle turning, this has advantages for pedestrians and cyclists and gives clarity where there is currently confusion and a lack of awareness. This rule change has major advantages for Highway Engineers in planning cycle paths and should be in place before any major works in the Belfast Cycle Network or other cycle infrastructure across the country go ahead.

GREATER POWER SHOULD BRING GREATER RESPONSIBILITY



- *Has it worked in GB?*

As with any major changes to culture and rules, they will take a long time to implement and imbed. In GB the changes were not accompanied by a good awareness campaign or behaviour change nudges around enforcement, something which NI should learn from, i.e. we need to invest time and money in communicating the changes and the reasons for them before they come into force.

03 Close pass awareness

TO EDUCATE AND RAISE AWARENESS OF MOTORISTS OF THE NEED TO ALLOW SUFFICIENT SPACE WHEN PASSING PEOPLE WHO CYCLE ON OUR ROADS

Close passes describe when drivers overtake people cycling without giving enough space. The obvious danger is that the driver misjudges their road position and ‘clips’ the person cycling, but even with no contact there is a proven danger of creating side winds and causing the cyclist to shift or unbalance.

- *Where has this measure been implemented?*

Many areas across the UK and Ireland have run close pass awareness campaigns with varied results. County Wexford have been running a very comprehensive campaign since 2014, promoting “Share the Road” and “Stayin Alive 1.5”. This included a video awareness campaign, “stayin Alive 1.5” poster, signs and vehicle stickers along with applying the “stayin alive at 1.5” image to over 40 council vehicles.

In 2015 Wexford erected 40 “stayin Alive 1.5” signs throughout the county with a small sample survey showing near Universal awareness of the safe passing distance when overtaking people cycling.

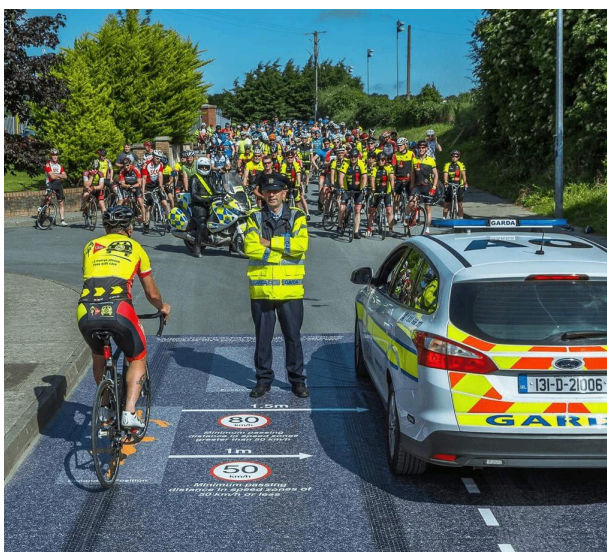


- *How will the measure improve safety and increase the number of people cycling?*

Anyone who cycles, whether experienced or a beginner is likely to have experienced a “close pass”, which is enough for many people to be put off cycling entirely because it feels too dangerous.

Estimates from the Near Miss Project show that regular bike commuters experience a “very scary” near miss on average once per week, which is more than frequent enough to put people off cycling.

The more awareness raising and enforcement of the close pass rules (which would be supported by adopting the GB Highway Code changes) the more likely drivers are to both expect people cycling to be on the roads, and also be aware of the dangers of overtaking them too close.



04 School Streets

CREATE A PROGRAMME FOR SCHOOL STREETS EMBEDDED WITHIN NEIGHBOURHOODS THAT PROVIDE SAFE, CAR-FREE ZONES AROUND PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

School streets are essentially an attempt to transform the streets directly outside schools into temporary car free zones, reducing congestion, unsafe parking and blocking of footpaths, concentrated air pollution and ultimately encourage children and their adults to consider different travel options such as walking or cycling.

School streets only operate on school days during set drop off and pickup times, and there are exemptions for disabled badge holders and residents within the zone.

- *Where has this measure been implemented?*

Fingal County Council established the first School Streets pilot (18 months) in Ireland which started in 2019 following comprehensive consultation and stakeholder engagement. The aim of the pilot was to “improve road safety, promote active travel and improve air quality by reducing congestion associated with the school run”.

The main method of achieving these aims was timed restrictions on vehicular access to the school. However, there were many additional measures taken to support this such as; setting up ‘walking buses’ for younger pupils, increased enforcement of illegal parking, a hedge cutting notice to be sent out in order to increase the width of the footpath, the creation of ‘drop off zones’, developing a new footpath link to the school, upgrading traffic signals and creating additional bike Parking facilities at the school.



- *How will the measure improve safety and increase the number of people cycling?*

The Fingal County Council School Street pilot was extensively monitored and evaluated and showed some very positive data (such as a 20% reduction in air pollution around the school streets zone). Specifically on encouraging pupils to cycle to school there was a 2 fold increase, though the numbers were still low (3%). Active Travel mode choice had a significant increase of 16%.

The main ways in which School Streets increase the number of people cycling is giving parents greater confidence in their child's safety when they travel to school. While School Streets generally focus on the area surrounding the School, they create an opportunity and the justification to look at cycling routes more generally in the area, which to an extent, Fingal County Council considered and acted upon.

05 Liveable neighbourhoods

RESHAPING RESIDENTIAL AND URBAN AREAS TO PREVENT UNNECESSARY THROUGH TRAFFIC AND ENCOURAGE ACTIVE TRAVEL.

Also known as ‘low traffic neighbourhoods’ (LTNs) and ‘active neighbourhoods’, liveable neighbourhoods use low cost physical changes such as bollards and traffic order changes e.g. one way systems, to reduce ‘rat running’ and keep through traffic to arterial streets as intended. These areas still give residents access with their cars, but the design should create more direct routes by active travel than driving.

- *Where has this measure been implemented?*

Northern Ireland has many historic Liveable Neighbourhoods where bollards and other barriers were installed to discourage people from using streets as shortcuts, but a more modern example is the ‘Low Traffic Neighbourhood’ completed in 2015 in Waltham Forest, London. Like many other places bringing in these changes, there was a lot of opposition and misinformation about the scheme, but the ‘Walthamstow Village Review’ found that support went from 41% opposed to the scheme before implementation, to just 1.7% of residents saying they wanted to scrap the scheme one year on.



- *How will the measure improve safety and increase the number of people cycling?*

It is unrealistic to expect segregated cycle lanes on every street across Northern Ireland. Realistically there will be a network of cycle lanes in dense areas that give people cycling safe routes across towns and cities. The challenge therefore, is to make people feel safe when they are cycling from their homes, workplaces, schools and shops to these safe cycle routes. One of the main measures to achieve this is to remove unnecessary through traffic from these streets. Through traffic by its very nature tends to be faster and less aware of the urban or residential nature of the street they are driving through. The obvious effect of removing this traffic is that the street will be, and more importantly feel, safer, along with other benefits e.g. reduced traffic noise, improved air quality.

The other way in which these streets encourage people to travel actively is by creating faster and more direct routes for people who choose to walk or cycle, i.e. you are unable to drive through the bollards or will get a fine if you drive through the ‘camera gate’, but you can use the route if you walk, wheel or cycle.

06

Active travel funding stream for local councils

ALLOCATING A POT OF MONEY WHICH LOCAL COUNCILS CAN USE FOR COMMUNITY CYCLE EVENTS PROMOTING ACTIVE TRAVEL AND TO ESTABLISH A NETWORK OF ACTIVE TRAVEL HUBS ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND.

Given the lack of transport powers which sit with councils in Northern Ireland, many don't consider active travel promotion as part of their core objectives. This measure would encourage them to consider promoting active travel in their area, thus helping to make the case for building infrastructure.

- *Where has this measure been implemented?*

The 'Ride on Belfast' event which takes place during bike week every year is a good example of increasing the visibility of cycling, encouraging people who have been considering cycling in the city to join the group and show people who cycle they are a key part of the transport makeup in the area.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority have recently funded organisations to set up active travel hubs across the region, with 13 groups receiving up to £50,000. These hubs will run events including led rides, offer cycle training to groups, provide equipment including e-bikes for people to 'try before you buy', adapted cycles and specialist equipment. The hubs will also become centres for expert support, advice and route information for the area.



Additional Measures

- **Parking restrictions**

With strong public support for a wide ranging pavement parking ban across Northern Ireland, policy makers need to consider policy which support this. Pavement parking and parking in cycle lanes bears a lot of responsibility for the negative experience people have when they travel actively. In addition the lack of parking restrictions and enforcement in our cities and town centres means there is no disincentive for people to consider other transport options like cycling.

- **Public Transport changes**

Cycling should be a key part of the public transport infrastructure consideration, with incentives for people to cycle the shorter distances from their homes to transport hubs and built infrastructure e.g. covered cycle parking, safe routes to train stations/park and rides. Casual cycle hire, such as the Belfast Bikes scheme, should be considered by Translink and local councils in town and city centres across the country.

- **Cycling on the curriculum**

Cycling is the third most popular activity amongst children and a crucial life skill. Despite this only a few have access to good quality Bikeability cycle training at school or otherwise. It is vital to be teaching children basic skills of bike handling, hazard perception and the road skills required to deal with the conditions as they are now.

Public Support and Political Challenge

Sustrans showed in their 'Belfast - Walking and Cycling Index 2021' that there is broad support for many of the measures discussed, and people recognise the benefits these changes will bring to their neighbourhoods, health and local economy.

The challenge for politicians however, is that this broad support dips as any change to our environment approaches. The 'Goodwin Curve' phenomenon shows that public support for new transport policies often follows a pattern:

1. Broad support when the policy is explained and understood by the public
2. Support falling when more details emerge and implementation gets closer
3. The lowest levels of support just before, during and after implementation of the policy
4. Following implementation people experience the benefits personally and support rises again

Policy makers and politicians need to be aware of this likely change in public support over time and be prepared to back the policy, but adjust the details in response to peoples experience. In the context of Northern Ireland this can be challenging as more recently Ministers have not had full Assembly terms to see bold policies through long enough to see public support change.

Reference material and further information

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9. **Public support for controversial policies** - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967070X23001415?via%3DiHub>
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