

like-minded company while benefiting from the moral and technical support offered by fellow riders. We don't require our member or affiliate group ride leaders to have formal qualifications, although we strongly recommend they take both ride leader and first aid training courses (see 'Ride leader resources', right).

Ride leaders come from all disciplines and walks of life. They may or may not have great mechanical skills. They may prefer a slow pootle to a head-down blast. Good ones will all be able to put together a pleasant route and tailor the ride to suit the ability and interests of the majority of their riders so that everyone comes back wanting more. Other useful attributes are humour, patience, kindness, confidence and empathy.

Different leaders can bring different things to their rides. Off-road ride leader Gus Cairns, who volunteers at Cycling UK's Dunoon Bothy project in Argyll and Bute, makes a point to find out about the local flora and fauna or historical points of interest. He says this "helps with keeping people engaged and is also a way of allowing everyone to have a breather, particularly after a tough climb." His rides encourage folk to come out in most weathers, with some attending from as far away as Glasgow to explore the stunning terrain and views of the Firth of Clyde.

REAPING THE REWARDS

So what's in it for the ride leaders? Why would anyone go to the effort of voluntarily organising bike rides for others and take on the responsibility that this involves? Gus likes the excuse to be outdoors. He usually leads one ride a week, depending on his work commitments.

CeCe Balfour has recently become a ride leader for Cycling UK-affiliated New Forest Off-Road Club, which was founded in 2020 with "ambitions to set the blueprint for the most inclusive, accessible and diverse, community-led group rides".

CeCe, who rides an ICE Adventure recumbent trike with Enviolo automatic gears and pedal assist, says: "I like seeing people enjoying riding their bikes. I also love meeting new people and catching up with friends. Sometimes I feel nervous when I meet new people, but when I am riding, meeting new people is easier. It's just amazing!"

There are other perks, such as being able to decide where you ride, for how long and at a pace that suits you. You call the shots. Not happy with your group's current offerings? Why not organise your own



“
*You will have
 someone to ride
 with who wants
 you to enjoy cycling
 in the local area as
 much as they do*
 ”

rides and see if others feel the same?

However, providing pleasure to the participants is mainly what makes the role so rewarding, along with the sense of giving something back to the community. Gus's rides, which take in the many miles of fire roads in the Dunoon area and attract people from all walks of life and of all ability levels, focus on improving the riders' mental and physical wellbeing. A recent rider said: "Thank you for allowing me to participate in your led ride today. Although I found the ride challenging, I did enjoy it. I thought that you were very encouraging and I therefore felt safe."

Another participant added: "I've been on several rides with Gus Cairns. He's brimming full of energy and enthusiasm for off-road cycling, really knows his stuff, sets a standard for fun riding, is equally mindful of keeping us safe, as well as encouraging folks with less experience. And he really does know the routes around Dunoon. On top of that, he has a good

grasp of bike mechanics – he saved my bacon on a wintery day, helping out when my fingers couldn't cope with changing a punctured tube. And he can give advice on bike setup as well as riding skills."

WHEELS OF CHANGE

It's not just the physical benefits of being out in the fresh air and enjoying the scenery that make led rides so valuable. Steve Potter runs New Routes Bike project, which has received support from Cycling UK's Vanessa Morris. It is located in Ladywood and Winson Green, a very deprived and diverse area of Birmingham. New Routes is an off-shoot of the Newbigin Community Trust, an organisation that aims to provide a place of "welcome, inclusion and social cohesion for neighbours in the area."

He and fellow ride leaders Jack, Andy and Alex from New Routes organise a led ride for beginners along the extensive canal network in the city every Thursday, with a coffee stop often included. The aim is to give people who struggle with issues such as drug and alcohol addiction not only the confidence to cycle but also the chance to be part of a group and benefit from the camaraderie and sense of belonging this brings.

Steve says: "Many of them have only ever done their own thing, so it can be challenging to keep their focus on the needs of the group, rather than their own immediate priorities. For example, they might suddenly decide they want to stop for a cigarette break. The way to deal

Photos: Gus Cairns, Steve Potter, CeCe Balfour, Lowri Evans