

How cycling can transform Scotland's cities

With the declaration by Nicola Sturgeon of a “climate emergency” we outline why sustainable transport must be understood as critical in any strategy for Scotland to go "further and faster" in tackling climate change. The Scottish Government must achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Net-zero is the point where the same volume of greenhouse gases is being emitted as is being absorbed through offsetting techniques like forestry. Although Scotland has been innovative in carbon reduction, transport remains an Achilles heel. Sustained and strong political leadership in delivering nothing less than transformational change is required.

Drawing on robust international evidence a study out this week for Sport England says that town and city-wide active travel interventions are the most effective at increasing walking, cycling and overall physical activity. Taking a UK example from the study, the Sustainable Travel Towns (2004-09 in Peterborough, Darlington and Worcester/Redditch), all three towns put in place a range of initiatives aiming to encourage more use of non-car options – in particular, bus use, cycling and walking – and to discourage single-occupancy car use. Cycle trips per head across the three towns increased by 26-30% and walking between 13-18%. Between 2008-09 and 2013, both the higher cycling and walking levels were maintained. Key to this success was scale and funding: these programmes were funded at a level that enabled significant changes to be made to the physical environment for walking and cycling supported by behaviour change programmes. This created a synergistic effect of the wide range of interventions. Critically, there was a 7-10% reduction in the number of car driver trips per resident. And all for £10Million shared across the three towns – roughly equivalent to a mile of a new road scheme.

We are about to see more car free days in our Scottish cities, increased pedestrianisation and businesses being supported to transport goods by cargo bikes. This and much more is needed including low speed streets with safe routes to school for children. Bus lanes, signal priority, park and ride and Workplace Parking Levies in Low Emission Zones, also form part of a synergetic package. So fund what we want to see delivered: although the Active Travel budget was doubled from £40 to 80 million in 2017 this funding needs redoubling in gearing up to achieve the 2045 carbon emission reductions target. The major mode share for sustainable travel across much of continental Europe is not culturally driven. It is because decade in, decade out funding has been at over £10 per head of population.

Taking cycling - in urban areas cycling could be a normal, everyday activity by 2040. The latest Sustrans Bike Life report predicts in Edinburgh alone that with adequate funding by 2040 just by more cycling, 47,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions would be saved annually, equivalent to the carbon footprint of 10,000 people. 96,000 kg of nitrogen oxides and 11,000 kg of particulates would be saved annually by removing 226,000 cars from Edinburgh roads every day. Alongside walking and public transport, cycling has the potential to shape and improve how people move around our cities in the future. Such transformation will improve the health of whole populations including through reducing transport-driven inequalities, improve liveability of neighbourhood streets, the civic, cultural and economic vibrancy of Scotland's urban life. Transformational change is the only game in town.

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Reference

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