

Cycling is sustainable and healthy so why aren't more of us on our bikes?

By Wayne Visser

In March 2013, London mayor Boris Johnson – already feted for his pay-as-you-go Boris bikes introduced in 2010 – announced plans for the [longest bike route in any European city](#). This is part of a £1bn bid to double the number of Londoners who cycle over the next decade.

This is certainly welcome news for a city that hopes to [reduce its carbon footprint by 60% by 2025](#). Currently, the average Londoner emits [9.6 tonnes of CO2 per year](#), which is lower than New York (10.5 tonnes), but almost three times Stockholm (3.6 tonnes), despite Sweden having a far colder climate. Cycling is one obvious way to make a dent on our carbon footprint in the west. But are we convinced?

According to [the CTC](#), the UK national cycling association, a person making the average daily commute of four miles each way would save half a tonne of carbon dioxide per year if they switched from driving to cycling per year. If the UK doubled cycle use by switching from cars, this would reduce Britain's total greenhouse emissions by 0.6m tonnes, almost as much as switching all London-to-Scotland air travel to rail.

There are obvious health benefits from cycling as well. [One classic study](#) found that, while people are killed each year in the UK while cycling (in 2012, [122 cyclists died](#)), many others die prematurely because of lack of exercise. The study estimated that regular cycling provides a net benefit to personal health that outweighs its risk of injury by a factor of 20 to one. If anything, the situation is more extreme today, with estimates that, if things don't change, 60% of men and 50% of women [will be obese by 2050](#).

The charity, [PleaseCycle](#) says the benefits of cycling are demonstrated with [some handy statistics](#). It reports that 79% of employees wish their employers had a more positive outlook on cycling and a 20% increase in cycling by 2015 could save £87m in reduced absenteeism. The charity also claims there is up to 12.5% difference in productivity between exercising and non-exercising employees and regular cycling can reduce a person's all-cause mortality rate by up to 36%.

Even the economic benefits are compelling. The specialist economic consultancy [SQW](#) showed that, an increase in cycling by 20% would release [cumulative saving of £500m by 2015](#). A 50% increase on current cycling rates would unlock more than £1.3bn, by reducing the costs of congestion, pollution and healthcare.

So why aren't more of us cycling? Surely it's not that we're all just lazy? This is where I believe we can learn some lessons from other countries – the Netherlands in particular. The Dutch have turned cycling into a national pastime and the bicycle into a cultural icon: wherever you go in the country, there are swift-flowing rivers of cyclists.

The population of the Netherlands is under 17 million – roughly twice that of New York or London – yet they make more cycle journeys than 313 million Americans, 63 million British and 22 million Australians put together, and they do so with greater safety than cyclists in any of those countries. Londoners only make around 2% of journeys by bike, and New Yorkers even fewer, at only around 0.6% of commutes. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands on an average working day, [five million people](#) make an average of 14m cycle journeys.

So why, in an age desperate for more sustainable transport solutions, has the Netherlands succeeded so spectacularly where others have tried and failed? There seem to be a few obvious

reasons. First, the country is relatively flat. Second, it is fairly small, so vehicle space is at a premium. Third, the government has invested heavily in supporting infrastructure including bike lanes and storage facilities. And fourth, cycling is complemented by a well-developed public transport system of trains, buses and trams.

There is also the very important issue of safety – both perceived and actual. The accident statistics show that the Netherlands is the safest place in the world to cycle. There is obviously a safety in numbers effect, and good infrastructure design is vital. But there are also legal sanctions. For example, there is an interesting law in the Netherlands, which makes car drivers financially responsible in the event of a crash with bikers. Of course, there is a cultural effect as well. Since everyone cycles regularly, there is a prevailing empathy and safety awareness on the roads.

Back in the UK, the signs are encouraging. According to the charity [Sustrans](#), in 2011, there was a [15% increase in trips](#) on the National Cycle Network, with 484m journeys made by 3.3 million individuals. The estimated health benefits of all this activity were worth £442m.

There are also some neat innovations. For example, PleaseCycle has an app that helps companies to engage their employees and help them to track their bike-miles and associated benefits such as carbon savings. [Aegis Media](#) used the app for its three main London offices during the 2012 Olympics. By signing up just 5% of its workforce, more than 800 journeys were logged and 5,000 bike-miles were clocked up over a four-week period. The 1.5 tonnes of CO2 saved was equivalent to flying from London to Paris six times.

Admittedly, it's not quite a revolution yet, but there are at least signs of an uprising – slowly but surely, more and more of us are rising up-off the sofa, out of the car seat and onto our bikes

Article reference

Visser, W. (2013) Cycling is sustainable and healthy so why aren't more of us on our bikes? *The Guardian*, 20 June 2013.

Source

Published as part of Wayne Visser's International Sustainable Business column for *The Guardian*.

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