

# To ensure cyclists get a good deal, do we have to annoy people?

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“Timid half-hearted improvements are out – we will do things at least adequately, or not at all.” That phrase, from (then) London mayor Boris Johnson’s Vision for Cycling in 2013 marked a significant change in planning for cycle infrastructure in London – and potentially the whole country. It implicitly acknowledged that British local authorities were suffering from delusions of adequacy. The phrase “or not at all” raises an interesting question for transport planners working on cycling infrastructure: is no deal better than a bad deal?

A bad deal is what passes for normal in most of Britain. The first phases of the new cycle superhighways in London are the only urban cycle routes I have ever seen here that could compare to European good practice. They are not yet complete but by autumn of last year they had already increased cycling flows by around 50% along their routes.

The key factor that unlocked this step change was a decision by Boris Johnson and his cycling commissioner Andrew Gilligan to abandon the usual British practice of design by compromise. Since his departure, Gilligan has described what he learned in that post as: “to get anything done... you have to annoy people”. Objections from some of the boroughs and many vested interests were overridden, provoking a political backlash and a great deal of nonsense about the alleged impacts on traffic congestion. (The roadworks during construction have caused some localised congestion but to understand the big picture on traffic congestion in London, read the London Assembly’s report, *London Stalling*.)

I had several occasions to reflect on the London experience during a recent ride across central Scotland to speak at the national active travel conference in Glasgow and to look at progress on cycling infrastructure in Edinburgh. Guided by Peter Hawkins and Dave du Feu of Spokes, the Lothian Cycle Campaign, I took a ride around Edinburgh’s cycle network, looking at places where changes are planned and some where serious problems remain.

Edinburgh is clearly one of the better British cities for cycling, although that is not a high standard compared to European good practice. The best elements of the network are opportunistic: on disused railway lines, through parks and along canals where paths have been widened and hard surfaced – places where progress can be made without upsetting vested interests. In between these fragments the networks exist only on a map. Two tiny examples of segregated path along roads have recently been built but there are also many shared pavements, a feature that has done so much damage to active travel in Britain.

Spokes has been working with, and sometimes against, the authorities for 40 years and they can point to several areas of progress, as well as some ludicrous situations where their input was

ignored. The route through the new Exchange 2 development reminded me of a fairground labyrinth – with none of the fun.

Edinburgh is planning its own east-west cycling “superhighway” – the media has given it that name but the council calls it the “city centre west to east cycle link”. Sadly, it will fall a long way short of the standard set by London. Much of it will be segregated but the plans on the council’s website show some two-way sections just two metres in width. The design is the result of many compromises. The initial plans provoked much opposition from councillors and businesses; some of the compromises were made to gain all-party approval on a council with no overall majority.

At the active travel conference I shared the platform with Lesley Hinds who was the councillor responsible for transport in Edinburgh until earlier this year. She led the consultation and negotiations that rescued the plans for the west to east cycle route. We agreed on several points but disagreed on one: I argued that British local authorities are too ready to appease NIMBY objectors by changing plans for cycle paths, making them ineffective. Similar objections would never be allowed to sabotage the strategic road network in that way.

Lesley replied that she believes in public consultation and that, without it, the west to east cycle route would never have been approved. Dave du Feu believes Edinburgh is a good example of a city where infrastructure of limited value in the early years helped to increase rates of cycling and this strengthened the case for continuing improvements. The same could also be said of a few English cities but not the country as a whole. Census data for the Government-backed English Cycling Demonstration Towns showed that four achieved a significant increase in cycle commuting: Cambridge, Bristol, Brighton and Exeter. In the other 14 cycle commuting was static or fell between 2001 and 2011.

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Did the quality of the infrastructure partly explain the differences between those cities? We do not know; clearly other factors were at play. We know that building a joined-up segregated cycle network combined with some traffic restraint can create a cycling culture where none existed before. This occurred in Seville, where the network was built from scratch over just four years. There is strong circumstantial evidence, from Cambridge as well as some continental cities, that filtered permeability – removing through traffic and creating short-cuts for other modes – can increase rates of cycling. We also know from several British studies that building individual cycle paths to British design standards has little or no impact on modal choice. But in between those extremes it is unclear, and probably impossible to prove, what causes what.

So the question at the beginning of this article, ‘is no deal better than a bad deal?’ remains open. To move beyond this dilemma we need some other towns or cities to follow the example of London’s cycle superhighways and build a first-rate fit-for-purpose network. Could that be yours?