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# Who put the brakes on cycling in Britain?

By [Peter Cox](http://theconversation.com/profiles/peter-cox-93403),  
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Making a city more bicycle-friendly is not simply a matter of painting a few lines and installing parking spaces. It requires cities to work with cyclists as participants in redesigning the city. Ensuring that riding a bike is not just the province of young, macho, urban-warrior types, and that road users respect each other and that traffic is calmed. Real political commitment and leadership is vital to this process.

This year's index of the world's 150 most [bicycle-friendly cities](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/) from Copenhagenize.com defines 13 separate categories that make everyday cycling practical and enjoyable. Managing the use of cars in city centres and encouraging alternatives to them factor heavily in improving the liveability and attractiveness of a city for investment. Rankings of the world's top cities produced by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Liveability2012) and [Monocle](http://monocle.com/) feature bike-friendly cities highly.

A city that provides welcoming space for cyclists allows greater social interaction, lower noise levels, reduces congestion and stress levels as well as benefiting from increased [general health and well-being](http://allpartycycling.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/get-britain-cycling_**_goodwin-report.pdf).

This is not simply an issue for an alternative travel enthusiast minority. From our top 150 cycling friendly cities, the obvious candidates of [Amsterdam](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/01.html) and [Copenhagen](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/02.html) still top the list. More remarkable, however, are the new entrants such as [Seville](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/04.html) and [Nantes](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/06.html); both have used hosting an international [Velo-city conference](http://www.ecf.com/projects/velo-city-2/) to publicly declare their commitment to change priorities for urban mobility. They have realised that benefit-to-cost ratio of investment in cycling infrastructure is higher than from other transport investments, and that increasing cycling numbers has significant economic impact [in its own right](http://corporate.sky.com/documents/pdf/publications/the_british_cycling_economy).

<p>Not a single British city makes the grade. London slid out of its <a href="http://copenhagenize.eu/index/2011.html">previous top 20 position</a> partly, one suspects, through a failure to capitalise on initial enthusiasm for city transformation, guided by clear leadership for city-wide planning (rather than devolved to boroughs), and a tendency to prioritise high visibility flagship projects over the necessary everyday details. Boris bikes and superhighways look good but are icing, not the cake itself. Other cities such as Bordeaux, Antwerp and Tokyo have lifted their game considerably to eclipse London, which has seen little real advance the past two years.</p>

<p>So what are the barriers, and how do we overcome them? There is no single magic recipe to transform a city. There has to be commitment. Most European cities have the advantage of working within <a href="http://www.ecf.com/projects/national-cycling-officers-network/">National Cycling Strategies</a>, something lacking in the UK. Even without this, where a city has a degree of autonomy it can arrive at its own solutions. Unfortunately again, the budgetary and spending constraints on local administrations in Britain makes this very difficult.</p>

<p><a href="http://copenhagenize.eu/index/16.html">Rio de Janeiro</a> scored highly this year from political and practical commitments to boost cycling as a substitute for the short car journeys responsible for much of the city's air pollution. Cycling lanes, locking posts and facilities have been integrated into public transport networks, and awareness campaigns have raised the social status of cycling.</p>

<p>The environmental benefits are matched by economic and social benefits. Bicycle journeys are relatively egalitarian, available to the slick rider of an imported European superbike as well as the local cargo-cycle delivery rider, distributing water cooler bottles or market vegetables. With increasing fuel prices and often gridlocked streets, the economic benefits to rapid, short distance delivery services by bike are obvious.</p>

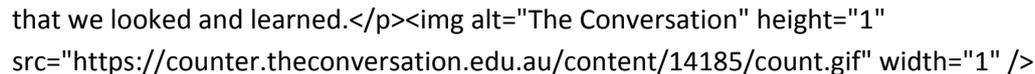
<p>But in Britain, the frequent verbal abuse and physical intimidation experienced by many cyclists suggests a widespread view of riders as deviant road users: experiences <a href="e.g.http://thinkingaboutcycling.wordpress.com/category/cycling-struggles/">widely shared on social media</a>. Changing attitudes requires institutional commitment, and intolerance of abuse towards cyclists should be central.</p>

<p>Helmets, as the Copenhagenize study recognises, are no solution. Indeed promotion campaigns serve to present cycling as an unsafe and scary activity only viable with protective clothing. Where

riding is normal daily practice (like that equally risky activity, walking) as in the Netherlands, helmet use by adults is negligible.

“Social Acceptance” is an explicit category in the Copenhagenize survey, underpinning a broad culture where riding is unremarkable, rather than something commented on constantly. Investment in new cycling road infrastructure has been touted as a way to spark economic regeneration, but I only ever hear it described as spending that local authorities can ill-afford. Years of entrenched thinking underpin erroneous assumptions not based on the best available evidence.

Cities and local authorities need to make clear, public commitments to improve life for cyclists in Britain. Second-class, incoherent, poorly planned cycle-lanes and paths won't make people change the way they travel. Good practice is not hard to find across a number of European cities; it's time that we looked and learned.



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