

Sustainable Transport. Workshop 3.

A Cross Border Regional Cycling Network?

Gordon Clarke, National Director of Sustrans Ireland presented a compelling picture of how cycling is maturing, not only as a leisure or commuting activity but as a focus of family and community activity. Boosted by the growing mileage of Greenway cycle paths, often linked to natural or tourist heritage features, cycling has caught our imagination to the extent that we are being strongly challenged to ask "What and where next?"

Cycling has different faces in urban and rural areas. In urban areas we have become familiar with traffic free lanes and facilities for cycle storage at work and at transport hubs. More children are cycling to school and home to office trips are increasing. In rural areas it was common to cycle on short business and social trips but as we lead lives linked to more dispersed employment locations and service facilities rural cycling has changed to have a recreational focus....A world where people travel for perceived health benefits and to enjoy our natural environment rather than necessity.

Investment in cycling has doubled between 2005 and 2013. Dedicated cycle pathways yield over 485 million trips/year. New pathway projects have been envisaged and achieved by community level groups rather than by central or local government initiatives. Much of this has been secured by making one off funding bids...a case of opportunities seized rather than planned programmes maturing.

Surveys show that 50% of network use is by walkers. The main user is a walking or cyclist tourist who values our natural or heritage environment. Next are local leisure groups who use only parts of the network at any one time. So the value of a network does not necessarily equate to available length as much as its perceived social or health bringing value. Networks are favoured locations for displaying public art and as venues for charity fundraising activity. The double win-win could also be that much of this cycling/walking network is built and maintained by community volunteers who derive immense community and personal benefit from that shared experience.

Gordon asked us to consider where all this now leads us and how best to secure and add to the benefits already realised. This raises a number of challenges. Should there be a Masterplan for urban and rural cycle ways which, in turn, links places of interest with land opportunities such as quiet roads and abandoned railway tracks? Could there be a plan to link all service centres with a population of 10,000 or more? Who should lead and be the coordinating organisation ensuring a consistent approach to design and land acquisition issues, costs, funding sources, phasing, maintenance and management, marketing and promotion?

The immediate response from participants was that there was no single organisation which stands out to take on all the challenges presented. Needs vary at national, regional and local levels and with different user groups. There is also the challenge of coordination between jurisdictions on the island of Ireland where many cycle and walk ways crisscross our land border. It was agreed that leadership and cooperation is essential to achieving anything more than local successes. A positive note was made that new local government structures, North and South of the island, with enhanced development powers and responsibility for community planning, and as possible signatories to an Irish Border Development Corridor Solidarity Charter, could provide a solid platform from which ideas and projects can spring forward.

One contributor warned against handing everything over to a monolith national organisation which might adopt its own priorities and stifle the enthusiasm generated at community level. Another pointed out that there was a lack of clarity around the benefits of cycle ways and cycling. Was it health, was it a form of transport or was it to encourage tourism? Perhaps the "essential mix" of all of these benefits was difficult for government to pin down in policy and spending programme development? Yet another contributor suggested that the way ahead may need to be innovative in the way that the London Olympic strategy sought to engage the private sector in realising lasting post-games community benefits similar to the "Barcelona Model".

Other suggestions included an Integrated Transport Card to permit cross-border travel along separated parts of a long distance route. Buses and trains need to have a capacity to carry cycles. Cycleway surfaces need to be tarmac to be safe and comfortable to use. And more thought should be given to linking up scenic and historic features as a key to earning more from tourism. For example, a path linking Irish Blue ways along the abandoned Ulster Canal route to Lough Neagh and beyond could promote fresh educational interest as well as long distance walking or cycling. There are already exemplars in Europe such as RHONE 1200KM.

In conclusion, this session showed enthusiasm for continued support for extending Green ways and cycle ways but no readymade solutions to the challenges raised. It was agreed that more now needs to be done to promote and realise the strategic value of such networks and to build on the success of organisations like Sustrans. Cycle ways are much more than safe routes for cyclists, they are vital in many ways to community building. The best immediate opportunity is probably to give even more support to community-based schemes.

The key will be to secure consistent funding. The Welsh and UK Governments in recent policy changes now recognise that cycling infrastructure belongs in the "infrastructure big kit" basket and will fund accordingly. But reliable funding is far from implementing plans and projects. We need leaders and champions to take over the middle ground between national government and local communities where the enthusiasm for challenge and hard work is so evident. That could be the new

Councils exercising Community Planning powers alongside their mandate to invest in local economic development. In this vein, and concluding with a question, should the new champions of sustainable transport be the new councils, North and South?

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