

# Cycling in Reading

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[research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research](https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research)

# CYCLING IN READING

## 1. Introduction

This research opens an investigation into local attitudes to cycling. The aim was to find out how cycling could be made more appealing to Reading's residents.

The research was carried out between July and September 2020 by the Whitley Researchers (part of WCDA) in collaboration with the University of Reading.<sup>1</sup>

A questionnaire was circulated in which residents were asked about:

- Their transport habits;
- The positives and negatives of cycling and their interest in cycling more;
- The things that make cycling difficult (including perceived danger spots for cyclists) and the things that have helped;
- How the pandemic has affected cycling habits;
- Ideas for promoting cycling in Reading.

## 2. Profile of respondents

23 interviews were carried out, mostly in South and central Reading, with just few responses to the East and West of these locations. Most of the respondents described themselves as White British. There was a fairly even split between male and female interviewees, and their ages ranged from teens through to people in their sixties, with a particular weighting towards respondents in their fifties.

The most regularly cited forms of transport were cars and walking. After this, around half the respondents said they were regular cyclists (defined here as using their bikes more than once a month) and half were not. Buses and taxis were used regularly by around a third of the respondents in this survey.

Note that the proportion of respondents in this survey who cycled is higher than a representative sample of the population would predict since our researchers took care to select some regular cyclists for this survey. ONS<sup>2</sup> data is more representative, and this suggests that in 2018, 42% of the UK population over the age of five had access to a bike, and 11% of the population said that they cycled at least once a week. Males were found to cycle more frequently than females both in the ONS data and in our own survey.

## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 Interest in cycling more:

A majority of cyclists were keen to cycle more than they already do, *and even around half of those who did not regularly cycle* expressed an interest in cycling more. This implies latent demand for cycling which could be tapped given the right provisions.

Having said that, for the significant minority who were simply not interested in cycling, changing external conditions is unlikely to change behaviours:

*"I would never get on a bike, however much you paid me."*

*"I'm not a fan of cycling."*

### 3.2 The positives of cycling:

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<sup>1</sup>The lead researcher was Sally Lloyd-Evans. The research team included Naomi Lee, Sandra Clare, Liz Ashcroft and Sonia Duval. Lorna Zischka drafted this report on the data collected. We gratefully acknowledge all who participated in this survey,

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/821842/walking-and-cycling-statistics-2018-accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/821842/walking-and-cycling-statistics-2018-accessible.pdf)

- Enjoying cycling played an important part in the decision to cycle and certainly influenced the desire to cycle *more*, and yet was only cited as a key motivation by about half the respondents.
- Respondents were at least as motivated by wanting to keep fit – “*Keeping fit*,” and, “*weight loss*” were top motivations mentioned by 85% of cyclists.
- Respondents were also motivated by the convenience of cycling: “*Cycling is quicker than walking*,” and “*Cycling is good for town due to traffic and parking difficulties*.”
- Likewise, cycling saves using the car so much, and this was felt to be good for the environment (“*I feel like I’ve done my bit towards pollution*.”), for finances (“*Cheaper than a bus pass*,”) and for others in the family who need to use the car (“*Husband/wife needs the car sometimes*.”)
- Many parents were keen to get their teenagers cycling so that the teenagers can get around independently, avoid the expense of the bus, and keep fit. Just a few also mentioned cycling as a family hobby.

### 3.3 How the pandemic had affected cycling habits

One third of respondents (all demographics) felt that Covid-19 had impacted their cycling. They had, “*Started cycling more*.” It was frequently mentioned that there is less chance of Covid-19 transmission on a bike compared to the bus, and also that it is, “*Easier to social distance when I’m out with my mates*.” Respondents also mentioned having found more time to cycle and having rethought some values.

Even people who did not feel their *own* habits had changed were positive – they cited the advantages of cycling in terms of social distancing, fitness and enjoyment. For example:

*“In fact, I think it highlights the need for fitness and independence to get to work and social distancing. Cycling can be an enjoyable experience as well as a means to get somewhere. Children use it as a social event but as we become older most of us give up and opt for a car/van.”*

“Very happy to see people out and about more on bikes.”

### 3.4 The negatives of cycling and barriers to cycling

- The most important limitations centred around:
  - Not feeling safe on the road. This was a top concern, mentioned by half the respondents, whether cyclists or not.
  - Worries that bikes will be stolen – also mentioned by almost half the respondents, and being a common reason why people who do not already cycle do not start.

There was a statistically significant link between these two limitations and wanting to cycle *more*, suggesting that road safety and bike security are key factors limiting cycling.

- People who lacked confidence or who faced health and fitness limitations were not keen on cycling more than they do – they were just not interested.
- Convenience was also seen to be an intractable problem – some journeys are simply not suitable for cycling. For instance,
  - When transporting small children or luggage - “*[Bikes are] not always practical on cooking days or PE days as too much in back pack or extra bags*.” “*Less children to care for (ha, ha). If someone’s hurt I can monitor or help if I’m walking*.” “*It is easier in a car/van to pop into a shop on the way home from work*.”
  - When needing to arrive quickly or in a clean and tidy state – “*It is quicker in a car*.” “*If I cycle to work... there is nowhere to change*.”
  - When wanting protection from bad weather - “*A car/van keeps you warmer in the winter and protects you from the elements*.”
  - When wanting to socialise with others whilst travelling – “*Walking is more sociable*.” “*[A barrier to cycling is the] inability to travel together with people quite as much*.”

### 3.5 What might be done to promote more cycling in Reading.

#### 1. Make the roads safer

Safety is priority. The following aspects of safety were mentioned, with associated recommendations:

- The busyness of roads was the baseline problem:

*"Busy Roads. I was knocked off on Oxford Road in 2012."*

*"Roundabouts for me as cars are coming in all directions."*

Controlling traffic and attending to perceived danger spots along busy roads and junctions is important. Examples given of danger spots included all the busy main roads and junctions where no joined up, dedicated cycle routes were available. It was said that, *"Danger spots for cars will definitely be danger spots for cyclists."* More cycle lanes were wanted and more consideration for cyclists from other road users.

- Wanting more cycle lanes:

*"Cycle paths would make a huge difference to how I feel about using my bike."*

*"Cycle paths needing to be increased in number."*

*"Cycle paths 100% would help!!!!"*

A strong majority (65%) *disagreed* with the statement that, 'there are sufficient cycle paths in my area,' and only 15% agreed with the statement. Dissatisfaction with the number of cycle paths was the same whether the respondent was a regular cyclist or not, and the following requests were made:

- More paths were wanted on busy roads and junctions
- Joined up cycle routes were wanted, not just partial provision
- It was felt to be safer when cycle routes were dedicated to cyclists, and not shared with buses or pedestrians. *"There can be a risk of collision if cyclists share a path with other modes of transport such as cars and pedestrians."* On the subject of buses it was said that, *"When I'm on the bus I noticed cyclists use bus lanes and drivers get cross, sometimes but I don't blame cyclists."* *"In my opinion I feel the buses are the biggest danger."* And about pedestrians it was said, *"Idiot pedestrians who wear headphones and cannot hear bell!!"* People asked for, *"Designated cycle paths."*
- The cycle routes need to be well maintained and smooth for travel – *"Better-quality paths - the bike path along London road is very uneven to ride on."*

- Fearing abuse from other road users (abusive pedestrians were mentioned as well as intimidating drivers) was another safety issue that discourages cycling:

*"Drivers don't like cyclists."*

*"Motorists are not patient or kind towards cyclists."*

*"Too many cars on the road who don't give cyclists enough room on the road."*

It was felt to be important to educate other road users so that they have a positive attitude towards cyclists and give them more space.

*"There needs to be more education towards cyclists and a better understanding for both sides."*

*"Friendlier drivers."*

*"Attitudes towards cyclists are very negative from motorists. How can this be altered and improved both ways? As more and more people take to the roads, we should be addressing this not just making people get on their bikes!"*

- The problem of potholes in the road is a fourth safety issue

*"Pot holes in the road, motorists don't see."*

*"Road repairs not good and also potholes."*

The filling of potholes in the road was requested as these are a danger to cyclists

Safety also depends on *cyclists* using the roads safely:

*"They sometimes weave across the road without indication therefore putting themselves and motorists at risk."*

Thus the need for more education for cyclists was expressed as well, promoting cycling in a safe manner for other road users. Likewise, children need supervising so that they learn to use the road safely.

*"Help with road safety at younger age."*

*"RG2 Bike Crew!! Someone needs to do something - these children/teens are causing havoc in Whitley - it's dangerous. I'm worried somebody will get hurt. If there's somewhere they could go with their bikes it may help. You can't just always blame the children if there isn't anything for them to do. Teenagers need supervision."*

*"Better education about cycling... How to use the roads properly."*

- Positive mention was made of cycling proficiency lessons in schools. Parents who wanted to get their teenagers cycling safely and independently were particularly appreciative. Maintaining these lessons is a priority, besides the promotion of safe cycling more generally.
- It was said that cyclists pose a hazard to themselves when they do not use lights, do not wear helmets or high viz. clothing, or wear earphones.

*"Can we as a society/area/group encourage and to some extent enforce safety measures with the use of cycles? You wouldn't go on an ice rink without skates or ride a horse without safety equipment!"*

It was recommended that the use of protective equipment should be promoted by:

- Advertising safety equipment on display boards
  - Educating in the classroom - *"Cycle helmets! Kids would wear them if they saw what happens with an accident. Bike helmet graphic photos. Cigarette packets have horrid images."*
  - Only selling bikes with protective equipment
  - Having safety equipment give-aways
  - Promoting good role models
- It was acknowledged that cyclists can be intimidating to pedestrians when they ride fast on pavements.

*"Cycling on pavements is dangerous for pedestrians - even grown adults with little traffic use the pavements - are they not confident?"*

*"They cycle on footpaths because of traffic or to get exercise in the countryside and sometimes go fast and close to pedestrians."*

In spite of this however, it is clear that the respondents did not want to discourage cycling and only 11% of respondents agreed with the statement that, 'cyclists pose a danger to other people.' Emphasis was rather put on the need to educate both cyclists and pedestrians in a safer and more considerate use of the shared paths.

## 2. Increase security for bikes

Bad experiences of cycle theft had left long-term concerns that bikes would not be safe if used.

*"My wife had her bike stolen from outside Oracle in 2011."*

*"Better security for bikes in town."*

*"Bike theft - Town centre. Once got stolen from garden shed."*

Lack of police action on behalf of those with stolen bicycles further damaged confidence.

*"Cycle theft... I feel police not interested. They see it as petty crime but reality is most cycles are important as most people's car."*

*"No compensation even though the thief was caught and convicted."*

The police need to demonstrate that they take cycling theft seriously and there are consequences for thieves in order to restore confidence that bikes will be safe if used.

People also wanted more secure places for storing/locking their bike up.

*"Nowhere to secure my cycle (not necessarily a valuable bike. However, it's my means of transport). When I'm in my car I have an allocated space but there is nothing in place for my cycle."*

*"Security of my bike is a major consideration. Being able to lock safely or put in to a bike shed or shelter."*

*"Somewhere suitable to lock my bike as it was my birthday present and I don't want to lose it and upset my parents as they paid a lot of money for it."*

*"Not sure where to padlock it when I get to shops so that it secure."*

Providing secure places for locking up bikes may therefore encourage the use of bikes.

### 3. Advertise the advantages of cycling

Fitness, convenience, cost-effectiveness, environmental advantages and less traffic congestion were all noted as reasons people cycle – and bringing these into public consciousness may help. Moreover, it was seen to be important to provide cyclists with a positive image that encourages those who cycle and ensures that those who do not still express a positive attitude towards cyclists, young and old.

*"More positive vibes around cycling not all youngsters/teens are up to no good on their bikes. It seems to me as a primary school child its ok to ride on the pavement but as soon as you are 10/11 society thinks you should ride on the road but cars/buses/lorries see us as children and we are in their way. I don't always understand when I'm with my mum I can ride on pavement and people are polite to me but when I with my friend adults tell me to use the road???" – Teenager response*

The following suggestions were made to promote the image of cycling:

- Hold promotion days
- Advertise cycling on display boards
- Encourage young people to cycle in schools
- Role models who cycle are important

### 4. Make it more convenient and cheaper for cyclists to access equipment and repair services

Suggestions to improve access to equipment included:

- Provide readily available repair points and bike shops - *"Easier access to bike repair and maintenance (our local bike shop is closed since lockdown)."* *"Access to cheap bike repair."*
- Recycle abandoned bikes
- Loan system for bikes, providing for those who want to borrow rather than own – *"Cost incentive."*
- Have cycling give-aways
- Electric bikes and tandems were both mentioned as a soft way into cycling.

### 5. Promote cycling for pleasure e.g. via bike clubs and countryside cycle routes

The idea of forming a club for cycling together and learning about bike maintenance was immediately put to respondents. About a quarter of them were interested and a few more said 'maybe'. These all enjoyed cycling, whether or not they currently did so on a regular basis. Males (of all ages) were especially interested. Those who were *not* interested either were not into cycling or were happy with things as they were. Although 65% were not interested, there could be sufficient interest even from this small sample to take the idea of forming a club forward.

70% of the respondents agreed, when asked, that they were interested in more off-road provision, whether or not they were regular cyclists). Providing countryside cycle routes (and cycle access to them) could also be a way to promote cycling then.

## Conclusion

Even this small survey showed that there is some latent demand for cycling which could be tapped into with appropriate provision for cyclists in Reading. Key areas for action include (1) making cycling safer (especially by providing off-road cycle ways, preferably dedicated to cyclists), (2) increasing security for bikes and police protection, (3) educating the public in order to change attitudes to cycling and to promote a safer use of roads (4) providing opportunity – which means increased access to equipment and cycle clubs or places to go.