

Spokes Public Meeting 8 April 2013
The Future of Local Transport
Notes from the Meeting

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Speakers:

Iain Docherty, Professor of Public Policy, Glasgow University. A top academic expert on transport trends and policies in Scotland.

Jim Eadie MSP, Co-convener of the Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Cycling Group

Cllr Jim Orr, City of Edinburgh Council, Vice-Convener of Transport, with special responsibility for cycling policy

Chair: Paul Tetlaw, Spokes member and member of Transform Scotland board.

Summary:

Between 110 and 120 people showed up at our busiest Spokes Public Meeting for many years. Nearly all seats were taken and we were treated to three interesting presentations and a lively discussion.

First we heard from **Iain Docherty** in a challenging, provocative and humorous speech, starting with a declaration of his status as a 'militant pedestrian' annoyed by those cyclists who run red lights. However he rapidly got the audience on-side with a convincing picture of changing transport trends, not yet appreciated by most decision-makers, and how our streets could be transformed for the benefit to all if politicians could be persuaded to take brave but sensible decisions.

From his academic perspective, Prof Docherty could engage at a bolder level than the two politician speakers, **Jim Eadie MSP** and **Cllr Jim Orr**, who are more limited by the political realities in which they work. Their comments were therefore correspondingly less ambitious, although we know them to be among the most committed local politicians in terms of understanding the potential of cycling for local transport and accessibility – an indication of how far we have to go to change the current political culture on transport! As Jim Eadie said, in response to a question, “*we are chipping away to get support from colleagues, without which it does not happen*” - support from the public in the form of continuing emails and letters from constituents to their own MSPs on cycling policy issues was vital.

Prof Iain Docherty:

We are at or beyond **peak car** – car use reached a peak prior to the start of the recession, and has started to decline subsequently. Driving licenses amongst young people have fallen drastically in recent years, with one theory being that social media and technologies are taking over the former role of the car as a status symbol. These trends are apparent not just in Scotland, but in the US and many of the advanced European countries. [*Spokes note*: This is reflected in our own traffic counts which not only show continuing growth in bike use, but a continuing decline in private car traffic – see 'traffic_counts' in the 'topics' cloud on the spokes website].

As a result of peak car, the traditional arguments that we have to keep building to accommodate car-use growth are no longer convincing. We are at a crossroads, and we should make decisions about what kind of place we want to live in in future. At the same time, politicians are not ready for this, which shows in the current state of public policy, with continuing massive road projects and 'toys for the boys.'

Despite falling car use and rising rail use, we are walking and cycling less than ever - the Active Transport agenda is not working. [*Spokes note*: although cycle use has been static or declining across Scotland and the UK as a whole over the last 10-20 years, it has risen, substantially, in Edinburgh, as shown by the Scottish Household Survey and by our own Spokes counts. Possible reasons for this difference are discussed in the 15 November 2011 news item on our website. A general pattern is also apparent in Scotland of declining cycle use in rural areas, but a degree of growth in some larger urban areas, notably Edinburgh].

Government transport policy tends to be about building things/projects, to 'satisfy the economy', yet there should be a focus on **outcomes** – including reduction of carbon footprint and an improvement in the quality of the environment in which we all move around every day.

There are currently many '**critical uncertainties**' which provide a chance to really influence the agenda. Technology is changing - we don't know what this will bring next – for example, electric cars may take off widely, or may fail. Demographics are changing - an older population will have to stop driving and will perhaps make more demands on public transport. Social identity of young people is not tied up with driving in the same way as it used to - there are significantly fewer new drivers especially young males.

'Transport creates the utilities of place.' It is about what kinds of places the means of transport take us to and from, and how they create a particular kind of place. 'What kind of a place do we want to live in?' is the main question. Then, how much space can we take from cars? There needs to be a focus on how people wish to interact. We therefore need to stop talking about 'cycling' or about 'bus' but about 'Edinburgh' as a place with a population with a range of needs.

With retail reductions of 30% forecast in the coming years, out-of-town centres may be on the way out. Town centres can become slower and friendlier places that support people, not vehicles. Examples were shown of France where this is seen to be perfectly possible - Nice and Strasbourg where trams, bikes and pedestrians intermingle in central areas, with few or no cars to be seen. These were contrasted with pictures of Princes Street, with pedestrians marooned on an island between lanes of heavy traffic.

The unresolved question is how we achieve this in the current political Scottish and Edinburgh context? How do we convince the politicians to take a step away from their car-obsessions?

Prof Docherty recommended the following books for further information...

Flint and Raco: *Future of Sustainable Cities*

Jane Jacob: *Death and Life of US Cities*

Cllr Jim Orr

“Our vision is that by 2030, Edinburgh's transport system will be one of the greenest, healthiest and most accessible in northern Europe.”

Currently 35% of work trips on foot, 7.3% by bike. Cycling has quadrupled since the 1990s. Graph showed an increase in parallel with the increase in investment in cycle facilities; similarly, an increase in bus use paralleling increases in bus lanes.

Local Transport Strategy consultation – includes consideration of 'vision zero' (no road deaths); 20mph zones throughout the city; parking policy to tackle the problem of parking on cycle lanes.

There are powerful factors in a pro-cycling direction: including, expensive penalties for missing air quality targets; a growing dedicated cycle budget; much increased cycle staffing; the Cycle Forum allowing for better networking; bikeability training increasing and targeted to 100% in next few years; gritting of cycleways budgeted in winter so that cycling can be done all year round. The ATAP [Active Travel Action Plan] and other projects include proposals for pedestrianizing parts of George Street and Princes Street and there are similar plans for the Royal Mile [Spokes note: no reference was made to the fact that the current Princes Street plan would not provide traffic-free cycling, leaving only westbound cycling in the one-way bus/taxi lane].

Key challenges are: the need for more match funding; getting the big projects right; keeping cycle lanes clear from parking; achieving an annual increase in budget (6% this year, hopefully up to 7% next year, assuming councillors sticks to current policies in a tight financial climate); improving perceptions of cycling, as safe, convenient, efficient.

In order to keep politicians positive on cycling, we need to build on the positive image of cycling in Edinburgh, so councillors feel the budget is worthwhile. We also need more cycling champions, like the Council leader, Cllr Andrew Burns, who cycles to work every day.

Jim Eadie MSP

We bring about change through political leadership, so that there is more support for investment and there is a culture of planning cycling into all levels. There is now a Parliamentary Cross-Party Group: in this way we can work on increasing interest and participation from more and more MSPs. Jim Eadie [SNP MSP] and Alison Johnstone MSP [Green] are co-conveners of the CPCG, and have now been joined as CPCG organisers by Claudia Beamish MSP [Labour].

Scotland needs a step change in cycling investment, Jim is lobbying his own government party [SNP] for adequate cycling investment and needs the maximum public support, for example from the people in today's audience. Constructive dialogue with Government and councils, MSPs and councillors, is the best way forward towards raising the profile of cycling and cycling investment.

His recent talks with Finance Secretary John Swinney had succeeded in an additional one-off sum recently, but nothing like enough for the ongoing step-change required.

He is also reviewing 20 mph zones, and trying to raise the provision of cycle training. It is important to monitor progress so that we can campaign for further moves.

He was keen to see one or more on-road 'exemplary' segregated lane projects in Scotland, to try and raise cycle use substantially and show the way towards cycling as a normal activity open to everyone. Lobbying government for funding for such a scheme is a major priority for himself and the other two leading CPCG MSPs.

QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION

How can we achieve modal shift and reducing car use?

ID: reduce road space for vehicles; re-allocation of limited space is the only way forward.

JO: link networks better; start with one world-class route.

ID: We have to be prepared for some political flak. Copenhagen had trouble when it started re-allocating space, but it persisted.

JE: we politicians who actively support cycling are in the big minority and we work away slowly, chipping away at this theme to get the support from colleagues, without which it does not happen. Who can blaze the trail on this will be regarded as brave just now, but will get the credit later. We need to take risks.

Nice routes, etc. are a distraction: we need decent basics like road surface fit for cyclists, police reinforcing bad behaviour like speeding, and other dangerous behaviour on part of cars and convictions for reckless driving.

JE: But good routes create less conflict and allows less confident potential cyclists to take it up.

JO: training for all will also create more people who expect to be cycling.

Why has there never been any reinforcement of 20mph zones?

JO: We cannot tell the police what they do. Average speed has come down – we will soon see this from the South Edinburgh pilot. When it comes to be everywhere, it will gradually become accepted and calm traffic generally in the longer term. But other basics are also important: road maintenance; cycle phase at traffic lights; proper shore path/route; strict (better called “presumed”) liability and more.

Why has Edinburgh such successes relative to other places?

Edinburgh has several positive factors going for it already: large middle-class, geography (small distances), an off road network (previously railroutes), large student population...

Should we be opening up old railroutes, e.g. the Borders?

ID: Until we sort out the expense, it is a huge investment with no clear return: it will lead to more building around the routes and encourage more cars driving more (to railstations and for non-work purposes) unless other work is done to prevent that developing.

JO: disagrees: it is fantastic! Should never have been closed. Will reduce CO2 and get people out of their cars. Sustrans is working on cycle routes to the stations, and will make Borders a much better place to be.

How can we persuade politicians and encourage integrated policies? And why can we not get politicians to talk about real costs?

ID: The level of debate in the media is awful. Councils only get 15% of their income from local taxes, and so are not responsible enough to local needs. Short term electoral gain.

JE: The Referendum debate might raise all these issues – this is an opportunity.

Why has there not been any talk about out-of-town retail centres? (E.g. suggestion of limited licensing for supermarkets, charging supermarkets and leisure centres for the number of parking spaces, etc.)

JE: The economic problems mean it is difficult politically to tax retailers.

ID: It is likely that they will reduce in number in the longer term due to the current transport trends, but politicians should take advantage of the trends to encourage local shopping and services rather than continuing to support out-of-town developments.

[Notes written/edited by Mies Knottenbelt, Peter Hawkins and Dave du Feu]