

# SPOKES

*The Lothian Cycle Campaign*

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## **Submission from Spokes<sup>1</sup> to the *Cycling Safety* Inquiry by the UK Parliament Transport Select Cttee**

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/transport-committee/news/cycling---deadline-extension/>

### **Background**

Our submission does not attempt to give a full response to the Inquiry theme, for the reasons here explained.

In the long term the primary solution needs to be infrastructural, and the UK should be building towards that end as from now. In that respect we fully support the submission by the *Cycling Embassy of Great Britain*<sup>2</sup> and we therefore need not discuss infrastructure in this response.

It must be recognised however that this solution will take significant time and funding to become widespread on the ground across the nation. Indeed, at present the Scottish Government invests a mere 1% of its transport budget in cycling<sup>3</sup> - a hopeless sum given their professed intent that 10% of all trips should be by bike by 2020 - and we suspect the figure at UK level is no better. And whilst Britain could move much faster now in the light of European experience, nonetheless the 'Copenhagenizing' of Copenhagen took from the 1980s to the present.

Furthermore, as the *Promoting Walking and Cycling*<sup>4</sup> research report (also quoted in the Cycling Embassy response) states in its concluding chapter, “*physical infrastructure ... is not on its own sufficient.*” Wide cultural change is needed and, in particular, “*it is necessary to change the image of cycling and walking*” ... “*campaigns to promote walking and cycling as normal ... and not dominated by super-fit or committed specialists, should also be adopted.*”

Rather than attempting a comprehensive response to the Inquiry, our response covers one particular aspect of safety relating to the above paragraph, and where we feel we have something distinctive to say about current approaches to cycling safety. We highlight some areas where research is inadequate - and one area in particular where we feel that many agencies supposedly promoting cycling and/or cycling safety suffer from head-in-the-sand syndrome, unwilling to take seriously evidence which challenges their preconceptions. They may even inadvertently be causing unnecessary casualties.

Finally, we urge the Inquiry to rely on evidence rather than on supposition, and to institute research where current knowledge is inadequate in terms of providing effective policy guidance.

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1 Spokes is a cycle campaign group working in Edinburgh and the Lothians, founded in 1977, now with over 1000 paid-up members, and almost exclusively volunteer-based. For more information see [www.spokes.org.uk](http://www.spokes.org.uk).

2 <http://www.cycling-embassy.org.uk/news/2014/01/17/our-submission-to-the-transport-select-committee-on-cycling-safety>

3 Scottish Government cycle funding <http://www.spokes.org.uk/wordpress/2012/09/cycling-up-very-slightly-in-budget/>

4 Pooley, C. et al. (2013) *Promoting Walking and Cycling*. Bristol: Policy Press

# Cycle usage, cycling safety and the image of cycling presented by official agencies

## The facts needing to be explained ...

- ◆ In the last few years in the UK (and Scotland and Edinburgh) serious cycling casualties have ceased their long-standing downward pattern, and flattened out or started to rise<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ In most cases, **the rise in casualties is greater than any rise in cycle use**
- ◆ In most cases, **the rise in casualties is greater than for other road user groups**, including pedestrians. Indeed, whilst cycling casualty rates have started to rise, those for motor vehicle occupants have continued their long-standing downward trend.
- ◆ This is happening exactly over the same few years when cycling safety gear, notably helmets, is being extensively promoted and is becoming widespread. Thus either such safety gear is not in fact preventing many deaths and injuries or, if it is, then cycling danger is (very surprisingly) even more out of kilter with other safety trends than the bullet points above suggests.

*These are vital issues which must be understood and tackled if cycling is to grow and to be as safe as possible.*

Conventional explanations for the new casualty patterns do not work – or, at best, provide only partial answers. 'More casualties because more cyclists' is clearly not the answer, given that casualties are rising faster than cycle use. Traffic speeds and use of hands-free or hand-held phones are serious dangers, but do not explain cyclists being differentially affected in the casualty figures. Inadequate infrastructure means higher overall casualties than necessary but does not explain the recent differential trend in cycling casualties.

We do not have the answers to these difficult questions, but we have ideas and there is some limited evidence. In contrast, the agencies involved in promoting cycling safety seem willing only to pursue their traditional avenues, and not to countenance or investigate theories which do not fit existing views. Reasoned emails on this topic from Spokes to bodies such as British Cycling, Brake and Transport for London either have been ignored or have received anodyne responses which restate existing positions and do not engage with the arguments.

**In our view the questions and theories below need urgently to be *taken seriously* - because some existing approaches to safety and/or promotion may be inadvertently discouraging cycle use and may even be increasing danger. The answers to these questions could have *significant implications for policy on cycling promotion and cycling safety*. If adequate evidence is already available, policy and its application may need to change urgently. If more evidence is needed, targeted research should be rapidly instigated to provide a guide for policy (and not as a delaying tactic).**

## Q1. Is the composition of Britain's cycling population changing?

Is there more cycling on faster roads or for faster journeys (for example, commuting) and less on quiet and side roads (for example, to the local shop)? Is there more cycling by faster more confident people, usually males, and less by women or the elderly? Given the *massive* crash risk differentials of different road types<sup>6</sup>, the differing crash statistics for different age and sex of cyclist, and the probable impact of differing cycling speeds, *changes in the cycling population could very easily explain why injuries are increasing without cycle-use increasing*.

Recent Norwegian research<sup>7</sup> suggests changes in the cycling population as a reason why widespread helmet use in a country may not reduce overall cyclist casualties, though some people are helped in some crashes. The proportion of cyclists who cycle fast and fully equipped, for example commuting on faster roads, may rise; whereas the traditional slower and unequipped use of bikes for local trips becomes rarer. See also Q3 below.

5 Rising cycling casualties <http://www.ctc.org.uk/news/2012-06-28/cycle-casualties-increase-sharply-in-2011>

6 DfT RAS30018 – casualty rates by various criteria <http://www.dft.gov.uk/statistics/tables/ras30018/> Cyclist death rates per bn km are 39 for urban A roads, but only 8 for other urban roads – only one-fifth the 'A' road rate [rural figures, as is well known, are much higher, but again with a huge differential between 'A' and other roads].

7 Helmet promotion results in changing cycling population [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1369847812000587](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1369847812000587)

## Q2. Tying in with the above, is the image of cycling in Britain changing – and being changed?

The image of cycling portrayed by official messages and agencies<sup>8</sup> and often by the media is almost always that it is vital to dress up in safety gear to use a bike. You can drive or walk to your local shop without dressing up, but to cycle there you need helmet and hi-viz. Surely the message to the average citizen is that cycling is a dangerous way of getting around. This could deter the more cautious person, or maybe the average person, even if in practice local conditions are very safe – and, indeed, everyday cycling is a safe activity<sup>9</sup> – and often very safe on local roads and for most types of cyclist [Q1].

Meanwhile those people who do decide to cycle, if they follow the safety messages presented by official agencies, dressed up in safety gear to face the challenges of the road, may feel prepared to tackle roads faster or busier than they would otherwise consider. In a self-reinforcing negative circle the public sees more and more cyclists dressed in safety gear, so the image of cycling becomes one of special equipment and of danger.

This is not to say that hi-viz should not be used in current conditions, especially in the dark and/or on fast commuter roads. But it should certainly not be made to seem an essential requirement for everyday cycle trips, particularly on local roads and for trips such as down to the local shops in broad daylight.

## Q3. Do helmets (and perhaps safety gear in general) make crashes more likely?

Whilst helmets help in some crashes (primarily slow speed, such as falling off your bike), if they also make crashes more likely this could help explain why increasing helmet use has been paralleled by increasing injuries.

Mechanisms by which helmet-use might bring about higher crash and/or injury rates have been raised often, but inadequately researched and not taken seriously by cycling agencies and those with an interest in selling or promoting helmets. At best the potential cyclist is told that wearing a helmet is a 'choice' – but a choice in which there are only benefits<sup>10</sup> to making the choice. *Yet even for the cyclist who chooses to be helmeted, an awareness of the potential risk factors would enable them to cycle more safely.*

Some mechanisms by which helmet-wearing might increase crashes and/or injuries are...

- ◆ Motorists may pass closer to cyclists who appear to be safe and competent because helmeted<sup>11</sup>. Passing closer may in extreme cases mean a crash – resulting from a wing-mirror clip or a snagged rucksack strap or, perhaps more commonly, the cyclist being forced closer to potholes etc.
- ◆ Cyclists may, often unwittingly, take greater risks if they feel safer – for example choosing a faster road, or cycling faster.<sup>12</sup>

There are as many anecdotes supporting such theories as there are widely quoted anecdotes of the “a helmet saved my life” variety. For example the cyclist who told us of a fast 'A' road, “*I wouldn't use that road without my helmet*” or the London taxi driver who said, “*I make sure to give Boris cyclists a wide berth.*” In other words, the helmeted cyclist takes on greater risk, whereas the unhelmeted Boris hire-cyclist takes on less – anecdotes which tie in with the low injury rates reported for Boris cyclists as compared to all London cyclists.<sup>13</sup>

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8 Edinburgh Council's Road Safety Section, for example, and the local Police, who jointly promote cycling at community road-shows and festivals, will only print leaflets in which every cyclist is helmeted. Interestingly, another section of the council, dealing with cycling infrastructure, and with cycle-use targets as a high priority, intentionally uses pictures which show unhelmeted or mixed helmet-use cycling. Cycling Scotland, the government-funded body promoting cycling within Scotland, has a policy recommending helmet choice – yet pictures on their website <http://www.cyclingscotland.org/> are overwhelmingly of 'fully-equipped' cyclists.

9 Risks per hour of cycling, walking or driving are not dissimilar, and for young men, driving is much more dangerous than cycling [www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0050606](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0050606) . For other comparisons see [www.cyclehelmets.org/1026.html](http://www.cyclehelmets.org/1026.html). Of course, if health benefits/disbenefits are counted, cycling is far safer than driving.

10 In fact, a recent meta-analysis of helmet research [Elvik R. Accident Analysis & Prevention, 2011;43(3):1245-1251] finds the benefits of helmet use are much less than previously thought. See discussion at <http://cyclehelmets.org/1251.html> .

11 Motorists may pass closer to cyclists who look safer <http://www.bath.ac.uk/news/articles/archive/overtaking110906.html>

12 Cyclists may behave less cautiously when helmeted. There are many relevant references, for example... <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21418079>

13 Low casualty rates for Boris hire cyclists <http://rdrf.org.uk/2012/08/17/disaster-waiting-to-happen-the-london-bike-hire-scheme-and-why-bradley-wiggins-was-so-wrong-part-four>

## Policy implications

If some or all of the above theories are valid, there are important implications for cycling policy, which would need promulgated through national and local government, the police, organisations such as British Cycling and Cycling Scotland and charities such as Brake. For example...

- ◆ Cycling should be promoted as an everyday activity, like walking or jumping into a car, so that you can hop on your bike to go down to the shops without first donning special equipment. The bulk of promotional material on official websites should show people cycling in their everyday clothing, as in Europe – rather than dressed up in special cycling gear.
- ◆ Cyclists and potential cyclists should be made aware of the huge differences in safety of different road types ('A' roads versus local roads, and rural versus urban roads). This is a far bigger contributor to safe cycling and, conversely, to the likelihood of serious injury, than is what you are wearing – and yet official and media messages cover only the latter, suggesting you are safe anywhere if dressed up.
- ◆ Advice on helmets in official documents, handouts, bike shops, helmet boxes, etc should, for the safety of potential purchasers, be required to give equal prominence to the pros and cons of helmet use, so that potential users can make *not a choice but an informed choice*. For example, to make people aware that whilst a helmet may help in a slow-speed fall, motor traffic may pass closer if you are helmeted, and that being helmeted does not mean you are safe to use a faster road than you otherwise would.



### Safe Cycling in Copenhagen ...

An everyday and everybody means of getting from A to B – with no special dressing up. Often with physical segregation, but sometimes without - just low speed limits and/or coloured paint on the roads!!