

What cyclists tell us about what inspires them to cycle or transforms their cycling

Powerful stories of lived experience as role models and guidance for policy,
from Spokes competition entries

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Introduction

Stories of lived experience can be powerful tools for persuading others to follow suit in changing their behaviour. Spokes collected 74 stories from a wide range of cyclists about what inspired them to cycle and transformed their cycling experiences. The common themes, and absence of others, in this collection provide useful insights into how active travel can be encouraged most effectively as well as powerful policy pointers.

Method

In 2018 and 2019, Spokes asked cyclists in Summer Competitions about what ‘transformed’ their cycling lives, and what had ‘inspired’ them to cycle.

The questions we asked were:

In 2018, What brought the biggest positive transformation in your cycling life in the last year or two?

In 2019, What inspired you to start getting about by bike – or how did you inspire someone else? [most responses were about the former]

The competitions were open to anyone. They were widely publicised on social media and cyclists’ networks and offered prizes to a dozen best entries each year.

Results

We received 74 entries from a range of cyclists, 32 in 2018 and 42 in 2019. Entrants varied in physical ability, ethnic identity, gender, and were from different ages and life stages. Clearly the entrants were entirely self-selected, so this is not a representative sample of any particular population.

One of the most interesting aspects was the difference between the entries in the two competitions, as illustrated by the table below, suggesting that the motivations to start using a bike (2019 competition) may be very different from those which improve (“transform”) ones existing cycling life (2018 competition).

Whilst many entrants mentioned more than one motivating factor, in nearly all cases there was a single most important factor. The table below summarises the most important single factor given by 4 or more entrants in each competition.

Top inspirations to start cycling (or to cycle regularly) – 2019 competition (42 entries). <i>Note that all were social and/or individual motivators.</i>		Top factors bringing a 'transformation' in an existing cycling life – 2018 competition (32 entries). <i>Note that all were material motivators.</i>	
Other people providing an example or encouragement	13	Cycling infrastructure	7
Life changes – e.g. changing job or major medical event	5	Changes in bike or accessories (panniers, trailer, clothing, gears, etc)	7
Environmental concerns	4	Getting an e-bike	6
Mental health issues	4		
Positive experience of trying cycling	4		

The main inspiration to start cycling was overwhelmingly encouragement or example from peers – particularly family, friends or colleagues, albeit there were often also multiple subsidiary motivations. However, for those who already cycled, material changes were overwhelmingly the source of significant improvements in their cycling lives.

A more detailed table comparing the two competitions is below. The columns show, for each motivating factor, firstly, the number of times it was mentioned and, secondly, the number of entrants for whom it was the main factor.

Motivations	2019 competition (42 entries)		2018 competition (32 entries)	
	Total	Main factor	Total	Main factor
1. Cycling in childhood	23	3	1	0
2. Bad car-commuting experience	10	1	6	0
3. Life transformative experiences	7	5	2	1
4. Concerns about health	19	2	21	2
5. Encouraged by others or seeing others cycling	19	13	3	1
6. Practical enablers, of which:				
- E-bikes	3	0	6	6
- cycling infrastructure	7	0	14	7
- other bike facilities	4	0	3	1
- bike itself or accessories	8	0	9	7
- bikeshops' support	3	0	1	0
7. Positive experience of trying it out/doing it	12	4	7	1
8. Convenience	14	0	2	0
9. Mental health benefits	18	4	15	1
10. Exploring environment	13	1	9	1
11. Cost	5	1	1	0
12. Environmental concerns	11	4	5	0
13. Social benefits	18	1	15	0
14. Sport	1	1	1	0
15. An event	11	2	4	3

Points to ponder

Childhood cycling Many people mentioned having cycled as a child – yet almost all said they had stopped or greatly cut down on cycling as an adult until some new inspiration (as in the table) came along.

Lesson – encouraging children to cycle is great but is unlikely to ensure cycling in adulthood.

Physical health benefits Although many people mentioned health benefits, these were the top motivating factor only for a very small number of entrants.

Lesson – highlighting health benefits may not be enough to persuade a lot of people to start cycling, though it may reinforce other motivations

Environmental concerns The 2019 results reflect the rapidly growing public concern over the climate crisis, with this having been the top motivating factor for 4 entrants, compared to only 2 for health benefits. Not long ago the picture would have been the opposite.

Lesson – Climate issues may become an issue that should be included prominently in publicity on mode change.

Discoveries Although our 2019 competition asked about motivating factors to start cycling, many entrants additionally mentioned important and unexpected discoveries they had made after starting to cycle. Of these, the top two were **the joy of cycling** and **the reliability of bike journey timings** compared to car-commuting.

Lesson – Stories about people who have started cycling may help potential cyclists realise that the benefits may be even more wide-ranging than they had considered.

Infrastructure Interestingly, no one gave cycling infrastructure as their main motivating factor for starting cycling, although new or improved infrastructure often transformed the experience of existing cyclists.

Lesson – Novice cyclists should be taken to experience quality infrastructure, whether by their friends/relations or community initiatives. It may of course be that many potential cyclists are unaware of existing quality infrastructure as currently this largely only comprises Edinburgh's offroad network!

Practical enablers These were by far the top factor in transforming existing cycling lives, and were also widespread motivators – albeit not top motivators – for people starting to cycle. In addition to infrastructure these included **improved bikes or accessories** (panniers, a trailer, better gears, clothing for coping with bad weather) and, notably, **getting an e-bike**.

Lesson – To maintain and increase cycling levels, investment in cycling infrastructure is vital, as is awareness of and incentives for 'cycling hardware' opportunities such as e-bikes, gears, panniers, trailers, etc.

Cycling sport There was very little mention of cycling as a sport, or indeed of cycling celebrities.

Lesson – the tendency to use celebrities or sport to promote cycling as an everyday activity is likely to be misplaced and possibly detrimental.

Strong themes

Few entrants mentioned only one thing that inspired them. Many stories contained a range of motivators acting together, albeit one top motivator was often mentioned. The strong themes were:

- Self-sufficiency and freedom that cycling affords (including for disabled cyclists and for children)
- General wide-ranging benefits around physical health (esp. losing weight and generally feeling better)
- Positive impact of cycling on mental health and reducing people's isolation (making friends and getting out)
- New cycling infrastructure as an important enabler, especially to people who live or travel near it
- The role that peers (and local bike shops) play as enablers
- The importance of normalising cycling (Many ask themselves: 'Can I do this?')
- Lifecycle transitions (such as becoming a parent, career change) as times for active travel take-up
- Experiences of e-bikes transforming lives

Practical Outcomes

As a direct result of the competition entries, Spokes has produced two printed and online factsheets based on the inspiring personal stories we received.

- *Why E-Bike?*
- *Inspired to Go By Bike*

These have appeared as the centre pages of our Spokes Bulletin [print run 13,000 copies] which is widely distributed through libraries, bikeshops, and leafleting of parked bikes, as well as to our membership. The standalone factsheets are available at Spokes stalls at community and other events.

Conclusions

Research (e.g. Common Cause, Scottish Government ISM model) shows that stories and case studies are effective tools for inspiring behaviour change because they appeal to people's personal domain i.e. their values and emotions.

The competition entries:

- offer case studies which can serve as powerful role models in this way
- provide lived experiences from a broad range of people, some missing in research studies
- confirm that these cyclists experience behaviour change motivators from across the ISM model
- confirm that a combination of motivating factors make change more likely
- show that what inspires people to take up cycling differs from what stimulates existing cyclists to cycle more or to enhance their enjoyment further. Encouragement from peers and personal motivations and circumstance are particularly important in inspiring cyclists to take up cycling anew. By contrast, material motivators are especially important for encouraging existing cyclists to cycle more.
- provide strong pointers to how active travel initiatives are experienced by cyclists and to what helped (and hindered) them in taking up cycling
- generate new perspectives on what messages we need to get across for different types of people
- provide powerful material for getting these messages across to best effect

Sources

Full sets of competition entries and reports on each competition can be found at www.spokes.org.uk : documents : odds : competitions.

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