

Spokes Public Meeting 21.11.24, Local Bike Campaigning

Speaker notes from Julie Clarke, Infrasisisters

How did InfraSisters begin?

In October 2021 Kirsty Lewin – a long time active travel and cycling campaigner - was cycling back from the cinema along the Innocent Path. A male cyclist without lights disappeared from sight, then emerged from the bushes as she came past – no way to exit from the path, no other people around, an instinctive female fear response. On this occasion, nothing happened but it emphasised the choice every woman cycling in Edinburgh makes on a regular basis – do I use the road and chance the dangerous drivers, or do I use an isolated cycle path and chance the behaviour of strangers?

Off the back of that experience, Kirsty tweeted asking if anyone would be interested in a women's critical mass/reclaim the streets evening ride? Women responded to the tweet, messaged, and a group was formed.

For context, at this time, there was a lot of public debate about male violence against women – Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard, Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry, women dying appalling deaths at the hands of violent men. Women across the country were sharing how unsafe they could feel – even from a person we should most be able to trust, a police officer with a warrant card.

We gathered virtually and in person, planning and recce-ing a route, developing a project plan, risk assessments, creating graphics and social media, engaging with the police, inviting politicians, the media.

Two months later on 10th December we met at Middle Meadow Walk, hoping we'd have a few dozen women – and allies – arriving on bikes decorated with fairy lights. We ended up with over 150, including women who'd never ridden at night before – but finally felt safe doing so in a large group.

It generated good media coverage, from the great visuals – I still love the photo taken of us slowly climbing up Johnson Terrace with the Castle illuminated behind us. We made the photo albums of hundreds of Christmas tourists heading for the markets and rides of Princes Street, including the inevitable silent disco. They danced to their beat, we partied to our own tunes. We were interviewed afterwards for STV.

A one-off protest ride became an ongoing campaign group. Jo came up with our name, which we unanimously loved – and were also amazed to find hadn't been claimed by any other group already.

Three years later we're still here, and sadly still asking for the same things from Edinburgh City Council

- Safe and comfortable cycle infrastructure, protected from traffic on well-lit direct routes
- Well-signed routes with good connections and filtered permeability
- Routes with good natural surveillance

None of these are unique to us; they come from Transport Scotland's Cycling by Design guidance – which I'm guessing a few people in this room are immensely familiar with.

Our additional perspective is that we want to see infrastructure that's safe for women and girls whether used in the day or night.

Why does "safe for women" matter?

Statistically in the UK, young men are the most likely to be victims of violence. But women are more scared of violence.

In the summer of 2021 – a few months before the InfraSisters began – the ONS published a report on "Perceptions of Personal Safety and Experiences of Harassment".

One in seven men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a quiet street near home. For women, the equivalent was one in two.

Two in five men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or other open space. For women, it was four in five.

Sixteen % of men reported harassment within the previous year. 28% of women reported the same.

Nearly half of everyone who reported feeling unsafe had actively changed behaviour within the previous month; staying at home, avoiding certain streets or areas, only travelling on busy streets, etc

Last year a Lime survey found that only 19% of women feel safe cycling alone at night, the main reasons being poorly lit roads (46%) isolated cycle routes in quiet areas (41%) anti-social behaviour (36%) fear of harassment (34%). What would make them feel safer? Dedicated cycle lanes, better lit cycle parking at journey ends or even just the existence of cycle parking.

The same study also found that for those women who do cycle at night, over half thought it was safer than walking through poorly lit or quiet areas, and a third thought it was safer and quicker than waiting for taxis or public transport.

If you build infrastructure that works for women, it works for everyone.

Successes and Failures?

Three years later, we organise two or three rides a year, always in the winter and generally aligned to international campaigns such as International Women's Day. We try to make them visually engaging, a spectacle that makes people think "What's that? Why's that?" and let's be honest, a good visual image makes a good placeholder for a press report, which helps with publicity.

We have a brand, a hashtag #OurStreetsOurNights. We have a simple website and a contact form, that in turn allows us to curate a mailing list, which we use sparingly. We support other events, whether critical mass, Pedal on Parliament, etc

The challenge as always is to get the amount of people we need to plan, organise and deliver events. From distributing leaflets, to publicity, to marshalling on the night, that all takes people.

Finding your place on social media is challenging. Scottish cycling used to be on Twitter – that's pretty much gone – so now we're trying to find our way on Mastodon, on Instagram, on BlueSky, on Facebook.

Are we seeing progress in Edinburgh? No, not really, across the wider active travel agenda, the council is struggling to make real change, still bogged down in the demands of car culture. But glaciers take millennia to move rocks, we can live in hope... Projects such as CCWEL deliver what we campaign for, but take far too long.

But we're still around and if you'd like to ride with us, you'll find us at Middle Meadow Walk next Friday evening and we'd love to see you.