

UK cyclists take different paths

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Vast differences in cycling cultures have been found in UK cities; for some cycling is a traditional transport accessible to all while for others it is a new edgy, urban subculture according to recent findings from a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). "We wanted to find out what British cycling cultures were like, what supported them, and what local and national factors continue to exist as barriers", says Dr Rachel Aldred from the University of East London.

The [Cycling Cultures](#) study looked at [attitudes](#) to cycling in four different English city locations – Bristol, Cambridge, Hull, and Hackney in London – and found striking contrasts. Although these locations have cycle-to-work rates that are at least twice the UK average (2.8 per cent), this was not especially high compared to European standards. For example, ten per cent of all trips are cycled in Germany with even more (25 per cent) in the Netherlands.

"When an activity like cycling is seen as something alien to national identity, local identity looms large", says Dr Aldred. "Some UK cities have a long-standing tradition of cycling as a means of transport, while in other areas cycling for an adult is a relatively new activity."

Both Hull and Cambridge were chosen because of their traditional cycling cultures. In these cities, cycling is seen as an everyday activity that people choose because it makes sense for their journey; or because in the past they did not have other options. In Cambridge, cycling is considered 'normal', with people of all ages and abilities taking part;

while in Hull cycling is associated more with the city's past, when few people could afford cars, than with its present.

In contrast, cycling has become popular in Bristol and Hackney more recently. In Bristol there are bike festivals and parades, while Hackney has seen the greatest rise in cycling rates over the last decade of any London borough. In these locations, cycling has more the character of a subculture with its own fashions and events. One Hackney participant commented, "It's purely a fashionable thing isn't it, it's become trendy to cycle".

The study also revealed differences in how people accessed help with maintaining their bikes. In Bristol and Hackney there are free, community-based cycle maintenance workshops, while in Hull people typically learn how to look after their bicycle from a parent. Similarly, there were local differences in what cyclists chose to wear. "We saw the most Lycra and helmets in Bristol, and the least in Cambridge", says Dr Aldred, adding "Worrying about what to wear on the bike can act as a barrier to cycling".

One issue unites cyclists in all locations: the problem of bike theft. "Most people we spoke to had experienced some form of bicycle theft", says Dr Aldred. "In a society where mobility is highly valued, waking up in the morning to find your bicycle missing can feel like a part of yourself has been taken", she says. While many people simply bought a new bike and a better lock, others started to care less about their bikes, deliberately leaving them looking dirty or unmaintained in an effort to deter thieves.

But as Dr Aldred points out, many UK cyclists feel burdened by having to carry a lot of equipment to keep themselves and their vehicles safe, unlike car drivers. "It's interesting to consider how driving would be affected if drivers had to remember to bring their own lights and locks

each time they made a journey, and had to remove their lights again when the car was parked", Dr Aldred comments.

The study also revealed the ways in which cyclists are helping to increase the popularity of cycling. "Many people in local areas are doing a lot for cycling, from running projects to lending friends a bicycle and showing them a good route to work", says Dr Aldred. This supports the idea of making cycling a national strategic priority. "If cycling were better resourced in the UK, local support networks might be able to grow and reach a tipping point where cycling cultures can extend beyond specific localities", she says.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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