

# Belfast Bicycle Network 2017

Comments by  
Northern Ireland Environment Link

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Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 70+ Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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NIEL welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Belfast Bicycle Network consultation.

Cycling investment in NI per head, compared to leading cycling countries and cities in Europe, is very low and currently decision making overwhelmingly favours private car transport. Research suggests that investment in cycling infrastructure brings financial return of over 20 times the initial investment<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, we commend the Department for bringing forward these proposals which are fundamental to realising the vision set out in the Belfast Bicycle Strategy and contributing to a much needed change in regional travel culture. We look forward to engaging further in the process to help develop, support and promote a stronger cycling culture in Northern Ireland.

In order to ensure the Network fulfils its considerable potential to provide safe, coherent and convenient cycling infrastructure we stress a number of points:

- It would be preferable to complete the primary network within the next five (rather than ten) years with secure funding over the course of the project. Phased, incremental implementation is not conducive to comprehensively replacing the existing infrastructure in a holistic manner. We are concerned that a ten year proposal could be too piecemeal and disjointed to deliver a coherent Network. A whole-route approach completed over five years, catering for commuters as well as amenity and recreational users, is required to radically overhaul the existing infrastructure. Seville built a similar sized bolt-on cycling network within two years, and grew cycling modal share from 0.7% to 7%.
- In developing the secondary network it is vital that communities are consulted to gauge user needs and requirements. While we recognise the desire to tailor the Network to particular users, the Department should aspire to high quality design (suitable for all users) throughout the Network. However, the Department should also guard against this becoming an overly protracted process. It will be difficult to create the 'perfect' Network. Efficient and effective consultation, followed by prompt decision making should enable Network implementation within five years. Once established the Network can be reviewed and upgraded.
- It is essential (especially on busy arterial routes) to segregate motorised and non-motorised traffic, providing protected lanes for cyclists. Providing safe and continuous cycling space is fundamental to challenging the prevailing perception that cycling is currently a hazardous form of transport. Giving confidence and reassurance to prospective cyclists is crucial. While it may be possible for cyclists and walkers to share space at certain times and in certain locations, in terms of future proofing it would generally be better to segregate cyclists and walkers to ensure there is sufficient space to accommodate the anticipated upsurge in users.
- Main arterial routes in the city, such as Ormeau, Newtownards, Crumlin, Lisburn, Antrim Roads etc. appear to have been overlooked. While we understand the complexity involved in retrofitting these routes it is disappointing that the Department appears resigned to confining

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<sup>1</sup> Macmillan, A., Connor, J., Witten, K., et al. (2014). The Societal Costs and Benefits of Commuter Bicycling: Simulating the Effects of Specific Policies Using System Dynamics Modelling. *Environmental Health Perspectives*. 22(4):335-344. DOI: 10.1289/ehp.1307250.

these routes to car highways. Many communities and businesses occupy these routes and will therefore miss out on the benefits that more people friendly streets can bring.

- The Network should take account of future infrastructure developments, such as the York Street Interchange. In turn, developments, such as road upgrades must respect and complement the bicycle network ensuring the safety and convenience of cyclists is prioritised. New developments should not obstruct or detract from a continuous, direct and dedicated Bicycle Network.
- In addition to the provision of a safe, secure and coherent cycling network, further action is required to promote cycling uptake. We support the 'three pillar approach' consisting of careful planning, high quality infrastructure provision and behavioural change campaigns. Education, awareness raising and incentivisation for major employers, schools, Universities and other businesses will help facilitate the transition towards active travel.
- Clear, effective signage and maps are required to ensure legibility and ease of movement across the network for all user groups.
- As a main economic hub, Belfast attracts commuters from across the region and a large cohort of commuters originate from dispersed rural locations. Creative schemes are required, such as power assisted bicycles and 'cycle and ride' schemes, to cater for this significant portion of the commuting population.
- The Department, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, should develop a detailed implementation plan outlining the proposed design stages and timeline for completion.

## **Conclusion**

Our sector is committed to working with government and relevant stakeholders to promote and facilitate active travel and we would welcome further involvement in the development of the Belfast Bicycle Network.