

Put pedestrians first

What do shared-use paths for pedestrians and cyclists mean for disabled people?
Carol Thomas, Access and Inclusion Manager at Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, reports

Guide Dogs supports the need for safe routes for cyclists. However, cycle paths should not be shared with pedestrians.

The public has concerns about shared-use paths. Research conducted by the Cycling Touring Club as early as the year 2000 highlighted some of these concerns, with half of the pedestrians and cyclists surveyed fearing crashes on such paths. But in the decade since the club's report, the number of paths designed to be shared by pedestrians and cyclists has increased substantially, supported by funding from UK Governments and the National Lottery.

Many shared-use paths have no physical or visual segregation between sections for cyclists and pedestrians. In others the only separation between pedestrian and cyclist sections is a white line, which is obviously useless for most blind and partially sighted people.

We believe that shared-use paths encourage cyclists to ride among pedestrians – illegally on pavements, or in pedestrian areas. There have been an increasing number of proposals from local authorities to allow cyclists to use pedestrian areas, citing the fact that cyclists do this already. Local authorities should instead be taking steps to enforce the restrictions.

New research

A new national survey, "The impact of shared surface streets and shared-use pedestrian/cycle paths on blind and partially sighted

people," commissioned by Guide Dogs, reports the views of blind and partially sighted people on shared-use pedestrian/cycle routes. Its findings, taken from interviews with 500 blind and partially sighted people in the UK, include:

- 86 per cent have concerns about shared-use pedestrian/cycle paths
- 28 per cent would go out of their way to avoid a shared-use pedestrian/cycle path
- 22 per cent were "very reluctant" to use a shared-use pedestrian/cycle path.

Some shared-use paths have successfully segregated sections for pedestrians and cyclists, and respondents mentioned feeling confident knowing that they had an allocated side of the path specifically for pedestrians. But there aren't many of this type.

What's the problem?

Shared-use paths are not suitable for blind and partially sighted people because they cannot see cyclists approaching. Being able to hear is not sufficient to work out exactly where cyclists are, and which way to move to avoid them. The problems are exacerbated for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Most cyclists may attempt to behave appropriately on a path where there are pedestrians present, but there are exceptions. Even the most conscientious cyclist may have difficulty avoiding someone who steps directly in front of them.

There are also implications for other disabled people. Guide Dogs and Disability Wales have worked together to collect the views of Welsh disability groups, in order to prepare a response to a Welsh Assembly proposal relating to shared-use paths. We sought to ensure that paths for pedestrians and cyclists would be separate or appropriately segregated: concerns about shared-use paths were received from a range of organisations across the Welsh disability sector, including RNIB, Wales Council for the Blind, Deafblind Cymru, Carers Wales, Age Alliance Wales, Learning Disability Wales and the National Autism Society Cymru, and local societies and access groups.

Collisions between cyclists and pedestrians are not usually reported or contained in any official statistics, so the extent of the problem has previously been difficult to measure. However, this new survey, conducted by researchers TNS-BMRB, has filled in some of the statistical gaps. Findings include:

- More than six out of 10 of the blind and partially sighted people interviewed had experienced a collision with a cyclist (20 per cent) or a near miss (45 per cent)
- Nine out of 10 of these incidents had not been reported (88 per cent)

- 74 per cent of those who have had a collision or near miss with a cyclist feel it has affected their confidence
- Asked about the “most serious incident” relating to cyclists, 38 per cent of the incidents described were found to have occurred on shared-use pedestrian/cycle paths, where there was no segregation or only a white line. Only three per cent of the described incidents were on paths where the pedestrian and cyclist segments were clearly separated
- Over half of these incidents (52 per cent) occurred on pedestrian-only paths, or pavements where cyclists were thought to be riding illegally.

Local case studies

Cardiff

Cardiff City Council recently undertook an 18-month trial permitting time-restricted cycling access in Queen Street, the main pedestrian zone shopping street. Guide Dogs worked closely with the Cardiff Coalition of Disabled People to monitor the trial, which concluded last summer. Following consideration of the Equality Impact Assessment report and the consultation process, the council made the decision to no longer permit cycling on Queen Street.



This year the issue has arisen in Cardiff again, with new proposals made to allow cyclists to ride in the pedestrian area at certain times of the day. Local groups have raised concerns that cyclists who have taken this route on the outward journey will expect to use the same route on return, and there are no firm enforcement plans. It seems that the council may be trying to change the decision taken following the trial, only a few months later.

Aylesbury and Bristol

Guide Dogs has supported other local disability groups in responding to local proposals for shared-use pedestrian/cycling paths. Two such examples are the “cycling demonstration” areas of Aylesbury and Bristol.

“Aylesbury Cycling Town” was completed last year. Despite our concerted efforts to raise awareness about the issues, and dialogue with officers of Buckinghamshire County Council throughout the project, there are still unresolved problems. As the work neared completion in the autumn of last year, Chief Executive Officer of local society BucksVision, Kiera Bentley, said: “We are extremely disappointed that advice and recommendations given during the planning process were not acted on. The town centre is fast becoming a ‘no-go’ area for visually impaired people. We want our town to be accessible to all.”

In Bristol, Guide Dogs has worked with RNIB, Action for Blind People and local groups to raise concerns about proposals, which may include shared-use. There have been constructive meetings with Bristol Council’s project team to try to ensure that “Bristol Cycling City” is a model of good practice. Time will tell whether our advice will be taken, and we are closely monitoring developments.

Clutter and cycling

The pedestrian environment is often daunting for blind and partially sighted people. Maintenance is often poor, and pedestrians are often forced to negotiate obstacles like “A” boards and wheelie bins – in addition to cyclists. But funding to develop or improve pedestrian paths is often dependent on sharing them with cyclists. Funding improvements for pedestrians, it appears, comes way down the lists of priorities.

Safe routes for cyclists – yes. But not at the expense of pedestrians. ♦

Further reading

CTC (Cycling Touring Club), 2000. **Cyclists and Pedestrians – attitudes to shared-use facilities.**

TNS-BMRB report (commissioned by Guide Dogs), 2010. **The impact of shared surface streets and shared-use pedestrian/cycle paths on blind and partially sighted people.** For more information on appropriate segregation of pedestrian/cycle routes see the Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People (JCMBPS) Policy Statement: **Adjacent facilities for pedestrians and cyclists**, available at www.jcmbps.org.uk.

