

A SCHOOL-WIDE CYCLING CULTURE

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John Spence Community High School is a comprehensive secondary school in North Tyneside. We have around 850 11-16-year-old students. The average commute for our students is one mile. The fastest, most convenient way to travel to school is by bike, scooter or walking. Some of our students travel by public transport and a few by car. The evolution of having more students travel to school by bike, scooter or walking has been a strategy spanning almost ten years.

The journey began with a Bike It officer, funded by Sustrans. Their role was to help us and our neighbouring feeder schools to get more students and families out on their bikes. They offered bike maintenance days, incentives to travel more sustainably, transition rides from the feeder school to high school, family evening and weekend rides, assemblies and awareness of nationwide competitions. The other role was to promote local Bikeability courses.

Bikeability was a stumbling block, with many students having unsuitable or unsafe bikes to take part. Consequently, some students were turned away and many failed the 'M' check (a bike standards test) on the first morning. It was evident that we needed our own fleet of bikes and a storage area in which they could be maintained. Fortunately, we heard of a local shipping company which offered to buy 16 bikes, plus spares, tools and accessories, to create our very own Geared Up project.

Through local contacts and a lot of time and effort from a small group of Year 11 students, we set up a fleet of bikes (including five smaller ones for our feeder schools) and

a maintenance garage which the Year 11 students staffed. With our own trained mechanics and a set of new bikes, we could progress rapidly into encouraging more cycling within school. We had cycle weeks, incentives for riding to school, maintenance sessions for students' bikes, and repair slots for damaged bikes. As a result, more students began to ride to school! We did not adopt a helmet policy but ensured students' bikes would be stored safely, with CCTV coverage. We worked with the Police to stamp bikes and issue free bicycle locks.

With more students biking, four PE staff and a learning mentor took the qualification required to take groups out and we put cycling in the Key Stage 4 PE curriculum. At Key Stage 3, students had the opportunity to take part in Bikeability Level 1 and 2, using either their own or the school's bikes. We also lend bikes to our main feeder schools for their pupils to take part in Bikeability and transition rides so they are fully confident and prepared to cycle to us in Year 7.

Participating in local competitions, such as GO Smarter, and promoting national campaigns such as #Biketoworkweek all contribute to additional support for cycling within school. We were crowned the top secondary school in Sustrans' national Big Pedal five-day challenge in 2019. In that week, more than 86 per cent of our students took part in the challenge: 586 cycled and 112 rode in by scooter throughout the week. We have been fortunate to have the Tour of Britain pass through our area in recent years and have run trips to view this. Last year, some of the students who never fail to cycle to school rode the last section of the Newcastle route, just before the main riders came through!



We have a strong cycling culture, with many seeing it as the only option for coming to school. On average, over 100 students cycle to school in all months and conditions. We also have some excellent cycle routes within the local area so display local routes and maps on our bike shed to inspire students to cycle at evenings and weekends. Events like the Coast to Coast, and cycling trips abroad, are on our agenda for future. The return to school during COVID-19 is a strange one, but we are fully backing the #BackToSchoolSafely campaign by encouraging cycling, walking and scooting where possible.

OUR TOP TIPS

- Engage with a local company or sponsor to buy a fleet of bikes.
- Train staff to take groups out.
- Check out Bikeability options in your area.
- Work with your feeder schools.
- Train students to be mechanics to maintain the bikes.
- Offer a repair service.
- Have secure bike areas for students.
- Enter competitions.
- Let Sustrans know of your intentions/project.
- Check out local organisations, such as: <https://www.bike4health.org/>
- Think about the benefits cycling has for students' attainment, behaviour, attendance and wellbeing. ■



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