

## **New 34-mile cycling route encourages active travel to improve health and reduce emissions in Birmingham**

As part of the 3D Data Hub project, Ecobirmingham was awarded funding to develop their inner-city walking and cycling route, encouraging people to use active travel to save on energy and reduce emissions.

Ecobirmingham saw an opportunity to reinvent some of the quieter, lesser used, traffic free and quieter routes in Birmingham and make them more appealing. Using maps, insider knowledge about bike friendly routes across the city, and data from the 3D Hub, they were able to determine how to link the route to places of interest in the city and revealed valuable insight into the correlation between inequality and health issues.

### **Lisa Jones, Cycling Projects Assistant at Ecobirmingham, shares more about the project, its impact and how it's helped bring the community together in exciting and unexpected ways.**

'The idea for this project was to find a route that linked up different wards and connected people to parks and green spaces in Birmingham to make walking and cycling a more attractive way to explore the city. We were conscious that we wanted this route to be available to everyone, not just those who were already keen cyclists and living near established routes. We've developed a 34-mile route which stretches from Sutton Coldfield train station to Waseley Hills Country Park with great public transport links throughout to help promote multimodal travel, especially for those who can't choose cycling. Future smaller routes will link other wards to this mainline route.

The project was made up of several key stages to help us decide the best route, implementation, and marketing:

- We held community workshops for local feedback and input.
- We used the existing infrastructure to plan how we could connect all 69 wards, including using less-known routes and quieter roads.
- We created digital maps and signposted the route to make travel as simple as possible.
- We promoted the route to locals, including setting up group rides for different communities.

### **How did you use the 3D Data Hub?**

The data helped us to decide where the route would go to target specific areas that had the least provision for cycling. We were able to find information about the existing infrastructure, safe routes, green spaces, quiet roads and canal paths. This helped us to map out the route.

Once the route was ready, the data hub provided additional information which influenced how we marketed it. Information such as the level of pollution in an area, the number of car owners and the prevalence of health services was readily available. Promoting the route to these areas could have a significant impact on reducing the number of emissions by encouraging people to walk or cycle over driving and allowing those with fewer health resources to make healthy changes.

### **What have been the biggest challenges?**

To meaningfully connect all 69 wards has been a challenge as it's such a large area. We've had to extend the route to be much longer than initially expected. There's a 34-mile 'main line' route from north to south using as much existing infrastructure as possible, and we'll develop several smaller routes that feed into it. This is to ensure there are shorter, more local bike-friendly options for

shorter journeys and less confident cyclists. We've been fortunate to have the support of local community groups such as ACP in Sparkbrook, The Ride to Positivity and Trikes & Bikes in North Birmingham who have helped to cover the gaps where the routes aren't as known.

During our workshops with the local community, the contrast between the more affluent and poorer areas in Birmingham was really reinforced. Feedback revealed that cycle routes in the poorer areas were less maintained, people felt unsafe using them and they were often littered with glass on the paths. We had a lot of work to do to re-establish these routes and to provide somewhere people feel comfortable using. Also promoting the portal where these issues can be reported to the council to be fixed.

We also found that some routes have bollards or steps along greenways and canals, making them less accessible. Using all the information we had, we figured out the best route possible and highlighted any issues along the route, with options to detour.

### **What have been the biggest impacts of the project?**

Giving people the confidence to ride around the city has been incredible! We've already started group-led bike rides, encouraging people to pick up their bikes – or rent from the City's cycle hire schemes – and tour the city. We've tried to encourage groups that have had reservations about cycling through the city, due to some of the paths being deemed unsafe before. For International Women's Day, we held a women's-only bike ride, and we received some positive feedback. Of the 20 women that took part:

- 87.5% said their health and well-being has improved.
- 75% said they're now more likely to walk or cycle.
- 90% are more likely to explore other wards.
- 81% said their knowledge of Birmingham's green spaces had improved.

We've also put together Commuter Cycling Breakfast rides, cycle and picnic rides, and rides for faith groups. This is to help people to explore their city – including different spots for leisure activities and eating! – and to encourage active travel for positive impacts on mental and physical health. Participants in Commuter Cycling Breakfast ride, Women's Day Ride and leisure rides have overwhelmingly reported that they have discovered new areas including green spaces, feel more confident using the route, and enjoyed meeting other people on the ride.

Michael, one of the first people to join a group ride, gave the following feedback:

**'I suffered a lot with anxiety, I didn't leave the house. Through group rides I have gained confidence, met lots of positive people and after 28yrs of owning a car I have recently given up driving completely. It's great because there's no forking out money and petrol, tax, MOT or insurance. I'm saving money and using it on self-care instead.'**

**The led rides with EcoBirmingham have been great, from Edrington to City Centre I would have normally taken a hilly route but learning alternative routes on the commuter rides I now choose between nicer, safer and more manageable routes. By cycling, I can get to places a lot quicker and easier than with a car or bus because you're not stuck in traffic. I feel a lot fitter and smoke a lot less as a result too.'**

As well as mental and physical health benefits, our group-led rides have also had an impact in reducing emissions. 6 months into the project:

- Our women's group leisure rides have cycled a total of 412km and saved 72.44kg/CO2e
- Our commuter riders have cycled 540km and saved 94.85kg/CO2e

[Research in Oxford reveals that people who swap just one car trip per day to cycling can reduce their carbon footprint by 0.5 tonnes over a year.](#) This is a significant difference. By continuing to promote and encourage people to use the 69 Wards Route, we hope to inspire changes to travel.

### **What's next?**

As the 69 Wards Route becomes more established, we're also keen to measure any improvements in air quality data and active travel within Birmingham.

We have plans to use the 69 Wards Route map in other cycling projects that Ecobirmingham delivers. It's an ongoing project to build people's confidence and encourage them to use active travel. This can continue to be promoted through group-led rides and other cycling sessions. We've been having conversations with three local cycling clubs on or near the route who've agreed to promote it and give us feedback for improvements.

Through this project, Ecobirmingham has been able to reach other communities outside of our initial South Birmingham base. We've reached other communities and partnered with new organisations. This can open new doors for us, and we're excited to see where these connections take us.'

Looking to develop something similar for your city? A cycle route like the 69 Wards Route can be replicated in other areas, too. The core idea was to link sites of interest across Birmingham through cycling routes. In Birmingham, there were few designated routes to work with initially, but other cities may have a better cycling infrastructure that can be utilised in new planning.

The use of open data, and third-party tools like the 3D Data Hub, can highlight existing routes and influencing factors (e.g. air quality, deprivation) to help with your plans. You may also be able to tap into more support (e.g. for funding, signage, and spreading the word) by working closely with your local authority, local groups, and with national organisations like Sustrans.

[View Ecobirmingham's 69 Wards Active Travel Route](#)