



Bradford cyclists gear up for a challenge!

Karl Milner from the Well Bradford team describes how a passing comment inspired a fantastic bike ride on the Tour de Yorkshire weekend, and proved a stereotype wrong.

It started in late March with a throw-away comment in a business/community meeting. Discussing the pros and cons of the Tour De Yorkshire setting off from Bradford, someone said: “*We all know Pakistani women don’t cycle.*” Clearly, our protagonist has never been to Karachi! The challenge was now out there and Well Bradford were determined to prove them wrong 200 times over.

There is, of course, a grain of truth in what was said. Access to healthy activity, and especially an expensive past time like cycling is limited for many. Finding 200+ people from inner-city Bradford prepared to ride out on public roads on a Bank Holiday Sunday in less than five weeks was going to be a challenge. We had to find them and then get them a bike - 163 bikes to be precise. What’s more, it turned out a handful of our riders had, as the man said, never been on bike before ... no pressure. The route from Lister Park to Roberts Park in Bradford may have been a short distance, but it was an epic journey to get to the starting line.

My local cycle club has 1,300 members (impressive!); but the overwhelming majority are male, stale and pale. Ilkley Cycling is a younger version of the golf club, but on wheels. Well-funded and connected, the club has direct access to green lanes and dedicated time-rich volunteers interested in making positive things happen. Good on them.

Inner-city Bradford has none of these advantages save one: talented and dedicated people who are equally interested in making things happen. If this was going to work we had to find them, back them and clear everyone else out of their way.

We found a local cycling club run by the formidable Mumtaz Khan, a local woman running a successful small community business. This was the single most important action – trusting someone to get on with it. What Mumtaz didn’t have was money or a supporter on the inside prepared to back her whatever.

The Well Bradford and Well North boards were brave. It’s not easy to let go and the governance of this project required a different mind-set to the usual. They committed with very little push-back allowing the appropriate release of funding – without this nothing would have happened. As it turned out, Mumtaz had to be prepared to sub the project herself whilst the agreed money moved slowly through the usual channels.

Money is key to so much, but money will come if the idea is strong enough. In our case Well North sorted out sponsorship by Brewin Dolphin. With five weeks to go to an event on a bank holiday they (along with our other organisational backers) were going to find it difficult to provide people to help on the day which they wanted to do, but this didn’t matter on the day as the community itself took up the slack.

Mumtaz roped in Cycling UK and the equally brilliant Rachel Squire (community cycling officer). The Tour De Yorkshire is a reasonably busy time for Rachel, but this project is what mass-participation cycling it is all about. The MaMinals of Harrogate (Middle class Men in Lycra) might just be able to cope on their own this time.

The biggest headache throughout was the bikes. A task that would have been so much easier if we had been allowed to use the community bikes right on the doorstep. No too simple we were either: (a) the wrong sort of “public” not young or on probation; in the case of the park bikes; or, (b) couldn't track anyone down in five weeks of trying who had the correct authority to release the bikes at the stations. The computer really did say no. On the day of the biggest cycling event to hit the city ever, the community bikes stayed locked up, unused.

One bike was promised through a personal connection by West Yorkshire Combined Authority, an electric bike for a new rider. But despite organising its arrival it never appeared (it was a bank holiday apparently). The bike was ear-marked to assist a Pakistani lady with health issues who had never been on a bike before. The community taught her to ride in four weeks and promised to hold her hand all the way from Park to Park but we wanted the bike to give her the extra confidence she might need. In the end she did it despite being let down. I got the feeling being let down is a reasonably common experience for many people who took part.

So where did we get the bikes? We paid local community businesses across Bradford to refurbish the bikes and gave them away to the riders – so much better. It got done. The local schools also helped us out and we paid for a few new bikes for them too - why not.

Every person involved in “assessing the risk” was helpful and polite; it is certainly not their fault that the paper work was immense. Four different risk assessments (30-pages plus each) and more documents to sign in triplicate than you could shake a cycle pump at.

Without Well Bradford and UK Cycling the administration would have sunk the event and several battleships too. We had to take more and more responsibility for more and more ridiculous scenarios, from damaging the concrete in a car park to bending and defacing street furniture by our ninja cyclists. Our pens ran dry as we explained who the “legal entity” was behind all this fuss on a bank holiday weekend. Normal people just don't have days to spare to devote to the paperwork involved in something like this. Why on earth would you want to waste your life learning how to talk “public sector”?

So we got to the start line – 219 riders, 14 cycle leaders (from as far away as Huddersfield) and the sun shone. We counted them all out and counted them all back in again. No one cracked a single car park. Loads of press, TV and happy smiling people. Success.

And the legacy? Well there are the bikes we bought– they are in good hands and are likely to be used a darn site more than the ones rotting away in the publicly controlled shed. We have built a team and strengthened the connections they may need in future. And we have taught and inspired people to cycle who would never have learned. Some will fall away but I bet most will ride again sometime. And, guess what, we have proved Pakistani women and their families do cycle... who'd have believed it.

Watch BBC Look North coverage at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JX04_C3B0GI

