

# What did Velo-City 2005 do for cyclists in Dublin?

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Velo-City 2005 put the media spotlight on cycling in Ireland for one week. We ask whether any lasting gains resulted for the status of cycling as a mode of transport.

## 1 Background

Dublin is a city of 1.2 million in rapid growth, dominated by an extreme degree of urban sprawl. The population of the Dublin local authority areas has only grown moderately over the past 15 years, while the surrounding counties have had a population explosion. According to a recent report from the Urban forum (<http://www.riai.ie/index.html?id=7219>), Dublin is on course to cover the area of Los Angeles, with only a quarter of the population. Many people now commute from up to 100km away, with the private car being the only option for most of them.

About half the working population in Dublin commute by car, the vast majority driving their own car. This proportion is boosted further by the large numbers commuting from neighbouring counties. Only 4% travelled to work by bicycle in 2002, down from 6% in 1996 (source: Central Statistics Office, [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)). Ireland-wide, a serious, long-term decline can be seen, as illustrated in Figure 1. Particularly serious is the collapse in the number of children cycling or walking to school: only 6% of education trips in Dublin are now by bicycle.

There have been some improvements public transport recently, most notably the re-introduction of the tram (Luas) and upgrades to the Dublin Bay-side commuter rail service (DART). Numerous further improvements are planned, including a metro to the airport and

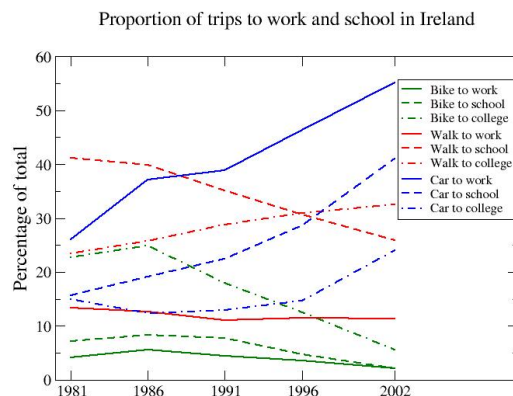


Figure 1: Proportion of trips to work, school and college in Ireland by bicycle, on foot and in car; from the census at [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie).

several new tram lines. Public transport providers are however hostile to cyclists:

- Bicycles are not permitted on the DART at any time, and there is little or no parking at train stations.
- Not even folding bikes are permitted on trams, while cycling is forbidden on tram streets.
- Many bus drivers show appalling driving behaviour and often try to run cyclists off the road. Many bus lanes are too narrow to accommodate both buses and bicycles. Counterflow bus lanes exist many places, but cyclists are not allowed to use these.
- Several ferry companies do not allow cyclists or foot passengers on their vessels.

Large parts of the traffic system in Dublin is extremely hostile to cyclists, with multilane one-way gyratory systems designed to maximise the throughput of motor vehicles. A particular problem is the Quays on either side of the river Liffey, which has been a through route for heavy goods traffic from Dublin Port to the rest of the country. Heavy goods vehicles have also been allowed to move unchecked anywhere in the city, causing a mortal danger to cyclists: 16 of the 21 cyclists killed in Dublin between 1998 and 2005 were killed by HGVs.

Speeding is endemic among Irish drivers. In the absence of congestion, 90% of drivers break urban speed limits, and the average free speed on 50km/h arterial roads was found to be 62km/h (43km/h on residential roads) in a 2005 survey from NRA ([www.nra.ie](http://www.nra.ie)). Enforcement of traffic law has been almost non-existent.

A number of cycle lanes have been rolled out over the past decade. Some of these are of good quality, but very many are very poorly designed or even downright dangerous (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Some typical cycle lane designs in Dublin.

On the plus side, there has been a big increase in good-quality bicycle parking in Dublin city centre. Most of the stands are fully utilised, indicating a demand for even more bicycle parking. There are minimum requirements for bicycle parking in all new developments, but most existing shopping centres, businesses and educational establishments provide little or no bicycle parking.

County Dublin consists of four local authorities: Dublin City Council, covering the city centre and inner suburbs; Dun Laoghaire–Rathdown County Council (DLRCC), covering the southern suburbs; South Dublin County Council, covering the western suburbs; and Fingal County Council, covering the northern suburbs. Each authority has responsibility for traffic planning within its area. In addition, the Dublin Transport Office (DTO) has some overall planning responsibility for the greater Dublin region, which also covers the neighbouring counties of Wicklow, Kildare and Meath. Finally, the National Roads Authority (NRA) has responsibility for all national roads.

## **2 Have conditions for cyclists on the streets of Dublin improved?**

After the opening of the Dublin Port Tunnel in December 2006, the biggest trucks have now been banned from the city centre between 0700 and 1900, in the face of very vocal opposition from hauliers and some businesses. This is a huge improvement for cyclists, although the ban does not go as far as we would have wished. However, although pressure from cyclists has played a role in achieving this step forward, it has long been a desired aim of many interest groups and politicians. That it happened shortly after Velo-City is coincidental.

30 km/h speed limits have been introduced in many city centre streets and some residential areas. Velo-City may have facilitated this move by making key decision-makers more aware of the benefits of lower speed limits. However, there is little or no public awareness of the need and reasons for lower speed limits, and since there is no visible enforcement of the new speed limits, the situation on the ground is largely unchanged so far.

With these two exceptions, the overall conditions for cyclists are largely unchanged:

- Multilane one-way systems designed to maximise throughput of cars still predominate.
- Cycle lane and bus corridor designs are as bad as ever.
- Bike lanes are still used as parking lanes, and now also as stopping lanes for drivers talking on their mobiles (use of handheld mobile phones while driving was banned in 2006).
- There is still very little enforcement of traffic law in the inner city. Cars, buses and bikes regularly run red lights, and speeding is still endemic.

There has been a great public outcry following a surge in road deaths in 2006. As a result, random breath testing has been brought in for the first time, a new Road Safety Authority (RSA) has been set up and a large number of speed cameras will soon be installed. These welcome developments have only had a largely indirect effect on cyclists in Dublin, since most of the enforcement effort has been focussed on country roads, which have received most of the media attention.

The decline in cyclist numbers appears to have been reversed in recent years: according to DTO figures, the number of cyclists crossing the inner-city canal cordon has increased 20% the past 2 years. These figures only measure numbers on one day in November, so the uncertainty is substantial.

The mass cycle that took place during Velo-City 2005 has become an annual event, sponsored by the Docklands Development Agency. Despite less publicity, the number of people taking part in the 2006 event were very encouraging, including many children who otherwise could not have the opportunity to experience cycling in the city centre because of the traffic conditions.

### **3 To what extent is cycling included in transport policy decisions?**

By raising the profile of cycling, the Velo-City conference could be expected to result in cycling being integrated into mainstream transport policy as a serious mode of transport. There have been some moves in that direction, but there have also been some notable disappointments.

Following Velo-City 2005, Dublin City Council joined the BYPAD network. A review was carried out in 2006, with Dublin scoring very poorly in most areas. We are now awaiting whether the recommendations will be followed up, which should lead to major improvements if it happens.

The council also commissioned a review, carried out by Alex Sully of Transport Initiatives, to advise on development of a new cycling policy. This happened in the immediate aftermath of Velo-City 2005. One of the key recommendations was the establishment of a Cycle Forum involving stakeholders. After an initial period with only sporadic meetings and no terms of reference, this forum is now up and running, but it is too early to judge what impact it will have. A particular problem has been that some bodies, most notably the Quality Bus Network Office, have used it as a way of avoiding to deal directly with complaints from Dublin Cycling Campaign.

No similar developments have taken place in any of the other local authorities, although the Cycling Campaign has a representative on the transport planning committee of DLRCC.

Dublin Transport Office, the main local organiser of Velo-City 2005, appears to have gone into reverse after the conference. The DTO Cycle Forum met regularly the year leading up

to Velo-City, but there have been no meetings since. The DTO's cycling policy document was finally published last year, but there was no public consultation or any consultation with Dublin Cycling Campaign, nor were we even informed of its issue. This is particularly disappointing, since the Cycling Campaign, through the DTO Cycle Forum, had put much effort into discussing this document.

Although the head of the DTO publicly admitted during Velo-City 2005 that the current policy is not working, no change in emphasis has been evident since. A revised Design Manual for bicycle infrastructure has been promised for years, but has still not been delivered. If new infrastructure were designed to the standards of the current manual, that might still be better than nothing, but the manual is largely ignored.

The new Road Safety Authority has recently issued a revised Rules of the Road, the book that forms the basis of driver education in Ireland. Dublin Cycling Campaign and other bicycle advocacy groups were invited to make submissions to this revision. But we received no feedback on our recommendations, and most of them were ignored. We have been promised representation on a yet to be established cycling subcommittee of the RSA.

Overall, cycling still occupies a very marginal place in transport policy — one might go so far as to say that cycling and walking are virtually invisible at policy level. No local councils have cycling or walking officers. The Government recently launched a long-term transport strategy (Transport 21, [www.transport21.ie](http://www.transport21.ie)), where cycling does not feature at all.

## **4 Has the conference resulted in any change of policy direction among traffic planners?**

It would be wrong to expect big improvements on the ground after only two years, starting from a situation of neglect. However, if the conference resulted in a change of direction among planners, the benefits should materialise over the next few years.

Velo-City 2005 appears to have inspired the then traffic manager of Dublin City Council and a number of city councillors towards the idea of lower speed limits and a more people-friendly city centre. Much momentum was lost when the manager left his position shortly after the conference, but several positive initiatives have emanated from the Council since then. The most notable of these is the proposal to remove private motor traffic from the "civic spine" (stretching from O'Connell Street to Dame Street).

The general impression is however that there has been little attitude change among most traffic planners on the ground. The Quality Bus Network Office, which is responsible for most of the new cycle lanes as part of new bus corridors, remains overtly hostile and completely uninterested in listening to the views of cyclists. This is evidenced in designs such as that in Figure 3. At a seminar in May for planners and engineers on road design in urban areas, no cycling representation was accepted. Most engineers remain stuck in their old habits, and the same goes for the Traffic Control Centre, which manages the traffic lights using as its

sole measure the volume of motor vehicle traffic that can be moved through each junction.

In the general policy debate, there are for the most part only a few nods in the direction of the concepts of liveable cities and neighbourhoods. There is no recognition that disasters do not befall businesses and traffic chaos does not result if car traffic is restricted. Planners and politicians do not seem to be the least interested in learning from the experiences of other countries. Walking is if possible even worse catered for than cycling, and there is no move towards more pedestrian-oriented urban planning.



Figure 3: A new Quality Bus Corridor and bicycle lane in Blackrock, Dublin.

## 5 Conclusions

The stark reality of unbearable congestion in Dublin, combined with the growing realisation of the climate crisis, have forced a realisation that the current, car-based model is unsustainable. With the obesity epidemic and the recent focus on road safety on top of this, there is a great opportunity for a new transport and planning policy where cycling and walking will play a central role. Unfortunately, the experience so far is that the inertia among planners and engineers is even greater, and that a lot more is required for cycling and walking to break through this barrier and be taken seriously.

A major cycling conference such as Velo-City can have a positive impact by spurring on a more cycle-friendly policy environment. But for the impact to be anything more than transient, it requires committed bicycle advocates working within the decision-making system. In the absence of this, planners, engineers and policy makers will be content to continue as they always have done, ignoring all the experiences from elsewhere that Velo-City and similar conferences can transmit.

A constant dilemma for an advocacy group such as ours in a hostile environment whether to work within the system, or criticise it from outside. We may gain more influence from within, but if the rest of the system is overwhelmingly hostile we may find that our independent advocacy role is undermined for little or no actual gain. This may change if we can identify potential advocates and allies within the system, but they may suffer from the same dilemma again, something we have experienced several times.

Persistent nagging has paid some dividends in bringing our issues to the attention of some politicians and officials. But it is not clear which effect it has in actually changing attitudes.

Building alliances with like-minded groups will be essential to achieving change. There is no pedestrian lobby group in Ireland, but tourist boards and tourism operators should be

interested in the walking as well as the cycling perspective, and the same goes for small city-centre businesses. Health professionals have been active in promoting a similar message to ours.

We are also considering legal action against councils and others who put cyclists at risk by building cyclist-hostile and dangerous infrastructure.

It is obvious that Velo-City 2005 was never going to solve all of Dublin's cycling problems, and that any progress would necessarily be slow. There have been some positive outcomes, most notably in Dublin City Council policy, although even there the experience is very mixed. But the absence of any positive action from the main conference organiser over the past two years, and the failure of most planners and officials to take heed of the messages from the conference, cannot be described as anything but hugely disappointing.