



CYCLE TAXIS TAKE OFF

Brian Esler investigates Downham Cycle Taxis, a pioneering scheme to use passenger-carrying cycles to transport the elderly and disabled to shops, friends and social events – restoring essential mobility where other forms of transport fall short.

Bikes are the first things you see when entering Brian Dalton's home in south London. A bunch of uprights of various ages, sizes and styles fight for space in the cubbyhole behind the door. A forest green Brompton crouches neatly folded beside the entrance to the living room. Brian, who rejoices in the title of 'London Region's Coordinator for National Cycling Strategy' himself comes out to meet me clad in a blue tee shirt proclaiming 'Lewisham People's Day' – perhaps South London's unofficial bank holiday? But while the people in Lewisham are undoubtedly deserving of their own eponymous holiday (aren't we all?), I'm here to talk about one of his most successful projects to date – Downham Cycle Taxis.

The concept is simple enough. Take a sprawling, slightly down-at-heel neighbourhood with a large elderly population and poor public transport, and find an economical, environmentally friendly way to get those folks from one place to another. Enter the cycle taxi!

As with all great ideas, this one did not occur in a sudden flash of inspiration. Rather, the tale

begins over a decade ago, when Brian first started working to have cycles included as part of local transport planning. At the time there was not much official support, but around late 1994, the government made an abrupt U-turn and decided to begin encouraging cycling projects. Suddenly, he found he could obtain official government support.

THINKING TAXIS

By 1997, he was convinced of the viability of a cycle taxi service, perhaps aided by the memory of his first job, at the tender age of 8, as cycle delivery boy for a local shop. That early experience of the utility of cycles remained fixed in his mind.

He wanted to do a demonstration project in Downham estate in Lewisham, one of the most deprived local authority districts in the London area. Brian thought that cycle taxis, similar to those that ply the tourist areas of central London, could provide an affordable, flexible door-to-door local transport service for elderly residents on the estate. However, at that time, despite the millions being spent on developing cycling networks, he could find no government funding.

By a fortunate coincidence, at about the same time, LSE Housing (a research group at the London School of Economics) was looking at potential links between local cycling projects and social inclusion. As part of that research, Jake Elster was contacting cycle campaigners and co-ordinators to determine the extent of existing activities, and to offer the possibility of support for deserving pilot projects that would promote cycling and social inclusion. Brian and Jake discussed the isolation felt by many elderly residents on the estate due to inadequate local transport, and together, they mulled over the idea of a cycle taxi service to alleviate this need.

To sweeten the pot, Brian also mentioned another of his ideas, which was to set up a local bicycle recycling centre, where neighbourhood youngsters could learn how to repair and maintain bicycles by working on abandoned and donated cycles. Out of 26 possible pilot projects across eleven London boroughs, LSE Housing ended up choosing both of Brian's proposed projects.

LSE Housing was able to provide dedicated worker time and took a lead in developing the projects, along with providing some start-up funding from the Ashden Trust, a charitable trust set up by the Sainsbury family to support their interests in urban regeneration and environmental issues. They also met with the head of Downham Pride,

who handle the regeneration budget for Downham, and interested her in the cycle taxi idea. The next step was to develop a detailed proposal that was used to secure further funding, getting the project up and running. Downham Pride eventually agreed to provide matching funding, and Brian also raised some funding from Lewisham Borough Council. The Downham Elderly Health project also became involved, but as no clear partner emerged to take over the next stage, LSE Housing again agreed to take the lead.

TAXIS IN ACTION

In June 1999, Downham Cycle Taxis went from dream to reality, and began carrying its first passengers. It has been running successfully ever since. The Downham Cycle Recycling Scheme was also begun at about that time, and operated successfully to provide underprivileged youths with both cycles – supplied for free from the Metropolitan Police's armoury of abandoned bikes – and the skills and tools to maintain and repair them. Unfortunately, the project recently had to be abandoned but will, hope the organisers, restart soon.

The Downham Cycle Taxi service started life with a pair of leased Brox Quads, but soon found leasing was not cost-effective. It now operates with a Cycles Maximus trike for passenger transport, and has expanded its operations to include a grocery/food and package delivery service via a Brox Quad in Lewisham, and a Bike Best (now known as the Cargocycle: see Issue 8 page 56 -Ed) in neighbouring Sydenham.

The cycle taxi operates from 9:30 am through 4:00 pm most days, and does about 80 journeys a week across the somewhat hilly Downham Estate. Catering primarily to the elderly, passengers with a senior bus pass have a choice of paying a flat £5 lifetime membership fee, which entitles them to journeys throughout the Estate at 50 pence a journey, or they can use a pay-as-you-go plan costing £1 per ride.

Non-seniors can also get a lift, albeit at the higher rate of £2.50 per trip. The commodities delivery service – which generally charges £1 to pick up and deliver groceries and other commodities – became so popular in Downham that it had to introduce a membership scheme. In addition to providing transport, drivers also help passengers with shopping and bags, and even occasionally help with odd jobs in the users' homes, such as fixing a dripping tap.

The combined (taxi and commodities) service now employs three people, and is always looking for eager, able-bodied riders to fill in or expand the service.

THE VERDICT

So what's the verdict on the project?

Anecdotal evidence collected by LSE Housing is the most powerful proof of the project's success. Consider this feedback from one 83 year old user: "It's been wonderful, I don't have anyone else to do this for me and if it wasn't for them [Cycle Taxis] I wouldn't be able to do these things. Before if I wanted something, shopping or to go down to the post office I had to rely on neighbours or sometimes my friend, when she was well, which wasn't always. Now I can hop in and I'm away, whenever I need to go I can, I don't have to trouble anybody."

Similarly, three elderly former neighbours now use the service on a regular basis to meet up with each other, which was previously nearly impossible since buses did not adequately link their far-flung council housing. Some users even reported that the cycle taxi service was the only way they got to spend time outside their houses.

More formally, Jake Elster's final report to LSE Housing sums it up:

"The project has proved successful in terms of delivering a popular service to elderly people in a low-income area (based on data from informal and formal user feedback), and meeting an

existing need that had been established through local consultation. It has allowed elderly people to make journeys that they simply could not before the service was set up, and to get help with shopping and home delivery that they previously had to rely on family and friends for."

Similar projects have also been pursued in Hackney and Manchester, though Downham is the granddaddy of them all. Brian sees a bright future, and recently hired a new project manager. However, funding for such projects is always tight, and all charitable donations will be gratefully received.

Downham Cycle Taxis can be contacted on 0208 461 3876.

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You can read the full text of Jake Elster's report on the project, 'Cycling and Social Inclusion', online at <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASereport8.pdf>



Alongside the much-appreciated taxi service (far left and left), there's also a local delivery service for groceries and the like, using a Brox (top) and Cargocycle (above). The service is so popular that a membership scheme had to be introduced.