

How we helped 4,000 students get on their bikes in Leeds

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Cycle training session at Hedingley

In 2008 we brought a pioneering bike hire scheme to the UK for the first time to encourage cycling and walking at Leeds universities to help reduce traffic and car parking and improve health of students and staff.

Challenge

In 2008 universities in Leeds realised they had a big problem with cars. Too many students and university staff were driving to work and study and the car parks were overflowing at the University of Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan (now Leeds Beckett) University, Leeds Trinity University College and Leeds Teaching Hospitals Trust.

There were also concerns that students' health was suffering: 50% of students were physically active less than three times a week.

Jason Colbeck, Transport Coordinator at Leeds Beckett University, said: "At Leeds Beckett parking was a huge issue. There were 6,000 vehicle movements every day. There was a realisation that something needed to be done. Cycling was at a low point, when you consider that universities tend to have more cycling than other organisations."

Partnership working to deliver change

The Universities wanted to promote health and wellbeing through encouraging and facilitating active travel in the everyday lives of students, university staff and local communities.

Making walking and cycling attractive would address both the parking congestion and health

problems, whilst bringing wider economic, time and environmental benefits to the campus and surrounding areas.

“Sustrans was the natural partner to work with because of their experience as a charity. ”

- Jason Colbeck, transport coordinator at Leeds Beckett University

Solution

The universities formed a partnership with Leeds City Council and Sustrans in order to deliver a package of measures to try and tackle the problem. With a combination of Big lottery funding, partner match funding and additional funding for monitoring and resources from the Leeds Primary Care Trust, project delivery commenced in January 2008 under the external facing brand 'Velocampus'.

The four-year project under the name UTravelActive included:

- › Bike hire
- › Bike hub
- › Bike maintenance
- › Walking and cycling events

Cheap bike hire was at the heart of the UTravelActive concept. A fleet of 400 branded bikes were hired out at favourable rates to students for a semester.

"They were so cheap they flew out the door," said Sustrans Project Officer Sarah Bradbury. "All participants could then access the services of a bicycle mechanic."

As the scheme grew, support services expanded too. As well as longer term bike hire the project invited staff to 'try cycling' for up to a month. Additional activities included led rides and walks to motivate people who were unsure of routes and who needed to improve their cycling confidence and fitness levels.

At the bike hub, with one to two days support from Sustrans staff, people could access information and attend workshops, including maintenance classes for learning bike repair skills.

Results

Within five years the campuses had transformed. By 2013 there was a dramatic increase in walking and cycling to the university. All the bikes were hired and their distinctive green and white livery could be spotted throughout the city.

Workshops at the hub were thriving and a new cycling culture had been born. As more people cycled and walked to the university pressure on car parking also reduced.

Statistics from all participating universities showed:

- › 4,000 bike hub users.
- › 8,471 people attended UTravelActive organised events over the four years.
- › Lasting behaviour change: 90% of participants who were infrequent or non-cyclists before hiring continued cycling post-hire.
- › Normalisation of cycling via development of "everyday cycling" with the fleet of 400 branded bikes visible throughout the city.
- › Hard to reach group of female cyclists successfully engaged with 50% of hirers being female.
- › Health benefits: 76% of those surveyed said they felt healthier as a result of participating in the scheme and 42% said they had lost weight.
- › Continued engagement throughout the project: 770 people took part in a walking challenge in year three.

Award winning partner

In 2012 Leeds City Council awarded Sustrans Partner of the Year.

"I am pleased to see, through successful joint working, the valuable contribution the UTravelActive project has made to the council's aspirations for a low-carbon, sustainable transport system and the support it has provided to residents and students alike in making the change to more sustainable transport modes," said Councillor Richard Lewis, Executive Board Member for Development and the Economy, Leeds City Council.

Testimonials

The universities say UTravelActive helped them to achieve their objectives to change travel behaviour and develop a positive cycling and walking culture in the city.

Dennis Hopper, Director of Facilities Management at the University of Leeds said: "The project has made a positive impact especially in enhancing the student experience and in achieving travel plan objectives, with significant increases in cycling and walking levels amongst staff and students.

"The Velocampus bike hire and hub have become a real asset to the university community, and we look forward to continuing our support into the future."

Making a long-term sustainable difference

The combination of cheap bikes and a supportive community has proved enduringly popular with students and staff, and helped people change their travel habits.

"I've found riding a bike to be the quickest, easiest and cheapest way to travel as well as the most enjoyable - much better than a crowded bus!" said Tamara Bloom, a former student at the University of Leeds, who hired a Velocampus bike for the year, and went on to commute regularly by bike when she worked at the university.

"It's also been the most fun way of getting exercise and something that I wouldn't have been able to benefit from if it wasn't for this scheme."

UTravelActive continued for a further three years thanks to additional funding from the Department for Transport. In the longer term, the project also made a significant impact to infrastructure developments in the city. Partners identified a number of improvements to layouts and signage to make cycling and walking safer.

Three cycle routes were also developed by Leeds City Council and Sustrans in conjunction with UTravelActive partners to serve the universities and hospitals, with a total investment of £1.3m.

Although the project is now over, the universities continue to run workshops on bike maintenance and information support.

"I think there would be uproar if the workshops stopped," said Jason Colbeck at Leeds Beckett.

Meanwhile the universities' 400 white and green bikes around the city are a constant reminder that cycling culture is here to stay in Leeds.

All the activities within UTravelActive project were made possible through a Wellbeing grant from the Big Lottery Fund to Sustrans, as part of the Active Travel Consortium, with matched funding from the University of Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds City Council and Leeds Primary Care Trust plus Department for Transport funding.

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