British cities are greatly expanding their cycling infrastructure

It will take many more years to reach Dutch levels

“This document aims to kick off the most radical change to our cities since the arrival of mass motoring” proclaimed Boris Johnson in a Department for Transport policy paper released last year. Entitled ‘Gear Change’, the paper outlined the government’s plan to build thousands of miles of dedicated bicycle infrastructure over the next five years, paid for by a sixfold increase in funding. The result, it is hoped, will be millions of healthier, happier citizens, who cycle more often, breathe cleaner air and contribute less to global warming.

The Netherlands serves as an obvious role model. The country is similar in many ways to Britain - rich, rainy and densely populated. But over a quarter of all journeys there are made by bicycle, compared to just 2% in Britain. Decades of investment into the road network means cyclists are almost always physically separated from both motor vehicles and pedestrians. Schoolchildren, commuters and pensioners alike can cycle to their destination, without helmets, hi-viz jackets or any other specialist gear, safe in the knowledge that they will not be endangered by traffic.

Cambridge and Oxford are the two British cities closest to emulating this cycling utopia. While not quite up to Dutch standards, a comprehensive network of cycle lanes criss-cross both cities, and the share of commuters cycling to work now reaches 32% and 17% respectively. Other local authorities are trying to catch up. Cardiff, rather optimistically, plans to reach a cycling modal share of 18% by 2026, up from 9% in 2015. Three boroughs in Outer London, Enfield, Kingston and Waltham Forest, are part of the ‘Mini Holland’ scheme, introduced by Boris Johnson when he was Mayor of London, and have invested heavily in ‘Dutch-style’ walking and cycling infrastructure. Following the success of this program, which saw time spent cycling increase by 18% in a single year, the government now wants a further 12 non-London local authorities to become ‘Mini Hollands’.

Nevertheless, most larger British cities still lag far behind their continental counterparts. Despite impressive improvements over the last few years, London has half the amount of designated cycleways as Paris, Vienna or Brussels, when measured as a proportion of all roads and paths. Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow are worse still, and have been building at a slower rate. Even with grandiose promises of radical change and generous funding, it will be a long time yet before British cyclists can travel as safely as those across the Channel.