

“How not to become the Department of Good Intentions” could have been the sub-title of Scotland’s 7th annual Active Travel Conference held on the 26th May 2015 at Our Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh.

Activists and politicians came together to discuss Active travel, basically walking and cycling, and to figure out how to continue pushing the issues surrounding them up the political agenda. It was, they agreed, all about main-streaming active travel, making it the natural and easy choice.

Craig McLaren of the Royal Town Planning Institute said it might be easier than previously thought because the assumed link between traffic and economic growth has been de-coupled. Figures show that relentless growth of traffic has stopped and, more interestingly still, that it started happening before the financial crash. The younger generation, digital natives, now keep in touch using mobile devices - obviously that will cut down on un-necessary journeys but we might need to watch that it doesn’t lead to an increase in general sloth and indolence. (The sky-living fat humans in Wall-E were mentioned)

Professor Ian Docherty of Glasgow University said that we need to be vigilant that Active travel doesn’t fall down the “Shiny Things” Trap. He pointed to a tendency to spend money on demonstrable “things” like new cycle routes or walkways - things that politicians can point to as evidence of progress. Sometimes, Ian said, what we actually need to do is galvanise Joe Public to get involved - to complain when their local environments are rubbish. Everyone agrees that, in terms of Active Travel, somewhere like Amsterdam is great but it’s great because hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and said “enough!” Maybe we need to be more militant.

John Dale, Director of Urban Movement continued the theme asking “are walking and cycling the same thing?” Are they really natural bed-fellows? This wasn’t an attempt to spook the cyclists in the room, (although it did), but a genuine attempt to make a serious economic point, if resources are limited, and they are, shouldn’t we target them where they will produce the widest benefit for the biggest number of people? As was pointed out, not everyone owns a bike but the ownership of feet is reasonably widespread.

Inverness has one of the highest levels of cycling in the UK but why when its cycling infrastructure is terrible? Well, what it does have is a very strong cycling culture so perhaps it’s more important to try and build that first rather than cycle routes, after all people tend to fight for what they care for. (On a personal note here, I’m a cyclist and a walker and a runner, I love canal paths and abandoned railway lines because they’re nearly wide enough to permit all three activities at once. Now the Victorians never foresaw or envisaged those uses so is it possible that the same thing may happen in the future to some of our roads?)

During the panel debate delegates took the opportunity to raise some of the issues that mattered to them with three MSPs, Jim Eadie, Alison Johnstone and

David Stewart. It was useful for the delegates but it may also have been useful to the politicians, it gave them a clear steer on the kinds of things that people wanted to see in any future manifestos.

This continued after the transport minister Derek Mackay MSP spoke. Michael Tornow, a delegate who has both hearing and sight impairment raised the very real question of accessibility. He quoted the recent revamps of Waverley and Haymarket railway stations and of Falkirk town centre. The minister and many delegates were shocked when Michael told how he had fallen off a railway platform which lacked tactile edge markings. He complained but was told by the station owners that they didn't have any money to fix it. This raised obvious questions about the possible necessity for new building and planning regulations, specially trained urban designers and maybe the compulsory involvement of affected parties in the planning of new projects.

One of the truly admirable things about Active travel proponents is that they aren't afraid to slaughter a few sacred cows or smash the odd icon. On the subject of the allocation of funding why not, they said, think the unthinkable and actually *reduce* spending on health, *take money away from the NHS!!* and use it to promote Active Travel? The argument here is one of prevention rather than cure, fitter healthier people will need less care in the future. Again this is not a "shiny thing", it's measurable yes, but any possible benefits will fall outside the usual 5 year political cycle so we may need to re-educate our politicians, local, regional, Scottish and Westminster that that is the kind of thing we want.

All in all it was a great day, lively, engaging and full of real energy and enthusiasm. Hopefully it will all translate into some political action.

Mark Stephen, Conference Chair.