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CycleAdvocacyNetwork



# How to organise a bike bus

A campaign tool for communities

[cyclinguk.org/can](https://cyclinguk.org/can)

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## Foreword – Emily Farquhar



**In my role as ride leader of James Gillespie’s Primary School’s bike bus in Edinburgh, I have had the privilege of supporting hundreds of children to cycle safely to school. Our inaugural bike bus set off on a sunny morning in March 2019 and the children have been cycling to school together – come rain or shine – ever since**

On alternate Fridays, children, parents and volunteer marshals assemble on a pedestrian island about a mile from the school. Even on the coldest mornings, there’s always a buzz of excitement as people gather and look forward to the ride ahead. The children are (generally!) enthusiastic about cycling to school with their friends and, for many parents, it’s a welcome opportunity for a friendly chat with other adults. For other parents and volunteers, it’s a fun way to get some exercise before work.

Before we set off, I usually spend some time welcoming new attendees and catching up with volunteers. This is one of my favourite parts of the ride because people tell me what they are looking forward to, or what they already love, about being part of our bike bus ‘community’.

This is really important because that’s what it’s all about: community. Bike buses are incredibly powerful tools for drawing people together. They create a perfect environment for making positive change. When you start cycling, it’s clear for everyone in your local area to see the benefits of making cycling safer: quieter streets, less pollution, healthier people and, ultimately, the school run becomes a fun activity. Cycling UK are experts

in creating a better world by bike so this handbook on ‘how to organise a bike bus’ should serve as a handy guide to starting a successful bike bus in your area.

So, if you’re thinking of getting involved in a bike bus – whether that’s starting a new one or joining an existing group – I highly recommend you do it! You might just find it’s the best way you can give back to your community and, after all, the best way to start the day is pedalling to the sound of bike bells and excited chatter; it’s infinitely good for the soul.



### How children travelled to school – England

2015-2019



44% Walking	3.6% Private bus
2.2% Cycling	12.1% Local bus
35.4% Car/van	1.2% Surface rail
	1.4% Other transport

2020



46.8% Walking	4.2% Private bus
2.5% Cycling	6.4% Local bus
37.4% Car/van	1.9% Surface rail
	0.8% Other transport

## 1. Why do it?

**Bike buses are like foodbanks – they shouldn't need to exist. However, they meet a fundamental need which really should be met by councils making better planning and highways decisions: the need for children to get to school safely and healthily under their own steam, without their parents and carers feeling that their only option is to get in their cars and drive.**

Decades of bad decisions by local councils, of underinvestment in suitable highways infrastructure, and a lack of leadership from national governments have meant that, for many families, cycling to school can seem like too dangerous an undertaking.

Bike buses exist to counter this inaction and underinvestment. These rides protest the lack of existing safe cycle routes – highlighting the fact that we can't get children to school safely with current infrastructure – as well as providing a safe, cheap, healthy and environmentally responsible way for children to get

to school. Bike buses are a great way to get children and their families involved with a fun, energetic demonstration of what needs to improve in their local area.

Bike buses are demonstration rides, with a very practical outcome every time: pupils arriving at school, on time and fresh for the day. They have the potential to be more persuasive to councillors and council officers than written reports or dry data.

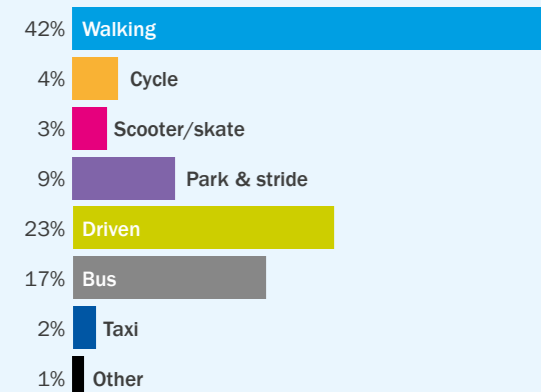
#### The ultimate aims are:

- to persuade local councils to provide safe, accessible routes to schools
- to build confidence for children and parents to feel they can cycle safely on roads

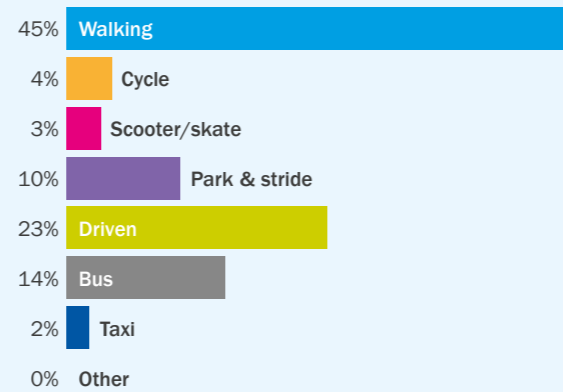
In the long term there is evidence that participation in bike buses increases the likelihood of people cycling to school informally, and reducing the traffic levels around schools, with the attendant benefits in air quality, pupil health and congestion.

### How children travelled to school – Scotland

2015-2019



2020



## 2. Where to do it

Bike buses open up cycling as a potential transport mode for people who have a difficult or dangerous road between their home and their school, and who therefore choose to travel by car rather than cycling.

If there is a part of the catchment area of a local school that is hard for parents/carers and pupils to cycle to school from, and people feel obliged to do the school run by car, this would be a good place to start.

However, there may be some places that are already easy to cycle to school from, but it hasn't occurred to very many people that cycling is even an option, so don't overlook the possibility of a bike bus along potentially 'quick win' routes as a way to start building momentum.

Importantly, ensure your bike bus travels on roads, not on pavements. The point is to claim back space for cycling in environments where motor traffic currently makes it an intimidating place to ride.

You may want to consider varying the route from time to time – you're not obliged to replicate the same journey each time and changing things around could highlight alternative safe routes or involve different riders.

## 3. Who do you need to get involved?

You can start out on a very small scale.

Bike buses need a handful of adults to organise them – an informal core group most often comprising parents and carers associated with the school(s) in question. Backing from the school staff is very useful, but you can still make a success of your bike bus without their express support.

It will help if you can recruit volunteer adult marshals who don't have kids participating in the bike bus – independent people who can stick with the ride and block junctions if necessary, without having responsibility for individual riders.

Make it clear that parents and carers must ride along with their children as escorts, and remain ultimately responsible for them. Bike bus leaders are not acting 'in loco parentis'.

It's good to contact your local councillors and council officers, and the police's local community liaison team.

Disclosure checks for adults aren't necessary for ride leaders/marshals, as they are never left alone with children.

## 4. How

You can start with quite a short route. If that works, you can always lengthen or branch out over time.

Choose a gathering point from which to start the ride. This could be a quiet road or cul-de-sac or a local park or green.

If there are busier roads on the route, try and find places to join them which will allow the group to proceed together (for example, at a light-controlled crossing). In some places, bike buses have secured assistance from the local council or police to control lights.





## 5. Leading bike bus rides

The role of ride leaders is first and foremost to keep participants safe.

Have a designated ride leader at the front. No participants may overtake them. Also have a designated 'leader' as a back marker, who should always ride with (or behind) the last child.

Before setting off, gather the participants in a safe and visible location and welcome everyone. Check that people have roadworthy bikes and suitable clothing, without being too restrictive – the aim is to normalise cycling, and for people to feel they can ride the bike they have in the clothes they have without needing special equipment. Encourage helmet use and visible clothing, but do not make this mandatory unless there are external reasons for doing so.

Ride leaders should wear something that identifies them as such – which could be a high-vis tabard or coat. It needs to be obvious to the participants who the ride leaders are.

Once ready to set off, wait for a safe gap in the traffic so that all riders can stay together.

The ride leaders should aim to ride close to the middle of the road (on two-lane roads) and ensure participants stay to the left of them. Check that no participants are straying across to the 'wrong' side of the road. Look out for oncoming traffic and parked cars (with the potential danger of their doors being opened). Check behind you constantly and monitor your pace, so that the bus does not split. The participating children will be capable of quite different speeds – especially on hills

Keep communicating with the riders near to you.

### Marshals

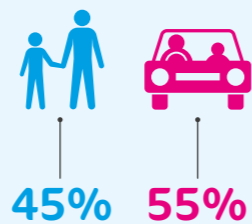
Have one or two marshals ride ahead of the ride leader, for example on narrow roads (to meet oncoming traffic and encourage them to wait) or to 'block' traffic on busy junctions. If your bike bus grows you might choose to recruit more marshals who can space out back down the riders.

## 6. When

You can run a bike bus all year and many successful bike buses take place every week, often on a Friday. If you want to build momentum and run the bike bus for an extended period of time then try to begin it in spring with the brighter mornings and better weather. Once the bike bus becomes more established children and their parents will be more likely to continue over winter. However, don't feel bad about stopping during darker winter months if you think very few children will be involved. You want it to be an enjoyable event for participants.

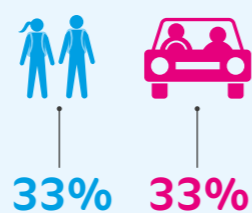
Use calendar occasions such as the annual 'Cycle to School' week, Road Safety Week and Bike Week as excuses. Look at events scheduled to take place in the community and use them as reasons to ride, too.

### How children travelled to school – Wales



#### Primary pupils

Results from 2018/19 suggest that more than half of primary pupils go by car (c55%); and about 45% walk.



#### Secondary pupils

Results also suggest that around a third of secondary pupils are driven to school, and about the same walk.

## 7. Insurance

Although many bike buses have sprung up around the UK as informal, uninsured groups, it's a good idea to consider insurance for your bike bus as you get established. This means that named ride leaders and marshals will be covered in the event of claims being made against them alleging negligence while accompanying the bike bus. Insurers may add certain rules and restrictions that may affect how you organise your ride.

If you set yourself up as a group, you can affiliate with Cycling UK to take advantage of our insurance offer, which provides organiser liability cover for up to £10m. The ride leaders and marshals you name are covered and you can add and remove names that require cover at any time.

Affiliation requires an annual subscription to Cycling UK, which gives you a range of further benefits.

You can find out more about this on Cycling UK's website: [cyclinguk.org/join-group](http://cyclinguk.org/join-group)

## 8. What next?

Your aim should be to bring long-term change. Use your bike bus to make more formal 'asks' of your council and politicians – be they councillors or parliamentary representatives. Invite them to join you one morning.

If you can get a photo of the ride (ask for parental consent), share it on social media or find other ways to let people know it's happened as that will promote further conversation on the subject.

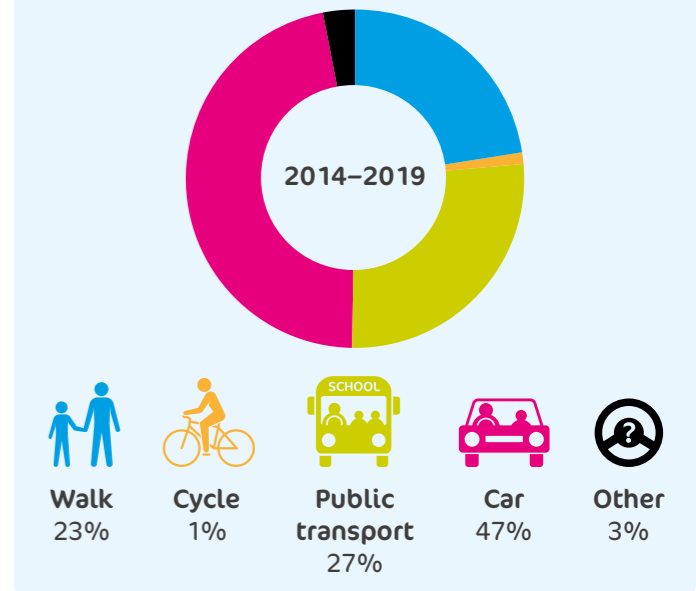
Encourage others to talk to councillors and election candidates about their experiences with cycling and active travel, so that they understand it's an important issue to a range of people who might vote for them in the future.

Talk with local newspapers and regional media and invite them to report on your bike bus. It's a visual, community-led event involving children which can bring positive coverage to the school itself. This can make it an easier 'sell' to journalists and should help increase the profile of your campaign.

Consider involving local businesses to sponsor or host 'bike breakfasts' to encourage participation in the bike bus.



### How children travelled to school – Northern Ireland



## 9. Resources – the Cycle Advocacy Network

Use Cycling UK's resources, provided as part of the Cycle Advocacy Network, to help you develop a wider advocacy plan and hone your message to the media.

Visit [cyclinguk.org/can-resources](http://cyclinguk.org/can-resources) to see the whole library.

## 10. References

**How to: Bike buses** – an interview with Meg Hoyt of North Belfast Cycle Campaign Group (written article and audio) [cyclinguk.org/blog/how-bike-buses](http://cyclinguk.org/blog/how-bike-buses)

**Blackford Safe Routes** offers some advice about organising a bike bus: [www.blackfordsaferoutes.co.uk/organising-a-bike-bus/](http://www.blackfordsaferoutes.co.uk/organising-a-bike-bus/)

**Cycling Scotland's guide** to setting up a bike bus: [www.cycling.scot/mediaLibrary/other/english/5539.pdf](http://www.cycling.scot/mediaLibrary/other/english/5539.pdf)

Sustrans – 'FRidedays' Bike Bus toolkit: [www.sustrans.org.uk/campaigns/fridedays-bike-bus/](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/campaigns/fridedays-bike-bus/)





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