

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Works in Engaging Disabled People in Cycling for Active Travel? A Case Study of Cycling UK's Inclusive Cycling Experience

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This paper explores the impact and delivery of Cycling UK's Inclusive Cycling Experience (ICE) programme, an intervention designed to enhance access to utility cycling for disabled people. Based on programme evaluation and participant feedback, the findings demonstrate that inclusive, person-centred interventions can effectively support disabled people to engage in cycling for active travel. Through cycle loans, tailored support, and attention to individual needs, the programme has had transformative benefits, enabling participants to gain independence, improve health and wellbeing, enhance social inclusion, and increase confidence. Feedback highlights that accessible cycling opportunities can positively influence not only mobility and autonomy but also overall quality of life. Key lessons for delivery include allowing time for progression, addressing storage and access challenges, offering flexible loan options, providing year-round access, ensuring consistent and supportive staffing, and fostering partnership working. While infrastructure barriers may persist, identifying and implementing feasible adaptations is essential to making cycling a realistic and empowering transport option for disabled people. This research contributes to the evidence base on inclusive active travel and offers practical guidance for designing targeted interventions to promote equitable participation in cycling.

Keywords: inclusive cycling; active travel; transport; utility cycling; disabled people; case study

Introduction

Cycling UK's Inclusive Cycling Experience (ICE) programme was launched in April 2024 to enhance accessibility and inclusivity within active travel. The programme enables disabled people in Greater Manchester and Inverness to engage with cycling at no cost through a combination of structured skills and confidence-building sessions, introductory try-out events, and a cycle loan scheme designed to support the use of cycling as a mode of transport. ICE provides access to a range of non-standard cycles to accommodate diverse needs. The programme offers tailored guidance and ongoing support to facilitate sustained participation.

It was developed to address a recognised gap in existing provision for disabled people interested in cycling for transport rather than leisure, with the broader aim of promoting independence, social inclusion, and sustainable mobility.

This paper situates the ICE programme within the wider context of inclusive cycling in the UK, outlining the gap in current provision that the initiative seeks to address. It then explores the impact of ICE for the individuals engaged, drawing on quantitative data from participant surveys ($n = 34$) and qualitative interviews with participants ($n = 10$) plus one family member, to examine how the programme has increased access to cycling as a mode of transport for disabled people and contributed to a range of positive outcomes for participants. In addition, interviews with delivery staff and referral organisations ($n = 9$) provide insight into key lessons learned that have informed programme delivery and generated positive outcomes. Throughout the first year of delivery, the programme evolved based on participant feedback to trial different loan models to better meet disabled people's needs. The paper builds an evidence base to understand what works to enable more disabled people to benefit from utility cycling and will inform future interventions.

This paper uses inclusive language informed by the social model of disability. The term *disabled people* is used to refer to anyone who experiences barriers to access or participation due to physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental health conditions. The terms *cycling* and *cycle* are used to refer to journeys made on all types of cycles, including two-wheeled "standard" pedal bikes, e-bikes, trikes, handcycles, cargo bikes, recumbents, and tandems. When discussing research findings, all language is kept consistent with the social model of disability; however, all participant quotations are presented verbatim, even if they do not align with this terminology.

Addressing the gap in existing provision

There are huge disparities in access to transport for disabled people in comparison to non-disabled people, and particularly in access to cycling. Research by Transport for All (2023) found that in the UK, disabled people face barriers to all forms of transport (including public transport, private transport, and active travel) and make roughly 30% fewer journeys across all modes of transport than non-disabled people. As stated by Transport for All "*for disabled people to truly be equal members of society, this disability transport gap must be closed*" (2023, p.6). Most notably, Transport for All showed that disabled people rated cycling as the most inaccessible mode of transport, rating their experience of cycling as 0.62 out of 3, with only 4% of respondents saying that they could cycle with ease, while 41% said they could not cycle at all. Sustrans and Arup (2020) reported that in the UK, 9% of disabled people cycle at least once a week, in comparison to 17% of non-disabled people, and 78% of disabled people never cycle.

There is a gap in evidence to understand how to reduce this disparity in access to cycling. Clayton, Parkin and Billington (2017) described that disability was an under-researched area within cycling studies and called for further research to better understand the range of contexts in which disabled people are cycling, particularly for transport purposes, and what any specific requirements might be. They argued that this would improve inclusivity in cycle infrastructure and help to develop guidance for designers and promoters of cycling. Similarly, a systematic review of evidence around interventions aiming to promote active travel (including cycling, walking, and wheeling) noted that, across all included studies, there was little consideration of disability, and when included, this tended to be in the context of older or retired adults only (Roaf, Larrington-Spencer and Lawlor, 2024). Research by Cycling UK (2025a; 2025b) found that there remains a gap in the literature around engaging disabled people in cycling for active travel and argued that there is a need to develop a better

understanding of how disabled people can be more effectively enabled to cycle for utility purposes through inclusive cycling interventions.

Current literature cites insufficient or inaccessible infrastructure as a major barrier to disabled people cycling for transport (e.g., *Wheels for Wellbeing*, 2021; *Sustrans*, 2023). While infrastructure improvements are crucial, further barriers associated with capability, confidence, opportunity, and access may prevent both disabled and non-disabled people from making use of existing infrastructure. Some of the other key barriers reported by disabled people relate to either the perceptions of cycling (*Sustrans and Arup*, 2020, found 23% of disabled people think cycling is not for people like them), or a lack of opportunity to cycle in terms of access to suitable cycles (cycles being too expensive and there not being enough opportunities to hire cycles); plus a lack of adult sessions to help people to improve their skills and confidence (*Transport for All*, 2023). *Transport for All* also found that financial barriers prevented 13% of respondents from accessing a suitable cycle or storage space. Non-standard cycles can be prohibitively expensive due to their engineering complexity and customisation requirements (*Cycling UK*, 2024).

Cycling has the potential, however, to bring significant physical and mental health benefits for disabled people, who are twice as likely to be inactive compared to non-disabled people in England (42% compared to 21%) (*Sport England*, 2018). Cycling as a mode of transport also has the potential to have positive outcomes in terms of independence and social inclusion. Disabled people are much more likely to be socially isolated than non-disabled people, with the proportion of disabled people in England who reported feeling lonely “often or always” being over four times that of non-disabled people (15.1% compared to 3.6%) (*ONS*, 2022). Thus, whilst *Transport for All* found that cycling was regarded as the most inaccessible transport mode, it has the potential to improve transport opportunities for disabled people by providing a direct, autonomous, door-to-door means of transport (*Berent, Fujiyama and Yoshida*, 2021) and enabling disabled people to have greater opportunities to access work and/or social opportunities. In addition, previous research by *Cycling UK* (2021) showed that there was demand amongst disabled people in Scotland for affordable access and opportunities to try out or hire different cycles. This research found that 62% of disabled people surveyed were interested in cycle share or loan schemes because they would enable them to cycle more often, 49% felt they would help them get advice on the right cycle, and 48% wanted to try a cycle before potentially buying one (*Cycling UK*, 2021). Such loan schemes not only mitigate the financial barrier by reducing upfront costs but also provide opportunities to try different types of cycles, receive advice on suitability, and build confidence before making longer-term purchases.

Addressing the range of barriers to utility cycling for disabled people is therefore an important task for those delivering cycling interventions. *Cycling UK’s* research (2025b) demonstrates that there is a gap, however, in provision for people who may wish to cycle for transport. The research included interviews with a selection of inclusive cycling providers across the UK to explore their approach to the delivery of active travel support within inclusive cycling interventions. This found a gap in targeted support and initiatives incorporating a focus on enabling disabled people to cycle for transport. Some existing programmes have incorporated elements of transport-focused cycling (e.g., *Sheffield Cycling4All*, *Cardiff Pedal Power*, *Wheels for All*, *Get Cycling CIC York*, *Wheels for Wellbeing’s Wheels4MeLondon*). However, across the UK, overall, there is a gap in targeted support and initiatives incorporating a focus on enabling disabled people to cycle for transport. Other providers were mostly engaging disabled people in cycling for leisure, providing opportunities to access non-standard cycles to ride in traffic-free or low-traffic locations, including parks, athletics tracks, and various cycle paths. These sessions include a range of different delivery models—training,

skills and confidence sessions; led rides; and opportunities for people to cycle either independently or with a carer/member of staff in these locations. These leisure opportunities held in safe, enclosed locations have a crucial role in enabling disabled people to cycle and have important positive benefits for individuals. Cycling UK found that providers could easily identify positive impacts for participants, particularly in terms of health, wellbeing, and social outcomes. Nevertheless, few framed their standard offer to include off-site cycle loans, explicit encouragement of skills relevant for building confidence on roads, route mapping, or support around storage and practicalities of cycles as modes of transport for disabled people.

Cycling UK's ICE programme was initiated to pilot how to bridge some of the transport gaps for disabled people. The programme addresses the barrier of the lack of cycle loan opportunities and offers targeted and personalised support to enable people to develop their skills and confidence in cycling independently for transport. By offering free access to a range of cycles and a cycle loan scheme, ICE directly addresses cost barriers, providing participants with the opportunity to try cycling without financial risk. The programme was designed and developed by Cycling UK with expert advice and support from the charity Wheels for Wellbeing. Wheels for Wellbeing is a leading UK organisation dedicated to enabling disabled people to cycle, offering training, skills development, and access to non-standard cycles. In the development of ICE, Wheels for Wellbeing provided strategic guidance, shared learning from existing inclusive cycling programmes, and supported the design of sessions and participant engagement strategies. They also provided Disability Equity training for Cycling UK delivery staff. A list of other organisations that were also consulted in the design, development, or marketing of the programme is provided in the appendix.

Cycling UK has established three ICE hubs (one in Inverness, and two in Greater Manchester). The hubs offer a mixed fleet of cycles and trained support staff, a range of environments for cycling, including off-road cycling routes, on-road cycling opportunities, and in one location, an indoor venue for inclement weather. The programme is open to anyone who identifies as disabled or who has a long-term health condition. Awareness of the programme is generated through links with local disability organisations, as well as targeted community engagement activities, and direct self-referral. Through a range of engagement events, the ICE team has built links with local organisations and partners who signpost people to the programme and bring groups to sessions. The provision includes opportunities for individuals to try out a range of different cycles; staff helping people to find the right cycle to meet their needs; support with adjustments needed; group rides; free loans of cycles; buddy rides and travel support such as planning routes from individual's homes or workplaces; guidance on road safety (e.g., navigating junctions, positioning on the road); advice on purchase of cycles and storage solutions (for those that are in a position to purchase); and ensuring individuals feel comfortable and confident to make journeys alone in the future. The team offers a person-centred approach whereby delivery is tailored to each individual, and the design of sessions is dependent on individual barriers, wants, and needs.

Transformative impacts of ICE

Over the course of the first year of delivery (April 2024–April 2025), there was a total of 1,560 engagements with ICE. This included 671 attendances at try-out sessions, 119 cycle loans, and 770 involved in other engagement activities (including awareness sessions away from the hubs and meet-and-greet events). These figures include repeat participants, as some people engaged with more than one element of the programme. Participants completed surveys that asked questions about the impact of the programme 12 weeks after their engagement. Through focus groups and interviews, participants were also asked for feedback on

the programme. There was an overwhelming consensus that ICE had either met or surpassed expectations. The participants described numerous positive outcomes of the programme, in particular improved health and wellbeing; improved feelings of social inclusion; developing in confidence and improving feelings of safety. Some participants described the programme as “*life changing*” or “*transformative*”.

Progression to active travel

The data collected in year one of ICE indicates that many participants are either progressing towards or considering active travel because of the programme. When asked about future behaviour, 60% of respondents indicated that they were likely to consider cycling as a mode of transport in the future, either through loans if available, or the purchase of a cycle. 18% were intending to purchase their own cycle. Considering the gap in participation levels and barriers to cycling for disabled people described by the literature, this can be regarded as a significant achievement of the programme. Reasons why individuals were not considering cycling as a mode of transport varied, with barriers such as storage, loan opportunities, and cost of cycles discussed in later sections. Further research in year two of the programme will investigate further barriers in more detail. Qualitative comments indicated that, for some, ICE enabled cycling for the first time in years, restoring autonomy and independence.

“Once I got comfortable, I borrowed the e-bike for two weeks and rode every day with my parents on off-road tracks. I covered more miles than I have in years, and it’s given me back my independence. I’m now saving up to buy my own e-bike.” (Participant)

“I thought it that was gonna be the end of my cycling and it’s not. It’s opened up new opportunities for me.” (Participant)

Improving health and wellbeing

The survey data shows that 88% of respondents reported improvement in physical and/or mental wellbeing as a result of their participation in the programme. Participants reported that regular cycling had improved their physical health through taking part in increased physical activity. The wife of one of the participants, taking regular day loans and hoping to purchase his own cycle, described how her husband had increased in stamina:

“It was the first spark in my husband’s eyes that I had seen for years when this was spoken about ... You know, the first time he went, he could do 10 minutes. He’s now up to over an hour, twice a week on a bike.” (Family member)

One participant has a health condition that makes walking painful for even a short period of time. He tried cycling as a child, but balancing proved difficult. The team worked with him to identify the right cycle to meet his needs and build his confidence to loan an e-trike. He is now starting to cycle for local journeys and is planning on saving for his own cycle.

“I think because I’m exercising more, you generally have a bit more interest in life in general. It just encourages whatever you want to pursue – opens your mind up to the possibilities. I’m travelling distances that I could never hope to walk or travel in my wheelchair. Being on a bike has been transformative.” (Participant)

Participants also spoke about improved feelings of wellbeing, developed through being outside in the fresh air, feeling healthier and happier.

"It's like, a feeling of, you know, freedom, being back on a bike and feeling the wind in your hair or on your face." (Participant)

While some health and wellbeing benefits would have likely occurred through cycling for leisure, the opportunity and encouragement to consider incorporating cycling into everyday life (potentially with greater regularity) increase the benefit for participants taking this step. Positive feelings of wellbeing may also be created through increases in confidence, social inclusion, independence, and empowerment in being able to access new opportunities.

Improving social inclusion

Increased access to places and opportunities (e.g., work, education, volunteering, social activities) through cycling was reported by 82% of respondents. One participant had taken a one-month loan during which she had done several rides with her family. Prior to this, her family would regularly go cycling without her. She spoke of her daughter's reaction to her joining their ride:

"She was sat on her bike at the end of the drive, bouncing up and down. I'm like, 'what's up with you? Why are you so giddy?'" She went *"I'm just excited. This is the first ever bike ride you've been able to come on with us",* and I was like *"wow". I thought I was just doing it for me, but actually, this meant a lot to all of us.*" (Participant)

This participant was planning to purchase her own cycle to continue to cycle with her family, as well as for local journeys.

Increasing confidence

Survey data showed 65% of respondents experienced an increase in confidence when cycling. The programme is designed to increase confidence at every stage, for example, being able to confidently adjust and manoeuvre cycles, learning to navigate routes and cycle in different conditions. The learning from the programme, however, as will be discussed later, shows that changes in confidence can take time. Some people needed several sessions to develop skills and confidence before progressing to a loan.

One participant had previously cycled for many years, but after being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, balancing on a standard cycle became difficult. She had lost confidence and thought that cycling was no longer a safe option. At her first session, the team encouraged her to try different cycle types. Once she had developed her confidence in the hub location, she took out a loan. This tested cycling on the roads that she would be using on a day-to-day basis. She described that:

"It was really valuable for me being able to bring it home on loan for a couple of weeks because then, you know, that enabled me to be sure that it could cope with the terrain that I wanted to take it on." (Participant)

The team provided advice on purchase options, and she has now bought a trike, which is enabling her to continue cycling for local journeys.

Lessons learned in delivering cycling for active travel

The research has captured some important learning from ICE around what works in delivery, which is highlighted here and helps to build the evidence around the delivery of utility cycling interventions for disabled people.

Allowing time for progression

A key learning from the programme was not to underestimate the amount of time required for planning and delivering an active travel intervention with disabled participants. The ICE team found that many participants needed more resources and support to begin cycling than had been initially considered, particularly if they had not used a non-standard cycle before. Generally, it was found that participants would need to attend several sessions before progressing to a loan and being able to confidently and safely use their cycle on the road. Within a person-centred approach, the team required time to understand access needs as well as interests and preferences of participants. This included time to try out different cycles to establish what adaptations might be needed. The team asked questions to be able to identify what would be suitable...

“...to unlock that bit of knowledge to be able to identify the key to what works for that person.” (ICE staff)

Inviting prospective participants to observe or attend taster sessions gave participants more confidence in what sessions would involve. This also assisted in managing expectations, as sometimes people would attend assuming they would be able to take out a loan on the same day, but the time needed to find the right cycle and make adjustments could sometimes be more than this. Offering multiple sessions each week provided participants with frequent opportunities to access and try out the cycles.

Finding storage solutions

The ICE team found that once someone has progressed to the stage of being ready to take out a loan, they often face a challenge in the storage of cycles. The size and manoeuvrability of some cycles mean that it can be difficult or impossible for some people to store them securely at home, and some people have difficulties transporting cycles from the hub to their homes. Changing the loan length times, as will be discussed in the next section, was an important solution to this challenge. In addition, the team managed storage issues by giving participants advice and guidance on the purchase of different home storage options and security solutions. The opportunities for loaning cycles helped some participants to view any investment in storage as less of a barrier to cycling than it had initially appeared because the benefits of cycling began to outweigh the costs. One participant had viewed storage initially as a barrier, but a loan for a few weeks demonstrated the health and wellbeing benefits of cycling. It was enough to make her believe that investment in both her own cycle and extra storage at home would be worthwhile, and she began exploring options for a secure shed for her garden.

Transportation as well as storage was a relevant skill taught in sessions. Staff supported people with testing out moving and lifting cycles in and out of a car, showing participants correct and safe ways to fold and lift cycles to be able to think about storage and access.

“And the thing I found very important was literally being hands on because [the staff] folded it right down and I could check whether I could actually lift it. Just simple things

like that because it's very easy to get into. It's like 'alright, but if you can't actually manoeuvre it when you're not cycling, there's no point'. So it was really great to be able to try all those aspects of it." (Participant)

Offering flexible loan models

The ICE programme has adapted their loan service based on feedback from participants to provide a storage solution by offering short-term loans. Initially, the plan was for loans to be offered on a longer-term basis for one week or more. There are participants for whom this worked well. However, the difficulties that some participants were having with storage meant that loans were not a possibility for everyone who was interested in the programme. The team has trialled a service where loans can last a few hours, allowing access to loans for those who do not have home storage space. This has resulted in more loans being taken out and participants who attend regularly to take out shorter loans. One participant has been taking out frequent short-term loans to use for local journeys as a mode of transport:

"I'm a wheelchair user, and I don't have a place to store a bike that size. So having those sessions that I can just, local sessions that are not far away from where I stay, it's for me, works brilliantly because I can just let you guys know, come in, use the bikes how long as I want and just go back home. That works for me." (Participant)

Lessons learned for leisure and utility cycling interventions

Other learnings can apply to those delivering leisure opportunities as well as those aiming to encourage active travel. First, the accessibility of the hub location is a crucial factor, as well as having a range of accessible facilities on-site, including parking, public transport links, and toilets or changing areas that are easy to find and accessible.

"I guess maybe it's like almost pre-empting stuff that people with different access needs might want or might find useful." (Participant)

Offering year-round provision if there is demand from participants was also raised. Some providers do not run sessions throughout the winter; however, the ICE team in both locations found that there was still demand for provision throughout the winter months. In Greater Manchester, an indoor venue enabled provision to continue throughout bad weather, and people were able to build up their skills and confidence inside before venturing to outdoor locations when the weather allowed.

The research has shown that ICE has important impacts in terms of social inclusion. Making time for social interaction before, during, and after sessions appears to be an important consideration when designing sessions. Some participants indicated that even when they progress to cycling independently for travel, they may still like the offer of returning for social or led rides.

A further lesson is the value of consistent staffing, as well as staff who have strong interpersonal skills and who are passionate about the benefits of cycling for disabled people.

"[the staff] were both amazing and like an important part of the experience. I think in terms of making me feel, you know, comfortable and just being really open to stuff." (Participant)

"And [the staff] are so good and they remember the students and they use their names, and all that kind of thing is so important too." (Referral organisation)

Finally, in both locations, the ICE team found it important to work in partnership with other inclusive cycling providers, wider community and disability organisations, and local authorities to ensure disabled people hear about and can access the service. Building these relationships requires significant time and organisational capacity, which needs to be considered in the planning stages.

Summary and next steps

This paper outlines the findings of an evaluation of the impact and delivery of Cycling UK's ICE programme, an intervention designed to enhance access to cycling for active travel among disabled people. Building on insights from the first year of the ICE programme, the paper highlights the positive impacts of the programme in terms of progression towards active travel, improving health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and increasing confidence, as well as highlighting the lessons learnt in delivery. Future research should focus on further refining inclusive cycling interventions to support active travel. Key next steps include evaluating longer-term outcomes to understand sustained impacts on independence, health, social inclusion, and transport behaviour. Expanding the programme to additional locations and further testing flexible loan models can identify scalable approaches to addressing storage, cost, and access barriers. While ICE has successfully reduced financial barriers to cycling, affordability remains a key consideration for future interventions. Expanding free or subsidised cycle provision, including loan schemes, could further support disabled people in transitioning from supported sessions to independent cycling as a mode of transport. Ensuring that cost does not prevent participation will be essential for achieving long-term increases in utility cycling. Finally, strengthening partnerships with community and disability organisations, local authorities, and other inclusive cycling providers can facilitate awareness and participation through collaborative working, ultimately enabling more disabled people to cycle regularly for everyday journeys.

Appendix

The Inclusive Cycling Experience consulted with a range of organisations in the design, development, and marketing of the programme. These include other cycling providers, disability organisations, and local organisations with disability groups:

- **Bee Pedal Ready** – Manchester, England – <https://www.beepedalready.com>
- **Beyond Empower** – Altrincham, Greater Manchester – <https://beyondempower.co.uk>
- **Cardiff Pedal Power** – Cardiff, Wales – <https://www.cardiffpedalpower.org>
- **Charlotte's Tandems** – UK-wide – <https://charlottestandems.weebly.com>
- **Cycling Scotland** – Edinburgh, Scotland – <https://cycling.scot>
- **Get Cycling CIC** – York, England – <https://www.getcycling.org.uk>
- **GM Moving** – Greater Manchester, England – <https://www.gmmoving.co.uk>
- **Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People** – Manchester, England – <https://gmcdp.com>
- **Hitrans** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://hitrans.org.uk>
- **L'Arche Highland** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://www.larchescotland.org>
- **Manchester People First** – Manchester, England – <https://mpf.org.uk>
- **NANSEN** – Edinburgh, Scotland – <https://nansen.org.uk>
- **NHS Highland** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk>
- **Outfit Moray** – Moray, Scotland – <https://outfitmoray.com>
- **Partnerships for Wellbeing** – UK-wide – <https://partnershipsforwellbeing.org>
- **Salford University** – Salford, England – <https://www.salford.ac.uk>

- **Seashell Trust** – Cheadle Hulme, England – <https://www.seashelltrust.org.uk>
- **Sheffield Cycling 4 All** – Sheffield, England – <https://sheffieldcycling4all.org>
- **Shopmobility Inverness** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://shopmobilityinverness.org.uk>
- **Simply Cycling** – UK-wide – <https://simplycycling.org.uk>
- **Spinal Injuries Scotland** – Edinburgh, Scotland – <https://www.spinal.co.uk>
- **TfGM (Transport for Greater Manchester)** – Manchester, England – <https://tfgm.com>
- **The University of the Highlands and Islands** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://www.uhi.ac.uk>
- **Velocity Inverness** – Inverness, Scotland – <https://velocityinverness.org>
- **Walk Ride GM** – Greater Manchester, England – <https://walkridegm.org>
- **Walk, Wheel, Cycle Trust (previously Sustrans)** – Bristol, England – <https://www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk>
- **Wheels for All** – UK-wide – <https://www.wheelsforall.org.uk>
- **Wheels for Wellbeing – Wheels4MeLondon** – London, England – <https://www.wheelsforwellbeing.org.uk>

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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