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A Safe Cycling Environment, and how Hong Kong can become one

by Hong Kong Cycling Alliance
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1. Over recent decades, while overall road fatalities have come down substantially, cyclist death and injury rates have increased. Transport Department ascribes the broader success to its campaigns to make drivers aware of the consequences of poor road behaviour. Meanwhile, minimal government effort to educate and inform motorists about cycling, or provide effective training for cyclists, corresponds to the toll in cyclists' lives.¹
2. Most deaths and serious injuries in Hong Kong occur not on the cycle tracks but on the road system, where much cycling takes place.²
3. The cause of the majority of cyclist deaths and serious injuries is ignorance and poor driving by other road users. Motorists have not been shown how to share the road with cyclists, or told of cyclists' rights, or reminded of the consequences of failing to drive appropriately when there are cyclists on the road.
4. Through TD and the RSC, the government's approach continues to focus in the wrong places: cycle tracks and cyclists' apparel. Also, by overemphasising cycling behaviour, it sends a dangerous message that motorists have little responsibility for cyclists' safety.
5. As members of this panel noted strongly in the meeting in 2010, "*cycling is transport and on the roads*". The government has still not recognised that, today, much of cycling takes place on the roads and for functional, not leisure, purposes.
6. Moreover, most cyclists, and especially those using their bikes for transport, will at some time use the road network. Cycle tracks don't reach everywhere and never will. Indeed the present networks in NT new towns are often disjointed, forcing cyclists to frequently cross and make use of roads.
7. It is vital that government policy recognises this, and stops pretending that cycling safety can be seriously addressed by looking only at the (relatively safe) cycle tracks. Motorists and cyclists must know how to coexist on the roads. To act on any other basis is to condemn hundreds more cyclists to unnecessary death and injury, every year. Cycling is transport.

What we need to do

8. On the roads, where most cyclists ride and most serious accidents occur, the primary need for action lies not with the cyclists but with educating motorists to respect cyclists on the road and on the practical measures to drive safely around them. The present laws are very clear on the obligation to drive safely. But without any public guidance, drivers are often ignorant of the practical measures, such as the need to overtake safely (typically into the next lane), to carefully judge cyclists' speed and to be aware of the safe space a bicycle needs to operate in. And without a firm enforcement of those laws, motorists may believe that they don't need to change.
9. An effective public information campaign with the message that cyclists have equal rights on the road, and some basic guidance on how to drive a motor vehicle in the vicinity of cyclists, could begin a substantial change for the better for Hong Kong's roads.

Cyclist training

10. In addition, it is necessary to greatly increase the provision of cycle training. This should involve practical instruction on riding in a busy urban environment, or on Hong Kong's open roads. The UK's official Bikeability programme could be a useful model.³ Training should focus on decision making in real-world situations. A high level of all-round awareness is teachable, as is understanding and anticipation of other road users' behaviour, and communication with other road users.
11. It should be noted that anyone who cycles mainly on cycle tracks and is not familiar with using the roads is dangerously vulnerable. Without training or at least guidance, the few minutes they spend on the public road become a concentration of risk. So cycling training should aim primarily to teach how to be safe on the roads. Then riding on cycle tracks simply means applying the same rules and process, but in a less intense environment, with a lower need for alertness and hence a more enjoyable ride.

Where's the data?

12. A critical factor holding back the creation of a safer cycling environment for Hong Kong is the absence of adequate data. The government has no clear picture of the nature, extent and frequency of cycle journeys made in Hong Kong. The annual TD Traffic Census takes no account whatsoever of cycling. Every ten years some questions are asked in the Travel Characteristics Survey. Some reliance is placed on the 2004 Cycling Study (including its mistaken data point that '70% of cycling is recreational'). A study for TD to be published in Q2 or Q3 of next year (*Traffic and Transport Consultancy Study on Cycling Networks and Parking Facilities in Existing New Towns in Hong Kong*) is limited in scope to a) the cycle tracks, and b) the NT new towns, omitting almost all of the

high-risk locations for cycling: the roads in towns, the fast roads between towns, and the urban areas.

International lessons and comparisons

13. As Hong Kong has one of the least developed cycling policies of any developed economy, we can benefit from the experiences of other locations. Both studies and actual programmes offer much that can inform a safer cycling environment for Hong Kong's cyclists today, as well as laying the foundation for the continuing growth of cycling, for leisure and especially as a component of our transportation system.

Priorities

14. Hong Kong Cycling Alliance believes that there are over a million bicycles in Hong Kong. (A 2009 study commissioned by Shatin District Council found that there are 150,000 in that district alone.⁴) That is much more than there are cars, but still the administration manages the road space as belonging to motor vehicles, while ignoring popular, efficient, non-polluting, health-enabling, infrastructure-light, low-cost bicycles, including and especially the safety and rights of their riders.

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