Give short-distance cyclists priority over speedy commuters

The majority find a bicycle useful for shorter rides: the trip to school or to visit friends locally, or journeys where public transport may be complex

John Stewart

Tuesday August 12 2025, 7.49pm, The Times

Share

Save

It is a daily occurrence. Cyclists jumping red lights and racing across pedestrian crossings. This month ITV London reported that 200 cyclists had gone through a red light in only one hour at a busy central London junction.

However, these speed merchants raise a wider issue about whether the government is pursuing the right policy on cycling. It seems to have been pressurised by the cycle lobby to put the emphasis on catering for those who want to ride at speed over fairly long distances, mainly to work. Mostly these are fit, able-bodied men.

I question whether these are the journeys most people want to make by bicycle. The majority find a bicycle useful for shorter rides: the trip to school or to visit friends locally; journeys where local public transport may be complex; jumping on a hired bike to go a short distance; and, in the commercial world, deliveries to nearby premises by cargo or electric bikes.

A policy focused on shorter trips, almost certainly made by a more diverse demographic, would have a different emphasis: much less cycling on “main” roads; the creation of cycle-friendly side streets; the development of safe routes to school; the provision of more secure cycle storage facilities, particularly in low-income areas; and an emphasis on junctions — according to Transport for London research in 2023, 84 per cent of cycle casualties occur at junctions.

Of course, there always will be longer journeys made by bicycle, such as shift workers who often find cycling convenient. But if the majority of potential trips are to be over shorter distances, the current emphasis on speed, fast superhighways and floating bus stops is mistaken.

Advertisement

It would flying in the face of the facts to say that the chronic congestion in many of our towns and cities is entirely, or mostly, down to cycle lanes but, equally, the less cycle provision that is required on busy roads, the more space there is for essential users of those roads, including buses and delivery vehicles.

Business and commerce are the lifeblood of any town or city. Congestion leads to more costs and lower productivity. If a different approach to cycling, more in tune with most people’s aspirations, were to help ease that congestion, it could be a win-win situation.

*John Stewart is a director of Social and Environmental Justice and chairs the UK Noise Association*