

Policy Position Paper

Cycle helmets

Cycling Scotland believes adults should be free to decide whether to wear a helmet whilst cycling and that parents or guardians are responsible for deciding if their children wear helmets.

Cycling Scotland is strongly opposed to any move towards helmets being compulsory. We believe such measures could have a negative impact on the uptake of cycling as part of a healthy, active and sustainable lifestyle.

To make our roads safer for people cycling, evidence shows infrastructure is the biggest priority, together with education and enforcement.

If children are involved in cycle training or other organised events, decisions around helmets depends on the operating procedures of the host organisation, usually a school or local authority.

For cycle races and other sporting events, we recognise participants are required to wear helmets, in line with regulations for these events, given the different risk to which sport cyclists, travelling at greater speeds, are exposed.

Key messages

- Wearing a helmet when cycling in the UK is not required by law.
- Cycle helmets should never be made compulsory. There is evidence to show that compulsory helmet laws drive cycle use down¹.
- There are associated public health impacts with increased levels of inactivity. UK research has estimated that the health benefits of cycling outweigh the risks of cycling by a ratio of 20:1².
- A focus on helmets risks diverting attention from systemic improvements to cycling safety from providing dedicated infrastructure.
- Cycling is an inherently low-risk activity. Over the last decade, there has been a 21% increase in pedal cycle traffic and the correlating increase in cycling accidents is significantly less. Since 2012, the number of people cycling involved in accidents of all severities has decreased³.

¹ Robinson, D.L (2001) Changes in head injury with New Zealand bike helmet law, Accident Analysis and Prevention, 33: 687-691 <http://cycle-helmets.com/AAP2001DLRNZHI.pdf>

² Cycling UK (2019) Cycle Helmets: An overview of the evidence https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2019/06/helmets-evidence_cuk_brf.pdf

³ Transport Scotland (2018) Reported Road Casualties Scotland 2017 <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/43355/sct09184702081.pdf>

Date published	August 2019
Version	2.1

Key evidence

- Evidence from a range of countries shows no positive association between mandatory cycle helmet use and a reduction in accidents. For example, in Portugal, following strong public opposition, the introduction of mandatory cycle helmets was dropped. Portugal has had the largest drop in road deaths in Europe between 2010 and 2015, and cycling deaths also fell by some 44%, while at the same time rates of cycling have increased markedly⁴.
- There may be some benefits for children in wearing a helmet as they are more likely than adults to have a fall and suffer a head injury. Evidence shows that 45% of children admitted to hospital with injuries from cycling have suffered head injuries⁵. However, this is within the context of just 64 child cycling casualties of all severities on built and non-built up roads in Scotland in 2018.
- It's important to note that evidence shows enforcement of mandatory helmet usage has led to a reduction in rates of children cycling, by around 4-5%⁶. Research from Western Australia, which introduced mandatory helmet legislation for children in 1991, shows that, whilst the number of children wearing helmets increased following the introduction of the legislation, the overall number of children cycling significantly decreased⁷.
- Research shows that enforcing cycle helmet use typically leads to a reduction in cycling by as much as a third.
- The health benefits of cycling outweigh the risks - people who cycle regularly have a fitness level equivalent to an individual 10 years younger than them.
- Enforced mandatory helmet laws have not prevented serious head injury at the population level. Cycling is not a leading cause of head injury in any group.
- Risk compensation - this suggests that people cycling will cycle less cautiously when they are wearing a helmet⁸.
- Impact on social exclusion - certain groups may be less likely to wear cycle helmets and therefore may be deterred further from cycling if compulsory helmet legislation was introduced⁹. These groups include children from socially deprived areas, minority ethnic groups, and women.

⁴ <https://ecf.com/news-and-events/news/important-victory-bicycle-users-portugal>

⁵ <https://www.rosipa.com/rospaweb/docs/advice-services/road-safety/cyclists/cycling-accidents-factsheet.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.nber.org/papers/w15658.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1410838/pdf/bmj3320722a.pdf>

⁸ Gamble, T and I. Walker (2016) Wearing a Bicycle Helmet can increase Risk Taking and Sensation Seeking in Adults, Psychological Science, 27(2): 289-294

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956797615620784>

⁹ Cycling UK (2019) Cycle Helmets: An overview of the evidence

https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2019/06/helmets-evidence_cuk_brif.pdf

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