

Sustrans in the North East of England

Many across the North East will be familiar with cycling routes like the Coast and Castles, linking Newcastle with Edinburgh, or perhaps the new Way of the Roses, a 170 mile route linking Bridlington to Morecambe.

The routes are part of the National Cycle Network, established by Bristol-based charity, Sustrans. We invited them to outline their achievements in the region and provide a glimpse of future plans.





The National Cycle Network

Sustrans' was established in the 1970s and its first project was the conversion of a disused railway path linking Bristol and Bath. In September 1995, after successfully bidding for a Millennium Lottery grant, it received funding of £42.5m to create a new National Cycle Network (NCN).

The vision was to build 2,500 miles of the network by the year 2000, but as projects were brought forward, it actually completed 5,000 miles by the turn of the millennium.

Today, the NCN carries over a million walking and cycling journeys daily, with at least one route passing within a mile of 57% of the population. The NCN routes with the distinct blue cycle signs and red numbers are recognisable throughout the North East. Of its 13,400 miles, 4,000 miles are off road, including dedicated pathways through parks, woodlands and green spaces. These “greenways” are often natural habitat corridors that transect other linear features such as rivers, canals and railways, and that Sustrans are working to restore through their Biodiversity Plan, launched in 2007.

In 2010 there were 420 million zero carbon journeys on the NCN, equivalent to 657,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide saved from car journeys. Of the 359 million trips made by adults, 25% were commuting and work-related, an increase of 10% from 2009. This highlights how the network is becoming more regarded as part of the everyday transport network, and not just something used solely for leisure purposes.



The NCN makes a significant contribution to the North East's tourism economy with a number of long distance routes popular with both UK and overseas tourists, including:

- *The Sea to Sea (C2C) running from the Irish Sea to the North Sea*
- *Hadrian's Cycleway, running 174 miles from Whitehaven to South Shields*
- *Reivers Cycle Route, passing through Border Reiver territory for 150 miles from Whitehaven to Tynemouth*
- *Way of the Roses, a 170 mile route from Morecambe to Bridlington*
- *Walney to Wear passes, 153 miles, passing through the North Pennines*
- *The Coast and Castles route from Newcastle to Edinburgh, forming part of the European North Sea Cycle Route that passes through eight countries*
- *The Pennine Cycleway between Berwick-on-Tweed and Appleby-in-Westmorland.*





Case Study: C2C

The Sea to Sea, or C2C, is 140 miles linking the Irish and the North Seas. The route is best cycled from west to east to take advantage of prevailing winds and more sympathetic gradients. It can be started in either Whitehaven or Workington with the finish in Tynemouth or Sunderland. There are 79 miles of the route that are traffic free.

The C2C was the first, and is the UK's most popular, 'challenge' cycle route, opened by Sustrans in 1992. It passes through the northern Lake District before climbing the Pennines, 'the roof of England', and then descending to the railway paths of County Durham. It includes Black Hill, the highest point on the National Cycle Network (609m) and the Consett-Sunderland railway path and sculpture trail.

The route also features a collection of artworks including:

- *Terris Novalis* by internationally renowned artist Tony Cragg, a theodolite and an engineer's level at twenty times life size, on heraldic animal feet
- Andy Goldsmith's *Jolly Drivers Maze* sits on top of an old coal mine; *King Coal* by David Kemp which is reflective of a mine ventilation fan
- "The Old Transformers", also by David Kemp, standing at the divide between the area's great steel town of Consett and the coal mining district of Stanley.

The C2C is a major contributor to the tourism economy. Based upon 2006 figures, there were 241,000 cycle trips on the C2C, of which 14,000 completed the entire route. It generated £10,700,000 of economic activity and created or safeguarded 105 full-time equivalent jobs. Whilst there hasn't been a comprehensive survey since, recent sample data indicates a substantial increase on these figures.

Local Route Development

With numerous longer routes developed across the North East, Sustrans next challenge is to provide safe everyday routes from homes to workplaces, schools, shops and other amenities. Aside from the improved safety aspects of such facilities, there are other direct benefits to communities:

- *Reducing the number of cars on the 'school run' reduces congestion, pollution, and potentially, accidents outside school gates. Walking and cycling also provide everyday exercise, encouraging children to be more active and healthy*
- *Walking and cycling links connect people to their work, shops, and to green spaces, and traffic-free routes are great spaces in their own right, providing linear playground for children and adults alike*

Since starting the programme, Sustrans has connected over 1,300 schools to their communities in 600 locations, enabling children to walk or cycle in a safer and more active environment. Connection to jobs, shops and other local amenities is equally important and one example of this is a network of new links across Bedlington and Blyth. Whilst not yet comprehensive, they are a good indication of our vision for the future.

Case Study: John Reid Road Phase 1 and 2, South Shields

Sustrans had developed a good working relationship with South Tyneside Council and, in 2009, identified John Reid Road (A1300) as a main commuting corridor for cyclists, linking Newcastle Road and King George Road from west to east. The route passes through the mainly residential area south of South Shields town centre.



John Reid Road crosses a number of local communities. There was significant demand along the corridor with severance issues for home to school journeys acting as barriers to movement across the corridor. While there were relatively high levels of cycle usage evident, it was mainly of an illegal nature, using pavements. At the time John Reid Road was a dual carriageway subject to a 50 mph speed limit, making cycling on it very intimidating.

A scheme was identified to complement the existing off-road cycling infrastructure along Temple Park Road and to create a new off road west to east route adjacent to John Reid Road, connecting to the Harton Mineral line.

Delivered in two phases between 2010 and 2011, the new route provided 1,900metres of high quality off-road cycle route to six schools, along with links to leisure facilities at Temple Memorial Park and the South Tyneside General Hospital. Four toucan crossings were incorporated on the route enabling improved movement across the John Reid Road and Whiteleas Way.

The scheme is now in use and proving popular with school children as well as commuting and leisure cyclists.

Case Study: Bedlington & Blyth

As mentioned, Bedlington and Blyth have both seen new networks delivered in recent years. The Blyth scheme is part of a major South East Northumberland initiative to create the UK's first 'Active Travel Town', based around high quality walking and cycling routes and two behaviour change programmes, to promote their use at work places and schools.

The scheme includes new routes both north and south of the River Blyth to Bedlington, including a link on the south bank of the river to National Cycle Network Route 1. A combination of commuter and leisure routes is hoped will encourage as many people as possible to make everyday journeys by foot or bike, and to enjoy the beautiful scenery along the Blyth Estuary, a site of special scientific interest for wading birds.

In Bedlington, the scheme enables all schools in the area to access the main circular route and takes in Gallagher Park, the site of the old Doctor Pit coal mine, which has become a mix of woodland and meadows, with football pitches, play areas and a new BMX track.

Both projects are at the core of a drive to make South East Northumberland a healthy, prosperous and inclusive place to live, work and visit.

What else is Happening?

Along with infrastructure projects, Sustrans provides an Active Travel programme – behaviour change initiatives that work with communities and partner organisations, to enable more people to walk and cycle. Everyday journeys on foot or bike is an easy way to increase the amount of physical activity in the daily routine.

Case Study: Get Moving North Tyneside

Sustrans are working with North Tyneside Council on a project to promote active travel among employees at Cobalt Business Park, increasing the number of people walking and cycling to work to improve physical and mental wellbeing. The project also works with surrounding local communities to offer guided walks, rides and bike hire.



Cycle leaders take staff on guided rides along the network of refurbished Waggonways. The Cobalt Bike User Group (BUG) was formed, leading to cycle facilities being upgraded at the business park. Guided walks are held around the site and adjoining biodiversity park, with information provided on routes that could be tried with friends and family.

Get Moving North Tyneside's work at Cobalt was founded on the principle of 'active' commuting, backed up by a growing body of research indicating that people who are active in their daily lives are also more productive employees.

Working With Schools

Sustrans are working with pupils, teachers and parents to promote, develop and foster cycling amongst the school community. School-run traffic adds to congestion and pollution, and isn't much fun. Getting more people to and from school under their own steam is a great way of promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Case Study: School Travel in Blyth

We've been working in Blyth and South East Northumberland since 2010. The area is one of the most deprived in the region, with high levels of unemployment and poor health. The project works by engaging children (and the whole school community) in healthy, fun and educational activities based around cycling, health and environmental awareness. They can be in the classroom or outdoors and involve children whether or not they own a bike. So far 18 schools in the area have taken part.

Since the beginning of the project, 18,578 children have attended Bike It activities in two years. Surveys revealed that in some of the schools, as many as 70% of children cycled at least once or twice per week.



The Future

Sustrans continues to develop and deliver infrastructure schemes and behaviour change programmes in the North East. In 2012 we are working with local authorities on new programmes to provide links to communities. This will lead to further development and improvement to the network.

We are working with our partners on tourism initiatives to promote the regional National Cycle Network and develop sustainable tourism in the region. Our attention is now also focussed on the short urban journeys that make up a significant portion of road traffic.

More information on the Sustrans Network including comprehensive information on cycleway routes can be found at www.sustrans.org.uk.

Thanks to the Sustrans North East team for preparing this article.

Photo References:

Lambley Viaduct, part of the disused Haltwhistle to Alston branch line, supplied by Sustrans

Cycling across Infinity Bridge and The Hub, Stockton on Tees, supplied by Dave Charnley Photography

National Route 72, Gateshead Millennium Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, supplied by Cog + Wheel

National Route 1, near Low-Newton-by-the-Sea, Northumberland, supplied by Sustrans

Hadrian's Cycleway, supplied by David Martin/Sustrans

Wooden bridge at Kielder Water and Forest Park, part of Regional Route 10 and the Reivers Cycle Route, supplied by www.getpedalpower.info