

Case study summary

City of Ghent, Belgium

● 2012 Eurostar Ashden Award for Sustainable Travel
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City of Ghent won a 2012 Eurostar Ashden Award for Sustainable Travel for its active support for cycling delivered through large-scale bike rental schemes, innovative marketing campaigns, an on-line cycling route planner and extensive cycling infrastructure – combining to create a culture where cycling is the norm.

In the early 1990s, Ghent was a city with a falling population and high levels of traffic congestion. In 1993 a Bicycle Plan was launched, followed by a Mobility Plan in 1997, which included the introduction of a car-free city centre and encouraging cycling among its key components. Since then, Ghent has enjoyed a revolution in cycling levels achieved through a sustained package of investment in marketing and infrastructure, backed by cross-party political support. Ghent's cycling culture is overwhelmingly evident to anyone who visits the city.

Key information

- Innovative promotion campaigns run regularly throughout the year to broaden the appeal of cycling. In 2011, a Cycle Chic portrait exhibition of cyclists was seen by an estimated 130,000 people per week during its month-long run.
- The city has its own dedicated cycling website, including an innovative cycling journey planner.
- Cycling culture has become ingrained in Ghent, with wide support from various stakeholders. Politicians view continued support as essential to their electoral prospects.
- The city subsidises 7,500 rental bikes through its student cycle hire scheme, and hundreds of rental bikes for wider public use.
- Cycling is seen as central to the economic viability of Ghent and essential to its goal to become a carbon neutral city by 2050; the city estimates additional cycling delivered through its programmes in the three years to 2012 is saving around 1,500 tonnes of CO₂ per year.
- Ghent and its radial routes have 300km of cycle lanes (on and off road).
- Cycling accounts for 19% of commutes in Ghent compared with 12% in 2001.
- A survey in 2009 showed that the share of journeys by car had fallen 2% since 2006, as cycling and public transport use increased.
- The car free city centre, coupled with one-way streets and reallocation of parking space, has made many journeys quicker by bike than by car.

Future plans

- The city plans to increase cycling infrastructure by a further 60km, and will target promotion at sections of the community which have previously been reluctant to cycle.
- The merger of the Mobility Department with the Parking Department in 2012 is helping to secure future funding for cycling and is contributing to new cycle parking schemes with thousands of spaces between them.

City of Ghent's Parking and Mobility Department is responsible for the strategic planning and promotion of public transport and cycling. It has an annual budget for cycling promotion of €150,000 - €200,000. The city spends around €4million on cycling infrastructure each year.

Statistics

Population of Ghent: approx 244,000

Mode share of journeys by bike in Belgium: approx 8%

Location



“What would happen if a political party no longer viewed cycling as a priority? Any political party that dared to say such a thing would not have many councillors.”

Martine de Regge, Alderman (councillor) for Public Works and Mobility, City of Ghent



Over 7,000 bikes are regularly parked at Ghent railway station, leaving no doubt that this is a cycling city.

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Case study

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Background

In the early 1990s, Ghent was a city with a falling population and high levels of traffic congestion. To tackle both these issues, the city launched a Bicycle Plan in 1993. Its goals were taken further with the launch of a Mobility Plan in 1997, which included the introduction of a car-free city centre and encouraging cycling among its key components. Since then, cycling has gained in popularity year on year – achieved through extensive promotion, cycling infrastructure provision and uptake.

The success of these initiatives is obvious to any visitor to Ghent, particularly if arriving at the main railway station where over 7,000 bikes are regularly parked, making for an awe-inspiring sight.

The organisation

City of Ghent's Mobility and Parking Departments were merged in January 2012, with the mobility section responsible for cycling promotion and planning investment. Around 80 people are employed on the city's Mobility and Parking projects with approximately one fifth of the total staff time spent on planning, implementing and monitoring cycling initiatives.

The mobility team works closely with colleagues in the parking section of the new department to implement new cycle parking initiatives, and with colleagues in the Road Department on infrastructure schemes. The Flemish Region, through its Highways Agency and its Waterways Agency, is also very active in providing cycling infrastructure. Public transport schemes are implemented in co-operation with the Flemish public transport company.

The programme

Infrastructure

The cycling infrastructure has been developed extensively over the past decade and many cycle lanes are built alongside the city canal network, making for a pleasant cycling experience. A focus of current work is to take more cycle lanes off-street so they are segregated from traffic. This is being achieved by reallocating on-street car parking so that it forms a barrier between cyclists and traffic. In addition, cycle lanes are being redesigned so that cyclists pass underneath busy road junctions rather than across them. The emphasis on safety extends to warning signs on the cycling map showing busy junctions that cyclists may wish to avoid.

Recently, Ghent introduced a 'Cycle Street' on a key cycling artery – a new concept that views motor vehicles as 'guests on the street' which means they are not allowed to overtake bikes. This concept was introduced without a formal legal framework but its success meant that formal legislation was introduced to make the Cycle Street official.

Promotion and information

The large infrastructure programme is supported by continued marketing and promotion, such as the annual autumn campaign to encourage cyclists to ensure the lights on their bikes are in good order. A grand bike tour of the city is held on the EU-wide car free day every year, and attracts 8,000 to 9,000 people, many of whom are children. A major Cycle Chic marketing campaign was held in 2011. This year a major campaign will focus on promoting going to the shops by bike, with a prize draw as an incentive.

Marketing of cycling in Ghent will continue to evolve and break down barriers in order to show that anyone can cycle. This will be a feature of future work with ethnic minority communities, older people and other groups of non-cyclists or occasional cyclists.

The city's cycling website www.gentfietst.be provides a wealth of information including where to rent or buy a bike, how to get your bike registered to improve security, and tips for safe cycling. It includes an online cycle route planner which enables cyclists to plan their

Cycle Chic

Ghent's 2011 Cycle Chic campaign formed one element of an established marketing strategy which has continuously funded cycling promotion alongside any new infrastructure construction since the launch of the city's Mobility Plan in 1997.

As part of the campaign, run jointly with the Flemish Environmental Union BBL, Ghent set up a temporary studio and invited people to pose with their bikes. Around 600 people were photographed and 20 winners were selected to feature in an open-air exhibition. Cycle Chic has been run in a number of European cities but in Ghent the awareness-raising was particularly striking with 130,000 people per week visiting or passing through the month-long open air exhibition which was held in one of Ghent's main shopping streets. The city says the high number of visitors is evidence that a relatively inexpensive marketing campaign can have a real impact and can be easily replicated in other towns and cities promoting cycling. In a spin-off campaign the city gave 200 people VIP tickets to events they were attending by bike.

"Everyone knows that with marketing and communications you have to repeat and repeat and repeat the message to build a culture and change behaviour. Cycling needs that just like anything else."

Patty Delanghe, Information Section, Mobility and Parking Department, City of Ghent



journeys and tailor them to show the shortest route or provide options to avoid cobbles, tram tracks or very busy roads.

A visual reminder of the importance of cycling is provided by two new cycle counters on major dedicated cycle routes. These count the cyclists that pass them, showing the current number on a large display – up to 9,500 a day. The apt slogan on the counters is ‘every cyclist counts’.

Cycle hire schemes

StudentENmobilititeit offers a dedicated cycle hire facility for students at highly subsidised rates. It is funded jointly by the university, colleges and the city, and has recently been expanded from 6,000 to 7,500 bikes for hire. The Max Mobiel cycle hire operation for the general public operates from the city station and offers 200 bikes for hire. Commuters and businesses are among the core clients. Max Mobiel also offers the chance to test novel cycles, such as those with child compartments, so that people have the chance to try out bikes before deciding whether to buy one from a cycle retailer. Both these cycle hire facilities also offer cycle repair from mechanics and self-maintenance facilities and are run by not-for-profit organisations.

How much does it cost and how do users pay?

Funding for cycling infrastructure comes from the Flemish government, the provincial government, the city and Flemish Waterways, with the city providing around 40% of the €4 million annual budget. Cycling infrastructure projects in Ghent now have access to a share of a €20m ‘reserve fund’ from parking revenues which is contributing to major cycle parking projects while the €150,000–€200,000 annual promotion spend is a core part of the Parking and Mobility Department’s activity.

Max Mobiel was founded by the city and other partners and receives a city subsidy of €30,000 euro per year. Charges include cycle hire for €9 a day and €30 a month, while StudentENmobilititeit offers cycle hire from €35 a year for students and receives a subsidy of €250,000/year from the city and the university and colleges.

Achievements

There is now a total of 300km of cycle lanes in the city, stretching on routes unbroken for up to 15km while a further 60km is planned. Cycling has increased by 15% between 2008 and 2011.

Environmental benefits

Based on the increase in cycling in the last three years, and the associated reduction in short car journeys, Ghent estimates that around 1,500 tonnes of CO₂ per year is saved through its recent cycling measures. Cycling now accounts for 19% commutes in Ghent compared with 12% in 2001.

Social benefits

The development of a cycling culture in Ghent means that cyclists are widely viewed as being more important users of road space than motorists, even in those areas of the city where dedicated cycle lanes are not available. Cycling itself is a recommended way of improving cardiovascular fitness, and has an indirect effect on reducing local air pollution by replacing shorter car journeys.

Bike rental is low-cost for students, with repairs offered cheaply – or free of charge through a DIY guide available via the website. Both Max Mobiel and StudentENmobilititeit are part of the social economy, offering employment to disadvantaged members of the community for up to two years.

Economic benefits

The launch of the Mobility Plan in 1997 was intended to address Ghent’s falling population, and that trend has been reversed. Today cycling is seen as central to the economic viability of Ghent and essential to its goal to become a carbon neutral city by 2050. One example of this is the provision of employers’ pool bikes based at Ghent’s two railway stations. These can be booked for visitors arriving by train, enabling them to get quick, direct and low-carbon access to the business or employer concerned.

Preventing bike theft

Around 7,500 cycles are available for hire to students in Ghent and the StudentENmobilititeit team which runs the hire scheme has a robust system in place to deter theft and promote responsible care of the bikes. Anyone who rents a bike has to sign an agreement to keep the bike secure and well-maintained. Student hire bikes are installed with microchips containing data both on the bike and the person renting it. The StudentENmobilititeit team is able to scan bikes on the street, see if the bike has been reported as stolen: if the bike is not properly locked (for example it has only one lock) or the key is left in the lock, the team can immediately trace the person renting the bike. The renter is sent a text message and the bike taken to the central hire facility, where the renter must pay a fine of 10 to 15 Euros to get their bike back.

“As the number of cyclists increase, the easiest way to accommodate them will be to make more streets car free. We will have to look at making cars go another way.”

Martine de Regge Alderman (councillor) for public Works and Mobility



Ghent's aim to become carbon-neutral is supported by the creation of a car free city centre, coupled with a traffic system based on a series of one-way streets and reallocation of parking space, which has made large numbers of journeys quicker by bike than by car. A survey in 2009 showed that the share of journeys by car had fallen 2% since 2006, as cycling and public transport use increased. Traffic congestion in the heart of the city has fallen dramatically, providing associated benefits to businesses – traders in the city centre have not complained about any drop in business since the area was made car-free. The city interprets lack of opposition as a positive endorsement from a group which is highly sensitive to measures which can impact footfall.

Potential for growth and replication

Political will for continued expenditure on cycling is a given in Ghent, with all political parties supporting it strongly. The Mobility Department's merger with parking in January 2012 means that a new source of capital funding is available from the €20m parking 'reserve fund' built up from parking revenue. This is currently contributing to several cycle park schemes in the city and a new 10,000 space underground cycle park at the main rail station. Promotional budgets remain assured, and future marketing will focus targeted campaigns on social groups that are generally occasional or non-cyclists.

Other Belgian cities have followed Ghent's lead, for example through implementing smaller scale student cycle hire schemes. Best practice initiatives such as the journey planning website are highly replicable, as is the emphasis on continued marketing which is regarded as giving exceptional value for money.

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This report is based on information provided to the Ashden judges by the City of Ghent, and findings from a visit by a member of the judging team to see its work in Belgium.

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“We have introduced a Cycle Street and put ‘red carpet’ on it so everyone knows cyclists have priority and cars can’t overtake them. Cars are guests and cyclists are king of the road. It was technically illegal when we did it, but we did it anyway and then got the law changed.”

Peter Vansevenant, Head of Transport Management Section of the Mobility and Parking Department, City of Ghent



‘Every cycle counts’ on one of the city’s cycle-counters

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