# London’s cycling surge driven by policy and infrastructure over genuine demand



London is witnessing a concerning shift in urban mobility, as cycling gains popularity across the capital — a development that seems to be fueled more by government policy and infrastructure initiatives than genuine demand. The recent surge, spurred by transport strikes and the city’s push for “active travel,” appears to be less about empowering commuters and more about shifting responsibility away from a failing public transport system that has become increasingly unreliable under the strain of misguided policies.

The London Underground strike acted as a catalyst, pushing dockless bicycles into the limelight not because Londoners suddenly embraced cycling, but because they had little choice. App-based rental services like Lime and Forest reported an astronomical increase in demand — with Forest experiencing a tenfold spike in app downloads and Lime nearly doubling its trips. Meanwhile, public transport ridership increased on buses and the Elizabeth Line, but this was not a sign of renewed confidence — it was a desperate reaction to the chaos caused by strike action and policy failures. Clusters of bikes in central London have become an eyesore, cluttering streets and creating disorderly scenes. Retailers like Halfords have reported a 30% increase in bike sales, yet this appears more as a short-term reaction than a sign of sustainable change. Businesses such as Pret a Manger pushed ahead with minimal impact—acknowledging that cyclist commuters are simply filling the void left by a collapsing transport network. Transport experts warn that if this trend continues, increasing dependence on cycling could see Transport for London hemorrhage revenue, as more commuters choose to abandon the Tube altogether in favor of an “alternative” mobility policy that prioritizes bikes over quality public transit.

Data from the City of London paints a picture of a city in flux—cycling has apparently increased by 50% over two years, but it’s worth questioning whether these figures reflect genuine long-term change or a temporary reaction to policy mismanagement. Daily cyclists in the Square Mile grew from 89,000 in 2022 to 139,000 in late 2024 — a figure that some suggest is more driven by infrastructure expansion and government meddling than a real shift in commuter preference. The expansion of cycle paths and increased dockless bike availability are tangible, but they come with logistical nightmares and streets cluttered with bikes, illustrating how poorly coordinated this initiative is. Meanwhile, car usage has declined only marginally by 5%, and air quality improvements — such as the reduction of nitrogen dioxide hotspots — are questionable, especially when considering whether these measures are driven by genuine environmental concern or just window dressing for failed urban planning. The government’s focus on congestion charges and ultra-low emission policies appears more motivated by political optics than practical benefit.

Transport for London’s own analyses claim a 56% increase in cycling since 2014, especially along key routes linking outer boroughs to central London. Yet, this “growth” is largely driven by top-down investment, driven not by citizen demand but by the city’s empty promise that cycling will somehow be the answer to congestion and pollution. The so-called “demand” for cycling is manufactured through infrastructure projects rather than organic commuter choices, leaving many outer boroughs lagging behind in terms of actual sustainable transport options.

History teaches us that cycles of surges in active travel are often the result of government promotion during major events. During the 2012 Olympics, Londoners cycled more — up by 32% — but this was driven by spectacle, not a sustainable shift in public transportation. Public bike schemes like Boris bikes saw a 43% rise in affiliated usage, yet years later, many are questioning whether these were ever truly popular or simply a government stunt to showcase environmentally friendly “progress.”

Geographically, London’s belt of progress is uneven, with boroughs like Newham leading small improvements through expanded 20mph zones and efforts to boost healthy streets scores. Yet, outer areas like Bexley continue to lag behind, exposing the failure of city-wide policies that neglect uniform investment and leave poorer areas behind — all in the name of “green” rhetoric. These disparities highlight the shortcomings and inconsistencies of a government jamming a one-size-fits-all “active travel” agenda onto the city, using cycling as a political tool rather than a genuine effort to improve mobility and quality of life for all citizens.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was exploited as a perfect cover for accelerated cycling policies, with surveys claiming nearly 40% of cyclists increased their activity due to health fears. But this was a panic-driven response, not a sustainable shift rooted in well-planned urban strategies. The narrative spun by city officials conveniently ignores the real issues: a declining public transport system hampered by poor management, reckless funding, and politicized planning. Instead of fixing these fundamental flaws, the government’s emphasis on cycling and stroll-friendly streets simply sidesteps the real challenge of delivering efficient, affordable, and reliable public transit for London’s millions.

In summary, this push towards cycling isn’t about overwhelming demand or urban innovation — it’s about a city government that has prioritized virtue signaling and nodding to environmental slogans over delivering a functioning transport system. The so-called “growth” in active travel is a fragile veneer, hiding deeper failures in transportation policy that threaten to turn London into a city where mobility is dictated not by the needs of its residents but by political agendas disguised as “green initiatives.”

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/london-tube-londoners-docklands-light-railway-workers-b1247141.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/ffa16e07-b83f-40a6-af1d-b9b2902a67db> - During a major London Underground strike, dockless bicycles emerged as a key alternative transport solution, significantly mitigating the disruption. Unlike previous strikes, this one coincided with the widespread availability of app-based rental bikes, notably from Lime and Forest, which saw massive surges in demand—Forest experienced a tenfold increase in app downloads, while Lime reported nearly 50% more trips. Transport for London also saw notable increases in bus usage and Elizabeth Line ridership. However, chaotic scenes of scattered dockless bikes in central London raised logistical challenges for providers. The popularity of these bikes, bolstered by the growth of cycling infrastructure and electrically assisted models, reflects a broader shift in urban mobility. Some commuters reportedly preferred bikes over congested and slow traditional modes like buses or taxis. Bike retailer Halfords even saw a 30% spike in sales, suggesting a potential long-term behavioural change. Businesses such as Pret a Manger noted less impact than expected, attributing recovery partly to determined commuters using alternatives like bikes. Experts warn that Transport for London could face lasting revenue impacts if more people permanently abandon the Tube in favour of cycling.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/cycling-city-london-rises-more-than-50-two-years-2025-04-28/> - Cycling in the City of London has surged by over 50% in the past two years, with daily cyclists in the Square Mile rising from 89,000 in 2022 to 139,000 in October 2024. This increase makes bicycles nearly twice as common as cars on the city's streets during the day. The growth in cycling has been supported by new cycle paths, expanded routes, and a significant rise in dockless hire bike usage, particularly from providers like Lime and Forest, which now represent one in six bikes in the area. Concurrently, motor vehicle traffic has decreased by 5% since 2022, contributing to improved air quality. Notably, the number of locations exceeding nitrogen dioxide limits has dropped from 15 in 2019 to two in 2024. These changes align with broader environmental initiatives including the longstanding congestion charge and expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone to curb pollution. The rise in cycling in the City of London notably outpaces the broader central London area, which has seen a 12% increase since 2023.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/amazing-new-maps-show-huge-demand-for-cycle-lanes-across-london-a3574921.html> - New maps released by Transport for London reveal significant demand for cycle lanes connecting London's suburbs to the city centre. The Strategic Cycling Analysis identifies 25 routes linking areas like Edgware, Romford, and Streatham to the West End as among the top five per cent used by cyclists. These high-traffic routes are earmarked for development by 2022. The maps also highlight a 56% increase in cycling across London since 2014, including a 54% rise along the East-West Cycle Superhighway and a 56% increase along Quietway 1 from Greenwich to Waterloo. The data underscores the growing need for expanded cycling infrastructure to accommodate the rising number of cyclists.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/700-000-cycled-to-work-during-olympic-games-8426895.html> - During the London Olympics, the number of cyclists increased significantly as Londoners opted for bikes to avoid crowded public transport. The Tube carried a record number of passengers, while cycling on the capital's streets was 19% higher than the same period the previous year. The Paralympics saw an even bigger rise, with 32% more Londoners cycling. The use of Boris bikes, London's public bike-sharing scheme, rose by 43%, averaging 40,575 hires a day. This surge highlights a shift towards cycling as a preferred mode of transport during major events.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/transport/best-london-boroughs-walking-cycling-newham-city-of-london-healthy-streets-b1236780.html> - Newham, the former Olympic borough now home to London's City Hall, has seen a dramatic increase in 20mph zones, making it the most improved area in the capital for encouraging walking and cycling. The borough rose from 13th to 8th place in the 'Healthy Streets Scorecard' of all 33 boroughs. The City of London topped the list, followed by Islington, Hackney, and Camden. In contrast, Bexley remained the worst borough in terms of promoting active travel, highlighting the varying levels of commitment to sustainable transport across London.
7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/transport/londoners-walk-cycle-public-transport-lockdown-b127082.html> - As COVID-19 restrictions eased, Londoners were urged to continue walking or cycling instead of returning to public transport to prevent overcrowding and reduce the risk of virus transmission. A survey revealed that 39% of London cyclists were cycling more due to the pandemic, with the majority doing so to avoid catching or spreading COVID-19 and to reduce congestion and pollution. The initiative aimed to maintain the health benefits associated with increased physical activity during the lockdown period.