

Cycling innovations - Best Practice by EIT Climate-KIC

Utrecht: Bicycle school - De Fietsmeesters

“We, as the Bicycle Masters, find it important that everybody experiences how the bicycle can bring you a lot and take you far. From new skills to more freedom of movement and a bigger social world, till more insight in your own cycling behaviour (and the behaviour of others). We share our knowledge in schools, from pre-schools and nurseries to high schools and classes for people outside of school. In this way we want to integrate the bicycle and everything that goes with it into the school life of youth.”

The organisation started as a project in 2015. In the summer of 2015, the Tour de France started from Utrecht. The Tour de France provided a backdrop to a range of cycle-related activities, with the aim to use this single event as a catalyst to support positive image-building of cycling, and more support for cycling from the general public. The City of Utrecht provided financing and a platform to initiatives that would promote the aims of building cycling culture. De Fietsmeesters (The Bicycle Masters) was one of many activities that was started / promoted at this time. Financing still comes from the City of Utrecht. Applications are sent every 6-18 months to apply for new funding from the mobility department.

The main activity of Fietsmeesters is to organise bicycle lessons. But their aim is broader, looking at supporting the use of bicycles, stimulating bicycle culture, traffic education, traffic safety and having fun on a bicycle. Volunteers run the lessons but are supported with training from the Bicycle Masters secretariat which consists of 4 people (equivalent to 2,5 people in full-time employment). The training of bicycle teachers is done in association with the Cycling Union.

The Bicycle Masters classes have two streams of which the first is teaching cycling to children – from kindergarten up to high school (see Table 1) – and the second is teaching cycling to adults who do not have previous cycling experience.

For the adult lessons, the primary focus is on women with a non-western background and refugees. The Bicycle masters actively recruit both participants and volunteers. In this recruitment they work together with local and social partners.

Bicycle Masters offer 14 courses/half year, with 10 sessions of 1 hour each. This means 140 participants and 35 volunteers during each half year period. Participants learn both practical and theoretical knowledge regarding cycling. The lessons for adults are held at asylum centres but are open for all to join. It was tested to have lessons only for refugees, but the concept and interaction worked better when others could also join.



Context

The province has an ambition of doubling the number of cycling by 2030, and the budget for this programme is taken from the mobility department.

In the Netherlands, traffic lessons are part of the school curriculum. Who and where to target the lessons and programmes of Bicycle Masters is decided upon in collaboration with the city council.

One of the findings is that there are generally no noticeable differences in bicycle ability in different areas of the city among the children – what differs is that in some areas access to a bicycle is not available (e.g. one bicycle for whole family in low-income neighbourhoods) and due to this, the share of cyclists is lower in some areas.





Driving forces

In the region and city of Utrecht there has been an ongoing political goal which is to achieve a “cycling legacy”. The Tour de France event was used by the city/region to support several cycling events and initiatives. 100 days before the Tour de France it was the intention to warm up people from Utrecht to the Tour-start. During and after the event of Tour de France the pro-cycling spirit of the city got even more grounded – everybody was really into cycling – and there was an overall good feeling about cycling even for those who did not cycle. All this led to even more support on a political level to reach the legacy goal.

The initiative is financed by the City Council of Utrecht. Besides this, the work is carried out by volunteers.

In the cases where they target adults the prior mode of transport was mainly walking and car before the lessons. Helping them to bicycle not only solves their personal freedom to be able to move more freely in the city. It also leads to reaching the goals of increasing biking substantially when individuals switch from one mode to another. This has been an additional argument used to ensure financial support from the Council of Utrecht.

The location at the refugee centres also makes it easier for refugees to participate, and the bicycles are left at the centre between lessons for participants to use. To encourage participants to continue to cycle after the lessons are over, they offer a discount on buying a bicycle (approx. 250-euro bicycle for 110 euro). After participating in the courses, other follow-up activities are offered; bicycle repair, guided tours, bicycle café etc.

Some results from the lessons for adults include:

- Participants increase their independence and access to services by being able to travel further on their own
- Participants find it easier to pick up children from school
- There is an important social aspect in bringing together a group.
- Women involved in the program build relationships with each other and spread the word to others they meet about the program.
- Participants also improve their access to the job market.

Lessons for children

Age group	Description
Toddlers 2.5-4 years	<i>With fun and challenging activities on push bikes kids learn in a playful way how to keep balance, steer, cycle and above all have fun. It can both take place outside in the playground or inside the gym. They practice on balance bikes (as stabilizer wheels are no longer considered to be the best option). With them they are biking on utility tracks where they can practice slalom. These groups also have other activities so that the focus lies on having fun and learning to interact with others. One popular additional activity used is playing under a parachute. Reach in Utrecht has so far been 40 preschools a year, reaching about 1200 toddlers.</i>
Primary and secondary school 5-12	<i>The focus lies on traffic education and to learn how to behave in traffic and in bigger groups of people. The children get to learn the effects of mobile phone while biking and why bicycle lights are important. For this they have the possibility of using virtual bikes in different situations (eg. trying what a phone in your hand does to your cognition). The Bike master's program also offers a preparation on the practical traffic exams for those at the age of 7 and 8 in the primary schools. The Bike masters support the schools by organising the practical exams together with Safe Traffic Holland, this way they realise a greater participation of schools in the City of Utrecht.</i>
Youth 13+	<i>The children have the possibility of taking part in an e-bike challenge where they test their skills and knowledge about cycling on an e-bike. The number of youngster cycling on an e-bike is growing rapidly in the province of Utrecht.</i>

Success factors

“We also had the advantage to be an organisation with a lot of contacts in the welfare and sporting world in Utrecht. To maintain a program like this you must keep convincing the council of the impact of your program. Show them numbers and show them what the effects are. To give a concrete example, Utrecht wants to stimulate people to ride a bicycle, the woman of non-western background who follow these lessons never learnt how to ride a bicycle. After 10 weeks of lessons they know how to ride a bicycle and are able be a part of the cycling community in Utrecht. This is the reason we evaluate all our projects.”

Lex van Dalfsen, Fietsmeesters

The program relies upon help from volunteers. Even though there is in general a large culture of volunteering in the Netherlands, it takes effort to maintain and recruit new volunteers continuously. Fortunately, many people were interested in volunteering for the Tour de France related events and initiatives. This was the wind in the back for de Fietsmeesters.



A lot of different channels have been used in recruiting volunteers. A few examples are; neighbourhood centres and newspapers, mosques, social welfare organisations, social media and different websites. The organisation emphasises that it is highly important to be aware of the fact that you must treat your volunteers very well and with respect. They receive a training, so they feel confident to give instruction to a group. Besides that, they organise meetings to just get together, share stories and have a drink or something to eat. They also receive gift cards.

Scaling potential

- Make sure you have the right contacts concerning welfare organisations and sports.
- Think about the target groups, and how to find those people who need extra support in cycling. In Utrecht that is one of the reasons de Fietsmeesters are in contact with mosques and general practitioners.
- Make sure you find the right people with the right energy to start up a project like this.
- Gather the right information and knowledge by consulting organisations like de Fietsmeesters.
- Talk with the people who might be interested in the programme before you start to make sure that there's a demand.

Barriers

Financing of the project and organisation staff is very uncertain and is seen by the staff as the biggest barrier. The council invests a lot in the hard side of cycling: infrastructure, bicycle parking, etc. But they do not invest that much in the soft side: education and information. The project has to seek financing from the municipal council each half-year, and each time they have to convince the council to keep funding them. After 5 years, the project leader had to step down due to financial restrictions and the remaining staff took over the leading of the project. The instability means that they risk losing long-term committed staff. The project is financed by the department for mobility in Utrecht, but the benefits are mostly accrued by other departments. A more in-depth analysis of the effects and a potential cost-benefit analysis could reveal the benefits and make financing more stable.

Keeping volunteers is also a problem, both keeping the old volunteers from previous periods, and recruiting new volunteers. They currently use a general web-page where potential volunteers get matched up with projects but have to spend a lot of time actively recruiting volunteers.

Following up / monitoring has not been done consistently from the start. It is difficult for a small NGO to understand what data they should collect, and they could do with more input from the municipality.

Find out more?

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