

Councillor Jim Orr – Last day in Amsterdam



Councillor Jim Orr is the SNP councillor for Southside and Newington and is the Vice-Convenor of Transport and Environment. He has been blogging for us from Amsterdam this week where he has been on a fact-finding trip. As a keen cyclist, he has been most interested in the way that the Dutch government has accommodated pedestrians and cyclists often to the exclusion of cars and vehicles. This is his final blog in the series.

Wednesday was the last day of our trip and I want to report up front that not only has our study tour been fascinating for all those of us interested in increasing cycling rates, but the quality of the organisation and hospitality by the “NL Agency” of the Ministry of Economic Affairs has been superb.

On behalf of the whole UK delegation I would like to thank our hosts Bregje and Marianna, not forgetting Tessel from the Dutch Embassy in London who turned my suggestion of a study trip into reality. Since arriving here all of our expenses have been met by the NL Agency which is also incredibly generous of them.



4 euros per hour to park your car near the inner ring road. The city centre is even more expensive.

Over the last few days I have tried to communicate through this blog the wonderful world of Dutch cycling culture and the benefits that it brings. But for UK politicians and decision-

makers there really is no substitute for seeing this in person, and I would urge everyone:-Alex Salmond, David Cameron and Barack Obama, to contact the NL Agency and arrange a visit. The Dutch people we have met believe that “cycling has a higher return on investment than any other transport form” and that the “marginal commuter cost” is lowest for the cyclist. This theory is at least worth checking out since we as a society continue to encounter massive challenges around obesity and many forms of sustainability to name only two.

Today was based in and focused on Amsterdam. We had a “Google hangout” (i.e. a video conference) with the 2013 Parliamentary Bike Ride participants at Westminster and spoke to them about what we have learned. St Luke’s School in London were represented during this conference and asked questions.



We also learned about the (fairly punitive) car parking regulations in Amsterdam, a policy which is driven as much by lack of space in a small city as the policy of increasing cycling. The biggest current challenge is cycle parking and one solution is that barges are now used. Contrary to the impression I gave in my first blog post, I now know that theft remains a problem and estimates were provided that around 10% of all bikes are stolen each year.

Another excellent addition to active travel infrastructure is a 900m bridge which has been constructed for pedestrians and cyclists to an island in east Amsterdam. It is the largest such bridge in the country, and yet, even with all of this investment the figures still show that cycling and walking are the cheapest transport modes to support.

We had a further lecture on safety (including some great school safety videos such as “Between school and home”). This focuses on areas familiar to the children where accidents are most likely. HGVs are generally only permitted at certain

times and cannot (as I understand) enter the "Environment zone" in the centre.

We had an excellent talk from the very wise and entertaining Mr Eric Wiebes the Alderman for Traffic, Transport and Infrastructure in Amsterdam. He told us that public transport subsidy is still 2.5 times the cycling investment. He also explained the "marginal commuter cost" as mentioned above. I understand this is the calculated estimate of extra cost for each additional cyclist as opposed to someone taking another transport option. He said that a car is "always the first choice for the public" but that the city is "full up." Wiebes also commented that there is an "endless struggle of parking spaces versus cycle lanes" in Amsterdam, a situation which for once felt familiar to the UK delegates.

For interest, modal shares of transport in Amsterdam are as follows (with city centre figures in brackets): Public transport 16% (10%), car 22% (14%), bicycle 32% (a staggering 48%!!), walking 27% (25%) and other 3% (3%).



Busy junction

We then had a long and interesting bike tour of cycling infrastructure and cycle parking facilities around Amsterdam. This illustrated the ease of bike riding here and the tranquility and safety of many streets and public spaces. The photo above shows one busy junction which was remodelled to enable cyclists and pedestrians to cross in stages.

On our return we returned the bikes and thanked our hosts before going our separate ways. A few of us took off to the Rijksmuseum.

Recently renovated, this is a wonderful museum focussing on Dutch artefacts from paintings (including Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Vermeer) to arms and model ships and is unmissable for anyone visiting Amsterdam.

Through and under the museum is, of all things, a two way segregated cycleway(!), defended by cycling groups for decades and a powerful statement of the unique transport priorities of Dutch society.