

# Councillor Jim Orr reports from Amsterdam Day 2



Councillor Jim Orr is the Vice-Convenor of Transport and Environment for the City of Edinburgh Council, and represents the Southside/Newington Ward for the SNP Group.

He is in Amsterdam this week on a fact-finding mission about transport and he is particularly interested in their cycling culture and how the best bits of their systems could be introduced here.

Councillor Orr is writing a blog for us from Amsterdam and this is his second post:-



Bridge at Nijmegen

Formalities started on Sunday evening with a talk by Steven Schepel on recent decades of cycling investment and who was the president of the famous “Stop Child Murder” campaign for road safety in the 1970s. We then heard from Marjolein de Lange, a transport consultant connected to the Dutch Cycling Embassy and the Dutch Cycling Union. This latter body campaigns to promote cycling investment and is a hugely important stakeholder, a little like Spokes is in Edinburgh but much larger and with paid staff. (That reminds me: everybody should [JOIN SPOKES](#))

The Dutch planned to expand road networks through large towns (like the UK did) but turned their back on this policy in the 1960s in favour of more sustainable transport policies. “Make cycling safe for all and easy and fast” was, and remains, an

important policy objective as de Lange simply considered cycling as the best way to move masses of people around urban areas. She commented that whenever a by-pass or ring road is built in the Netherlands, that equivalent restrictions are put in place through the town in question, in order to maximise the benefits. All very interesting.

In the morning we went to Arnhem Nijmegen for a lecture from Mr Wittink of the Cycling Embassy. He spoke to us about the national transport policy which now includes attractive bicycle highways between cities. He noted that Amsterdam has, effectively, a congestion charge in the shape of punitive parking fees (around 5 euros per hour). It seems that, unlike in the UK, parking is all state controlled (no NCP). 80% to 90% of urban roads are treated as habitat, and many such streets are designed to be "for children but cars are allowed as guests". On parking in retail areas he said that "cyclists buy less but come more" and on investment it is "always best to attract as many bikes as possible" as "cycling derives the highest return on investment". Interesting stuff.

Next up was Mr Augustijn the Head of Mobility of the local Department of the City Region. He spoke about local plans (well under way) for cycling highways between towns and with regional rail as the backbone of the system. He also explained that cycling was so common that "in the Netherlands we don't have any school buses!" We then went for a cycle tour of the town on electric bikes (very swish) and saw the excellent new bridges and tunnels (see photos). Electric bikes would be very useful for the slopes and hills of Edinburgh. On access to facilities such as cycle parking he said:- "Everything must be free. As soon as you charge, people stop using them."



## Houten old village centre

In the afternoon we went to Houten. A town of 50,000 which was 40 years in the planning and which must be one of the most cycle-friendly towns in the world. The town is divided into neighbourhoods and car drivers can only drive to another neighbourhood via the ring road. This leaves most of the town connected by a wonderful network of cycleways which are completely safe and pleasant and where all cycle journeys between neighbourhoods are always faster than by car. Some residents have disabilities and they also appreciate the tranquility and ease of movement without cars. Like the elderly the disabled often use electric buggies and these can go anywhere that bikes can. Cars are simply not allowed into the city centre, except in small parking lots behind the shops. The train station is well integrated to the bike parking facility. It feels a little too quiet and modern for some tastes but it is still a super town for safe, sustainable living. Very fresh air, very friendly, pleasant atmosphere.



Main road to railway  
station



Houten integrated transport

We visited Utrecht on Monday evening and had a lecture from Transport expert Professor Bert van Wee (and which is pronounced "van Way", I'm told.) He spoke a lot about the difficulties in estimating cost/benefit analysis in cycling spend (how to measure social exclusion, health benefits or the cost of a death? What value do you put on time?). One estimate of benefits being 4 to 5 times the costs

(Saelesnminde, 2004) was not universally accepted but seemed broadly reasonable (if perhaps slightly overestimated according to critics). We need to account for long term policy objectives when doing the first cycle lanes as these are particularly important. He writes books on this stuff.

I took the opportunity to ask him why cycling infrastructure projects are often felt to be so much more expensive in the UK. He replied that this wasn't conclusively proven to his knowledge but that the more often you do something, the cheaper it is (due to scale effect and learning). Also, there are savings to be made such as laying thinner asphalt for a cycleway than a road which save money. And are professional fees greater in the UK? Certainly, the financial and legal sectors appear bigger in the UK and small government may lead to larger private costs. Others observed that in the UK we are good at protesting and strictly following robust planning laws. There may be a greater cost to this too.

And on the subject of resolving the difficulties of the need for residential parking and the need to keep cycle lanes free of cars on arterial routes, he said that there are practical manuals in use in the Netherlands on this subject, and that it can be resolved by sensible planning. The city of Ede was a good example (though he didn't know the specifics) and he suggested that checking Google Earth would be instructive. Professor van Wee also noted that parking charges in the Netherlands often vary with the distance to the town centre.

One reason we are all here is that since the advent of the Dutch Cycling Embassy two years ago, the Dutch seem keen to export technology and knowledge. Perhaps this is for economic benefit but it is also a way of spreading knowledge of a very pleasant way of life and ways to tackle sustainability issues and climate change – and to boost tourism.

From a transport and planning perspective it's hugely interesting to be here.