

On Barriers

Barriers to Active Travel: Excluding the Many for the Few

At Wheelrights, our recent campaign to persuade Swansea Council to remove physical barriers on cycling routes has seen some success. Yet, the broader implications of these barriers reveal just how much more work needs to be done. A recent academic paper * sheds light on the wider consequences of such barriers, particularly for disabled cyclists, and underscores why our campaign is so crucial.

The Hidden Cost of Access Control Barriers

Access control barriers, often installed to prevent misuse by motorised vehicles, are a common sight on traffic-free routes across the UK. However, their unintended impact is far more profound. These barriers, while aiming to solve the 'problem' of anti-social behaviour, end up excluding a significant number of legitimate users, particularly disabled people, from using active travel routes comfortably or at all.

The paper explores how these barriers are essentially a form of 'hostile architecture', designed to control behaviour and limit access. While they may stop some dirt bikes or mopeds, they often fail in this regard, as determined riders find ways around them. Meanwhile, for disabled cyclists, people using mobility aids, parents with pushchairs, and even those on non-standard cycles such as trikes or cargo bikes, these barriers are insurmountable obstacles.

Real Stories. Real Impact

Vignette 1 from the paper* provides a powerful personal testimony:

"I can't stop smiling. I feel like I'm four again and I've just learned to cycle. Places that are too far for me to walk (and too painful – as walking exacerbates my nerve pain) seem possible again. I feel hopeful.

But the feeling doesn't last. We cycle to the traffic-free path that connects our street with a protected cycle lane. I stop at chicane barriers, which are spaced too narrowly for me to zigzag through. The path is too narrow for me to turn around. It dawns on me that I won't be able to use this path independently.

We reach the entrance of the path and encounter an A-frame barrier and a horse stile. My trike is too wide to fit through the A-frame and too heavy for my husband to lift over the horse stile. I feel so frustrated. And I also feel shame. Shame that my body and my needs are all wrong. I don't fit, literally and metaphorically."

This account is painfully familiar to many in our community who have been unable to use local cycling paths due to similar barriers. It powerfully illustrates how such infrastructures contribute not only to physical inaccessibility but also to feelings of exclusion and non-citizenship. The barriers quite literally dictate who belongs on these paths and who doesn't.

Why Barriers Fail Everyone

From a practical standpoint, access barriers simply don't work as intended. Anti-social users can often navigate around or through them, as evidenced by the well-worn desire lines that frequently appear beside these obstacles. Meanwhile, legitimate users, particularly disabled cyclists, find themselves excluded or forced to take dangerous alternative routes.

Moreover, barriers contradict the very essence of active travel policies aimed at encouraging more people to walk, wheel, or cycle. If the infrastructure is not inclusive, then active travel cannot truly be for everyone. The paper calls out this contradiction, noting how policy rhetoric often promotes inclusivity while the on-the-ground reality does the opposite.



Our Campaign in Swansea

Our local campaign has highlighted the specific challenges posed by these barriers in the Swansea Bay Area. We have had some success in convincing the Council to review and, in some cases, remove these barriers. However, there is still much work to be done.

The paper's findings reinforce our message: barriers are not just inconvenient – they are exclusionary. They prevent people with disabilities from exercising their rights to active travel and, by extension, from participating fully in community life. This is not merely an issue of mobility; it is an issue of citizenship and belonging.

What Needs to Change?

To create a truly inclusive active travel network in Swansea, we need to rethink the use of access barriers entirely. This means:

1. **Removing existing barriers** where they cause exclusion.
2. **Designing future routes with inclusivity in mind**, ensuring access for all types of users, including those with adaptive cycles, trikes, or mobility aids.
3. **Challenging the narrative** that barriers are the best or only way to prevent anti-social behaviour on cycling paths.

Our campaign is not about removing all control measures. It's about creating a network that is truly accessible to everyone, regardless of their mobility needs. By removing these barriers, we are not just making paths easier to cycle; we are opening up our city to all its citizens.

How You Can Help

We need your voice to continue this momentum. Join us in advocating for the removal of unnecessary physical barriers in Swansea. Share your experiences with us (Wheelrights32@gmail.com), write to your local councillors, and support our calls for more inclusive active travel infrastructure. **Together, we can create a city where everyone can cycle safely and freely.**

* *Larrington-Spencer, H. (2025). Autoethnography of disability and active travel in Greater Manchester: Encountering (non)citizenship through access controls on traffic-free walking, wheeling and cycling paths. Urban Studies, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980241311728>*

John Britton