Guide to setting up and running a bike bus

A bike bus is a brilliant way to support and encourage primary-school children to cycle to school, giving them the experience of cycling on roads, with the safety of being directed by adults and surrounded by others cycling. This informal guide provides tips and advice to help you set up your own bike bus; please tailor your plan to meet your school’s needs.

A big thanks to Sciennes Primary School and Blackford Safe Routes for telling us how they set up a bike bus and sharing key documents. Photo of James Gillespie's Primary School bike bus, courtesy of Ewen Maclean Contents

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The main things to consider at the outset are:

Discussing the idea with your head teacher and/or other key personnel.

Appointing someone to coordinate your bike bus (that may be you!)

Identifying your bike bus route

Appointing trained ride leaders – including deciding if you pay for experienced ride leaders

Carrying out a risk assessment

Deciding who you’re communicating with, how and what the message is

How you can make your bike bus as inclusive as possible

How bikes are being stored at school How to decide on the route

You should map out the different routes to school and identify the safest option. If your school has a School Travel Plan, your bike bus route can be informed by this. If you don’t, tools such as mapometer or CycleStreets can help you plan. You may also want to speak to the school travel professional in your local authority to help with route planning and starting a travel plan.

Ideally the starting point of your bike bus route would have space for everyone to meet and for children and parents/carers to be given some instructions before starting.

The next stage is to decide on points along the route for children and families to join the moving bike bus, ensuring as many children as possible can access it within the school catchment area.

It’s important to identify a safe route to enter the school grounds. Once at school, consider where bikes can be parked. You may need to investigate if the school or janitor can identify additional space for bikes. Who should we get involved? To help ensure your bike bus is a long-term success, support is essential from all levels of the school community.

Appoint ride leaders to lead and pace the bike bus. It’s important someone experienced leads the ride, has the confidence to hold up the traffic where necessary and ensures everyone is positioned correctly and the pace is suitable. It’s important to also have a rear ride leader who keeps the group together. Bike bus guide v 1.0 July 2019

Try to get as many confident cyclists involved as possible to help manage the ride.

Parental and school support is key – a lead co-ordinator can provide direction, but all help will be valuable to plot out the route, promote the bike bus, carry out risk assessment and assist with parking bikes. It’s crucial to have senior management buy-in, including your head teacher’s support. It may also be worth creating a sub-group of the parent council – this is what James Gillespie’s School Primary School did and it has worked well. Developing a bike bus with parents/carers who support cycling to school and the idea of a bike bus is likely to make it more successful, it can also help if they already know each other.

Pupils: engaging pupils is central to making sure it is successful. Assigning pupils roles in the ride gives them a sense of ownership. You could appoint some pupils as ‘Ride Captains’, as Blackford Safe Routes does, choosing those who understand how important it is to stay together, not make the ride a race and encourage others to keep going.

You might like to contact your local council cycle safety team who can help with route planning, as well as the local community council. You can also inform the police to let them know you are running a bike bus. When should we run our bike bus?

Bike buses in Scotland tend to be run from March to October. However as long as it’s not icy and warm clothing is worn, they could happen all year round.

Running a bike bus once a month is recommended: although it could happen more often, the idea is that it builds confidence to encourage children and families to complete the route themselves at other times.

Ensure enough time for everyone to complete the route, including pick-ups, in time for the start of school. Consideration needs to be given to the pace of the ride and traffic. Bike bus guide v 1.0 July 2019 What else do we need to think about? Responsibility

It’s good practice to plan and risk assess the route: your local authority will have a template guide for this. An example risk assessment is available in the resources section of this pack.

You may wish to issue clear disclaimers before the bike bus as parent/carers have overall responsibility for their child’s safety, are responsible for ensuring that bikes are roadworthy, making decisions about helmets and clothing and that children are not wearing anything that hangs down and could catch in bike wheels.

It’s worth reminding parents/carers about locks for bikes and making sure they’re aware schools are not liable for theft of bikes from school property.

You should ensure that all children can take part as much as possible. There could be opportunities for participants to borrow or exchange bikes so that those children without bikes aren’t excluded. Contingency If the weather becomes windy or too wet, you can turn the bike bus into a walking and wheeling bus. Promotion

Make sure everyone knows about the bike bus and its purpose:

Promote using posters, parent e-newsletters or bulletins, websites, social media, staff meetings and through community contacts.

Hold a special assembly the week before the bike bus to make sure all pupils know about and can look forward to it.

Send a reminder email in advance of each ride You could approach your local press and ask them to write about your bike bus.

Incentivise children taking part by holding a ‘bike breakfast’. It may be worth engaging with your local supermarkets to ask for a donation of fruit, mention them in your promotions and they may be willing to be involved for free. Bike bus guide v 1.0 July 2019 Ride specifics

Avoid single file cycling- the idea is that the bike bus takes up the whole lane of the road to discourage cars from overtaking.

Try to let the slowest riders go first

Ask parents/carers to travel on the outside of the group, front and back of the group, and let the children travel on the inside, safer part of the road.

Ride leaders should set the pace and try to regroup where possible, ensuring if there is a split in the group that there is an adult at the start of each group of children cycling.

Aim for an adult to pupil ratio of around 1:3

Ask parents/carers of younger children to accompany their children on the ride in case they can’t keep up or struggle with the distance so they can then complete the remainder of the journey with their parent.

Remind everyone that the group should stay together. And finally: Best of luck – and if it doesn’t work out, then well done for trying and please keep promoting cycling for different journeys and asking the local authority for safe routes to be provided. If you do set up a bike bus and have advice / learning not covered in this guide that you think others would benefit from, we’d be really interested in hearing about it – please email feedback to info@cycling.scot. And remember to promote your bike bus through social media using the hashtag #bikebus - we’ll look out for it!