

# Ride Calderdale Off Road Cycling Survey 2022





## Introduction

Calderdale is an area of West Yorkshire which has a wealth of rugged outdoor landscapes and a strong sports and leisure cycling culture. With steep-sided valleys and narrow, winding roads, it may not be an easy place to ride a bike, but it is undeniably a popular one, and it is estimated that over 10% of Calderdale's tourist economy is attributable to cycling.<sup>1</sup>

Mountain biking and off-road cycling are a very visible part of Calderdale's cycling culture. Off-road cycling has evolved and diversified hugely in the past two decades. While it may have begun in the UK as a fitness-based sport with competition at its heart, personal challenge and enjoyment is now arguably more important to participants. Bikes have advanced technologically, making it easier to tackle steep rocky terrain both up and down and bringing harder trails within reach of a wider user base. It is against this backdrop that Calderdale's reputation as a prime area for mountain biking in Yorkshire has grown.

At one time, a mountain bike ride would have entailed frequent stops to repair punctures, raise and lower saddles, or massage feeling back into wrists. Today's mountain bikes have tubeless tyres, telescopic seatposts, and front and rear suspension to add control and comfort over rough terrain. It's not just bike technology that has moved on: riders nowadays are more likely to be guided by a mobile phone or a GPS device than a paper map.

The traditional image of mountain biking as a sport that takes place on byways and bridleways is still partly true, but riders also travel to trail centres and bike parks, or build their own local equivalents. Word of new riding opportunities can spread rapidly online. In early 2020, with organised sports suspended and cycling one of the permitted forms of exercise, the number of riders using the countryside around Calderdale seems to have grown substantially - as did reports of user conflict and unauthorised trail construction.

As a response to these concerns, a working group was set up by local parish councils in collaboration with Ride Calderdale, a mountain bike advocacy group for the area. The aim of this group is to identify positive action that can be taken to reduce conflict between outdoor users and improve facilities for off-road cycling. This survey has been aimed specifically at off-road cyclists as a step towards understanding the needs and behaviours of this user group, and deciding what form these improvements might take.

(1) Calderdale Cycling Strategy, Calderdale MBC, 2017 [https://www.cyclecalderdale.co.uk/files/docs/Cycling\\_Strategy\\_2017\\_Low\\_Res\\_Version.pdf](https://www.cyclecalderdale.co.uk/files/docs/Cycling_Strategy_2017_Low_Res_Version.pdf)



## Survey method

This survey was drafted by **Ride Calderdale** with substantial input from the Encouraging Responsible Cycling steering group, a collective of local parish councils, walking and cycling groups.

The survey was hosted on Google Forms and links were circulated via social media to local cycling groups.

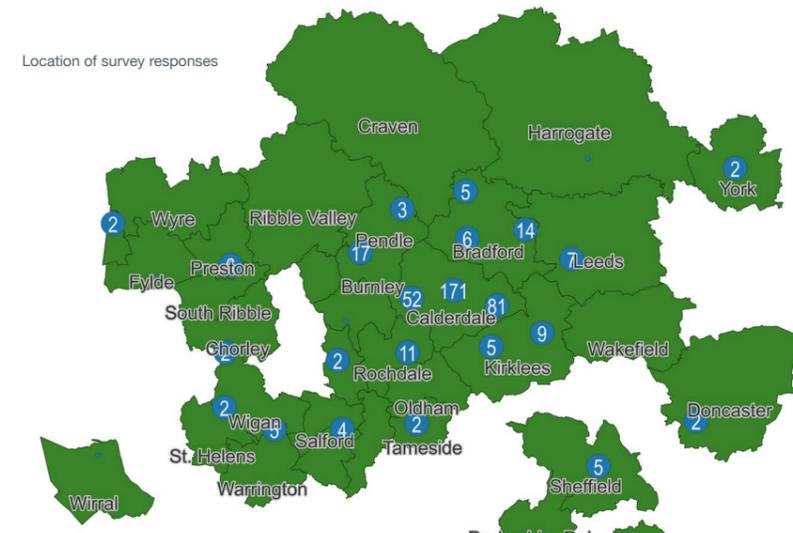
Posters with a QR code and link were placed in bike shops and popular meeting areas for off-road cycling groups, such as St George's Square in Hebden Bridge.

Ride Calderdale members also carried out face-to-face engagement with mountain bikers to encourage completion of the survey. 440 responses were received in total, over a three-month period from January to Easter 2022, making it the most comprehensive piece of engagement work so far undertaken with off-road cycling users in Calderdale.



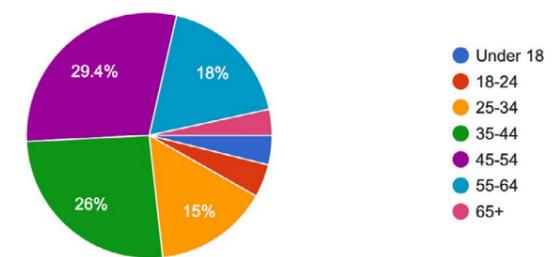
## The who and the how

Unsurprisingly, around three quarters of the responses to the survey came from within Calderdale, although some replies were from as far away as Durham, Edinburgh and North Kesteven.



Demographically, the majority of respondents to the survey were male (83%) and from a White British background. This unequal representation of gender and ethnicity in participation is not unique to the area, and has been reflected in other off-road cycling surveys by Cycling UK<sup>2</sup> and Natural England<sup>3</sup>.

Nearly 50% of respondents were between the ages of 35 and 55. Younger off-road cyclists were less well represented, making up around 8% of responses. This almost certainly reflects engagement with the survey as well as the user demographic.



(2) "Rides of Way", Cycling UK, 2017. <https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2019/02/ridesofwaycyclingukoffroadreport.pdf>  
 (3) <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-survey-purpose-and-results#full-publication-update-history>



## Mountain biking can encompass a wide range of activity carried out on a wide variety of bicycles.

**Gravel and cyclocross** tends to describe riding on gentler terrain with lightweight bikes featuring drop handlebars and narrower tyres.

**Cross country or XC mountain biking** tends to place an emphasis on distance, speed and fitness over challenge and skills.

**Downhill mountain biking** is a specific discipline of the sport requiring high technical skill, where participants descend purpose-built tracks with large obstacles like jumps and drop-offs.

The newest branch of mountain biking, **enduro**, combines the distance and fitness of cross country riding with the technical challenges of downhill racing, and has had a huge influence on everything from bike design to trail construction.

Participants who didn't feel they fitted into any of the above categories were also given the option of **"just mountain biking"**.

Despite the image of mountain biking as a sport for the able-bodied, 41 (9.5%) considered themselves to have a disability, with poor mental health as well as physical disabilities mentioned in many responses.

*"I have an auto-immune condition that has changed my life, having to retire due to ill health. It means I have to rely on an eMTB nowadays, which is extremely heavy. I would like to see legal access, with appropriate gates, to more areas."*

*"I've had my large intestine out due to colitis. It doesn't bother me but riding my bike helped me to recover from the damage that the disease did to my body and gave me focus in hard times."*

The survey asked what types of off-road cycling respondents participate in. The respondents strongly favoured challenging mountain biking. Most said their last bike ride could be classed as enduro or downhill mountain biking, with cycling for everyday utility trips or with a family the least chosen option.

Asked more broadly about types of off-road cycling they regularly took part in, 65% of people said they did XC mountain biking, and 57% said they ride enduro/downhill. While many respondents said they took part in undemanding off-road rides on easier routes, such as the canal path network, relatively few went cycling with their families.



Over 20% of people said they sometimes or always used e-bikes. Uptake of e-bikes is noticeable in Calderdale, where they have obvious advantages on steep terrain. A national survey carried out by Cycling UK in 2017 found that only 1.5% of mountain bikers owned an e-bike, illustrating how rapidly e-bike use has grown<sup>4</sup>.

Respondents considered themselves to be relatively skilled and competent. Asked to rate their cycling ability as novice, intermediate or experienced, the vast majority (65%) classed themselves as "experienced".

Most respondents rode in groups of 2-5 (58%) or alone (32%). Only 10% rode with larger groups. Just 15% were members of a formal cycling club. 37% were members of an informal group that arranged rides through social media or messaging apps. Over 50% were not members of any cycling club.

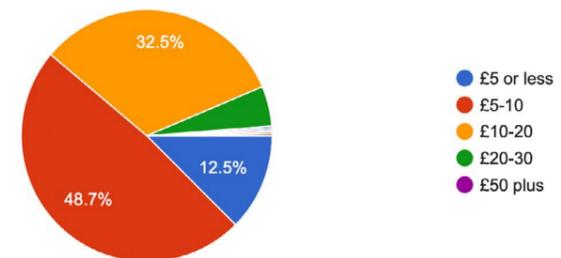
(4) Cycling UK, ibid



## The pedalling pound

The survey asked whether people used local pubs, shops and cafés and roughly how much they spent. The vast majority said they did - 58% frequently and 35% occasionally.

Nearly 50% of respondents said they spent £5-10 per visit. A third said they spent more - mostly £10-20. 30% said they would stay overnight on a riding trip.

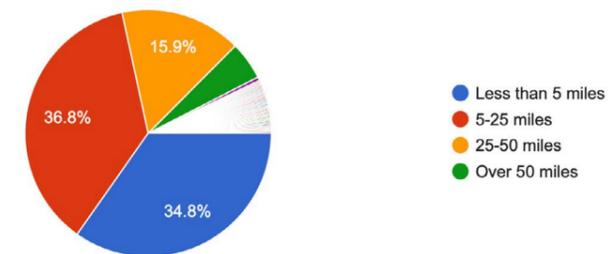




## Places to ride

Mountain biking is typically thought of as a sport requiring travel to appropriate locations, so it was surprising to see that the majority of respondents normally only travelled a short distance to the start of a ride, or rode from their front door. 59% said they usually got to the start point of a ride by bike.

This underlines the abundant opportunities for off-road cycling in the area, and also indicates an aspect of mountain biking that is not always considered in discussions of its environmental impact: the fact that the bike serves as transport as well as recreation, enabling cyclists to access the countryside without using a motor vehicle.





Asked whether they rode only on routes with permission to cycle, such as roads, bridleways and byways, a clear majority (71%) said they used all routes, including footpaths and informal trails. There is more detail on this in the comments made by respondents.

*“More access [would improve Calderdale for mountain biking], especially linking up bridleways. Many footpaths were once bridleways and have been marked incorrectly on modern OS maps. Some trails have become eroded and need repairing.”*

Asked how they normally planned routes, nearly 60% said they relied on “word of mouth” to decide where to ride. 54% used online or paper maps. 17% followed longer routes found online, but 44% used “online resources” such as Strava segments. Strava, an online ride logging platform, was used by around 85% of respondents, although they were not asked to specify how frequently. Segments are short sections of trail created by users of the platform, which are shown on an interactive map and can indicate particularly enjoyable or challenging climbs and descents.

*“I just ride down random paths and see where they go.”*

Asked about favourite trails in the area, respondents named some legal routes for cycling, such as the bridleways running between Pecket Well and Hardcastle Craggs, or the Mary Towneley Loop. However many responses listed trails that are footpaths or have no legal status. Replies often used nicknames or Strava segment titles such as Ripper Dipper, Ali’s Wound, Ernie’s and Bearded Lady, all of which refer to footpaths. Some responses cited whole areas that have little or no official cycling access, such as the area around Stoodley Pike, Hardcastle Craggs, North Dean Wood and Elland Park Wood. 28 responses mentioned Norland Moor, which is still subject to a bylaw restricting off-road cycling.

*“[There are] multiple classics all round the valley. Most of the best are footpaths/built ones”*

*“All the best trails are ‘unofficial’ or footpaths. Particularly affecting my work - individuals riding these trails are breaking no law, but I would be liable should anyone hurt themselves if we used these trails whilst under my guidance.”*



## Reasons for riding

Respondents were asked what they liked about cycling in the Calder Valley, with a list of choices and the option to add their own comments. Of 440 responses, 91% cited the scenery in the area, while 76% enjoyed the technical challenges of riding. 80% mentioned physical health benefits, but nearly as many (74%) cited mental health benefits from riding.

The opportunity to stop at cafés and pubs was also ranked highly (60%) while 26% said they liked the historical interest of the area.

*“I was suicidal in 2019. I used drugs to block out unwanted feelings that I couldn’t cope with and ended up with an addiction. I used mountain biking to get clean and help me recover. I cycle three times a week. I don’t drink, don’t use any substances and stay away from services. Mountain biking keeps me well and is so important to my wellbeing and ultimately enables me to be a productive member of society.”*

*“I like the landscape. We’re spoilt around here.”*



## Trails and tribulations

The survey asked what people disliked about cycling in the Calder Valley, and received around 300 responses.

A common theme among the responses was user conflict, and a perception that cyclists are viewed with hostility by other users. 59 responses mentioned user conflict on the trails or negative comments towards off-road cyclists online.

*“I’ve lived in Hebden all my life and biked for the past 6 years. It’s increasingly got more antisocial and aggressive (traps and angry walkers for example).”*

A further 26 comments mentioned obstacles being placed on trails to “booby trap” them, which is a relatively frequent occurrence locally, typically in the form of rocks or logs being placed on footpaths and informal trails used by cyclists.

Some respondents also raised concerns over patterns of cycling use, or damage to footpaths and other trails, citing this as a cause of tension between user groups

*“Proliferation of new trails with no apparent thought worries me, as does damage to existing trails . There is no mechanism for riders or volunteers to legitimately get involved with maintenance since they officially shouldn’t be there in the first place.”*

There was a widely held feeling that road conditions in Calderdale are hostile to cyclists, with 55 responses mentioning traffic and aggressive or inconsiderate driving. Some commenters felt that there needed to be more dedicated cycling infrastructure to link areas up, and the condition of the canal towpaths between Brighouse and Todmorden was mentioned in many responses.

Many comments flagged up gaps in provision, ranging from family facilities and secure bike parking, to dedicated mountain bike trails or bike parks.

*“Other than the canal path, there are almost no beginner/child/off-day friendly routes. Also no facilities for practicing skills (eg a pump track or looped skills area)”*

*“There’s a lack of progressive areas to ride. A bike park similar to Windhill would be great for the area.”*



## Action for cycling

The survey asked what improvements people would like to see for cycling in the Calder Valley. There were 315 responses, and several common themes emerged.

One such theme was provision of officially sanctioned mountain biking trails in the valley. Some responses suggested that these could be trail centre style facilities, while others wanted to see informal, rider-built trails adopted and protected. Some responses cited the reduction of user conflict as a reason to do this, while others felt it could be used to promote the area as a destination.

*“There is so much opportunity to create a mountain biking network and culture in the Calder valley that could bring so many people to the area to spend their money in the local economy. I regularly visit Bike Park Wales in Merthyr Tydfil and it’s heaving with people usually staying overnight and spending money in the local economy. Same with Antur Stiniog in Blaenau Ffestiniog. In Calderdale, all it needs is some vision from those with the power. There are multitude of people in the MTB community that could help bring the vision to life”*

Related to this, and receiving nearly as many comments, was support for some kind of review of the rights of way network in the area. Some respondents favoured upgrading individual footpaths, based on historic use or suitability for cycling, while others cited the Scottish access system as a model that should be followed, opening up all rights of way for responsible use.

*“Opening up existing rights of way like footpaths for cyclists would be excellent and help to spread users out over a wider network of trails, reducing conflict.”*

Nearly 50 comments were received in support of greenways and traffic-free cycling infrastructure for leisure and utility trips - in particular the proposed Ryburn Valley Greenway and the Calder & Hebble Navigation, the latter of which is difficult for cyclists to use due to its cobbled spillways. Some comments asked for increased access to moorland or access land.

*“There are quite a few access roads for windmills, reservoirs etc which are perfect for gravel riding. It’d be good if these linked up with more trails as they tend to be dead end / out and back.”*

A number of the responses mentioned specific facilities, such as a pump track (23 responses) or a bike park (also 23 responses). The sole local bike park in Calderdale (Havok) closed at the start of 2021 due to storm damage and the need to manage tree disease. There are no equivalent facilities nearby that cater specifically to very challenging riding, other than informal trails which riders have built themselves.

Some responses mentioned promotion and signage for routes. Dialogue between riders, landowners and other user groups was felt to be important by some respondents, following the positive model pioneered by trail associations like Ride Sheffield.

*“Calderdale is way behind Sheffield, Leeds and even Bradford on council sanctioned/maintained trails, and don’t even mention them over the border who sorted this years ago. Much of the ‘cheeky’ stuff is due to lack of proper facilities. I often ride footpaths that are rarely walked that could easily be designated MTB or shared areas. I’m a walker as well, happy to discuss.”*

*“I’d happily partake in trail maintenance if we had open trail access.”*

*“The Calder Valley is a prime location for MTB, it should be a destination really. People should revere it as a prime location in the North for this mountain biking specifically. Sadly it is not. I find it unbelievable that it is not a) encouraged as a healthy and beneficial activity and b) encouraged as a form of tourism within the locality. This alone would be a huge boost for Calderdale and yet nothing has changed in the 30 years I have ridden here!”*

*“I live in hope that Calderdale council will adopt the same attitude as Sheffield and create MTB specific trails (not bridleways) and even adopt informal trails in local woodland. If this happened there are more than enough volunteers to help maintain them.”*

*“Innerleithen in Scotland is an example of how welcoming and embracing MTB can build relations and growth or community.”*



## Conclusions and actions

The results of the survey highlight some contradictions about off-road cycling in the area. Calderdale is an attractive destination to mountain bikers, with a growing reputation. But it lacks the official facilities that are features of similar destinations around the UK, such as Sheffield or the Borders region of Scotland, in the form of sanctioned trails, continuous routes on legal rights of way, and good working relationships between land managers and users.

Mountain biking provision in Calderdale is almost entirely reliant on the rights of way network. Two established long-distance routes pass through the area, the Pennine Bridleway and the Mary Towneley Loop, but these are shared use routes, designed for equestrians as much as cyclists, and there are currently no local dedicated mountain bike trails. Off-road cyclists can only use the rights of way network - not always in the way land managers envisage - or take to the woods to build their own facilities.

The tension between the current Rights of Way system and its actual use by mountain bikers is a recurrent theme of this survey's findings. Calderdale's most recent Rights of Way Improvement Plan (from 2006) states that "Cyclists are entitled to use bridleways subject to the rights of walkers and horse riders, but some mountain bikers prefer more challenging terrain than other users and this cannot be accommodated on bridleways." However, Calderdale's challenging terrain seems to be what attracts many mountain bikers, who are drawn to the area to ride steep, technical tracks regardless of official status.

There are also growing calls for reform to the existing rights of way system, reflected in wider initiatives like the Right to Roam campaign, as well as specific cycling campaigns like Cycling UK's Trails For Wales initiative. There is little appetite at a government level to reassess access for cyclists and equestrians, but for cyclists in Calderdale, the current system seems so unworkable that a clear majority ignore it. A byproduct of this is tension and conflict between user groups, which can even manifest itself as behaviour that could seriously injure cyclists, such as trapping trails.

There are other serious gaps in provision here, in the form of family- and beginner-friendly off-road cycling facilities, and traffic-free quiet routes. The frustration with slow progress on projects like the Ryburn Valley Greenway and the access improvements along the canal is evident in some of the responses.

Finally there are the opportunities raised by off-road cycling: for tourism, for boosting the physical and mental health of the local population, and for outdoor recreation opportunities that don't need to start with a car journey. There is huge potential for off-road cycling in the area, with numerous examples to draw on elsewhere in the UK.



## About Ride Calderdale

Ride Calderdale is a collective of volunteers from the mountain bike community that advocates for off-road cycling in the area. More information about the group and its activities can be found at [www.ridecalderdale.org](http://www.ridecalderdale.org)

### Survey design

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