BIKES IN BUCKS

A case-study of cycle infrastructure in car-centric Buckinghamshire, UK

ABSTRACT

How has planning policy been applied to Beaconsfield? Why has the 'Little Holland' cycle scheme been so ineffective? What can we do better to ensure that liveability is at the forefront of future development?

Jacob Leman

SP2 Governance Dynamics

Cover image by Alamy Stock Photo for The Guardian

A small, leafy town to the West of London sounds like a perfect place to raise a family. However, after development in the '60s, the quaint town of Beaconsfield has seen car-oriented planning take centre stage. As an affluent area, the town is ripe for redevelopment using more people-focused planning principles, and was even the site of a 2016 'Little Holland' cycle scheme, as directed by Westminster. How successful has this been? Are the needs of the residents met by recent infrastructure developments? What lessons can we learn, to improve the lives of citizens across the Home Counties and beyond?

History

A historic town located just half an hour from London, Beaconsfield has only become more affluent since the Industrial Revolution. The town grew from 1732 people in 1847 (Knight, 1847) to over 12,000 residents today (Office for National Statistics, 2011), with its most rapid periods of expansion in the interwar years, the 1960s, and the 1980s (GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, 2021).

As is the case across much of the developed world, the largest growth in purely spatial terms took place in the car-centric 1960s. Affluent urbanites sought to leave the cities, and brought with them a small family and two cars. The older residents, now outnumbered by an affluent upper-middle class, either sold out and made a significant profit, or stayed around and founded the town's fledgeling services (McSmith, 2010). Even so, the town functioned effectively as a dormitory settlement for London and, to some extent, neighbouring High Wycombe (Beckley & Green, 2012). These new residents would commute into town every day, and then return home in the evenings. The preferred method of commute was initially the car. However, as congestion worsened, the train station became seen as a more viable way to get to work (Fig. 1). There was just one problem: the town had now grown to the point that it was inconvenient to walk the half-hour to the station. People instead turned to the car to get to the station, and then to the train to get them into London. Congestion within Beaconsfield continues to this day.

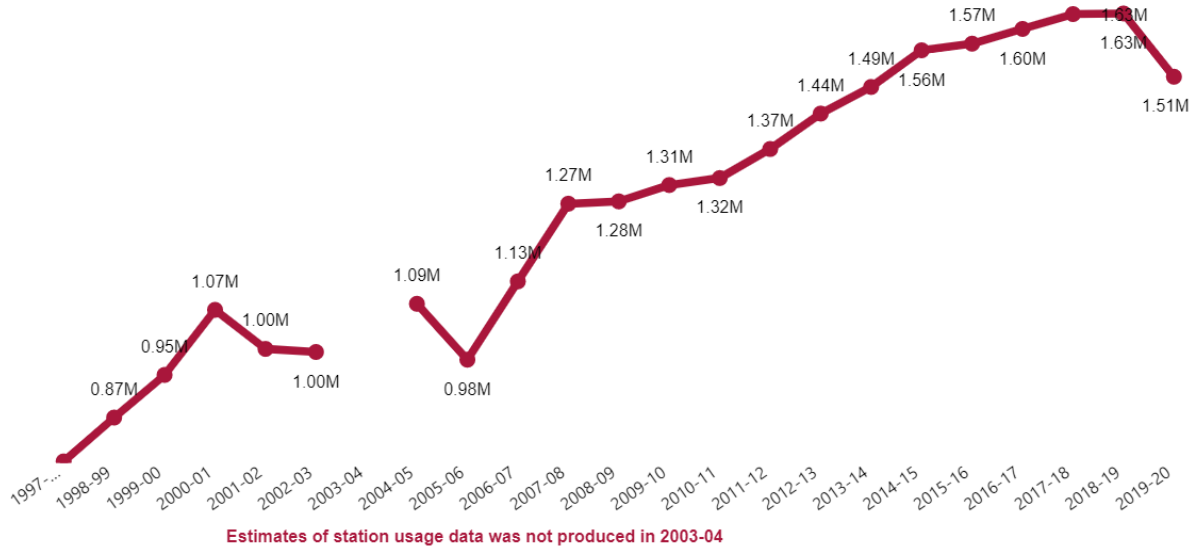


Figure 1 Station usage figures for Beaconsfield (Office of Rail and Road, 2020).

The local council, initially somewhat supportive of rapid development, became more and more aware of the threat that unsustainable growth would bring, and wholeheartedly supported the national government's green belt expansions in the '80s which protected much of the area around town (Beaconsfield Town Council, 2018). Local residents, now deeply frustrated with the drop in quality of life and feeling scared to allow their children to even walk to school, began relying on the car more and more often- not just to get to the station, but to take children to activities, visit clubs and associations, and to unwind. Cycling, once a common way to get around, had been marginalised since the post-war years as a thing of the past (National Archives, ONS, 2013), and even today cycling is not a frequent sight.

So, we arrive in 2016. The town's urban footprint has stopped growing. With a national and local government broadly against further car infrastructure investment (Department for Transport, 2017), and a local population in support of green infrastructure at least in principle (BCP, 2021), there was spirit for change.

The national government had been looking for an opportunity to trial a cycling project for some time (Department for Transport, 2016), given the clear improvements that cycling infrastructure brings to liveability. An affluent town with the impetus for change, it seemed, was ideal; after all, local cycle advocacy groups such as the Beaconsfield Cycle Path Action Group (BCP) had been pushing for greater investment for some time (BCP, 2020). The local authority, too, was optimistic and proposed several plans in conjunction with a leafleting information campaign. Beaconsfield was to be the site of the UK's cycle revolution; a case study and shining example of the 'Little Holland' scheme designed to promote walking and cycling in car-oriented towns (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2016). So where did it all go wrong?

Stakeholder Needs

To understand just how successful this project has been, we must discuss the positions of its stakeholders.

National government: The plans, supported by a pro-investment Prime Minister with a majority in Commons, were swiftly overturned and watered down by the new Prime Minister Theresa May (Reid, 2019). While on principle she was supportive of cycling infrastructure, her party often held her hostage and passing legislation either relied on the support of the belittled Opposition, or conceding to the demands of the extreme right of the Conservative party (Merrick, 2018). The national government's responsibilities focus on providing funding for local policy, as well as legislating for change in planning and infrastructure policy.

Local government: Acting as an intermediary between the local population and the national government, Council-level organisations are effectively made up of volunteers and have an extremely limited budget. They instead act similarly to lobbying organisations in Parliament; as the 'ordinary voter base', it is the Council's job to propose popular but local schemes. How successful they are at this is disputed; local election turnout in most areas is below 40% (Electoral Commission, 2019) and, as jobs are often voluntary, low-income people and those in work are not able to take part in this bottom-up democracy. The local government, as the owner of the roads, would also be the recipient of any changes made- and maintenance costs.

Residents: While not necessarily represented by the Council, especially schoolchildren, most residents are broadly supportive of infrastructure designed to make their town more liveable. After all, a lot of people just want to get to their destination quickly and safely. Their stake is that they are the intended beneficiaries of the infrastructure.

Non-residents: Residents of other towns, who use Beaconsfield as a through-road to their destination, are unlikely to be thrilled at greater cycle infrastructure, especially if it comes at the expense of car space. Given that the area is in a green belt, and development is heavily restricted, there isn't a significant quantity of space available to create a parallel cycle path network. Any additional cycle infrastructure is likely to mirror current development and effectively feature narrowed roadways for cycle paths. Until cycle infrastructure is implemented commonly across the UK, negative perceptions from non-residents are likely to stay, as they may fear losing vehicular access.

Cycle advocacy groups: Residents who have organised into action committees, their purpose is to promote cycle infrastructure. Such groups recognise that this infrastructure development may come at the expense of car access, but argue this is a price worth paying for safer streets and increased neighbourhood liveability. The BCP seeks to promote cycling as a viable, healthy alternative to driving (BCP, 2021), and directs local authorities to where change is most needed. One particular aim is to create a safe network of cycle paths connecting local schools; this has not yet been completed (BCP, 2015).

When confronted with such a diversity of opinion, planners must be prepared to mediate and create compromise (Albrechts, 2003). In the case of Beaconsfield's cycle infrastructure, political will was available, as was the support of a large part of the local population. However, countering this pro-cycling sentiment was a strong anti-cycling coalition formed predominantly of visitors to the town, as well as a somewhat indecisive local council and a lack of money to the project. At every stage, consultations with the public were made, however this often focused on limiting cycle infrastructure to the bare minimum, instead of the visionary approach many, including the author, had desired.

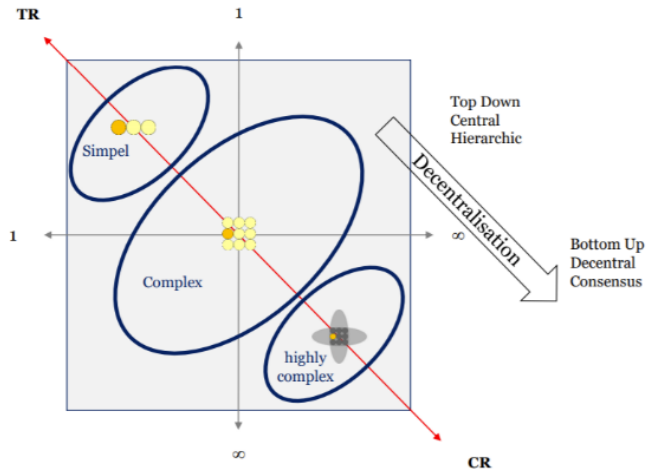
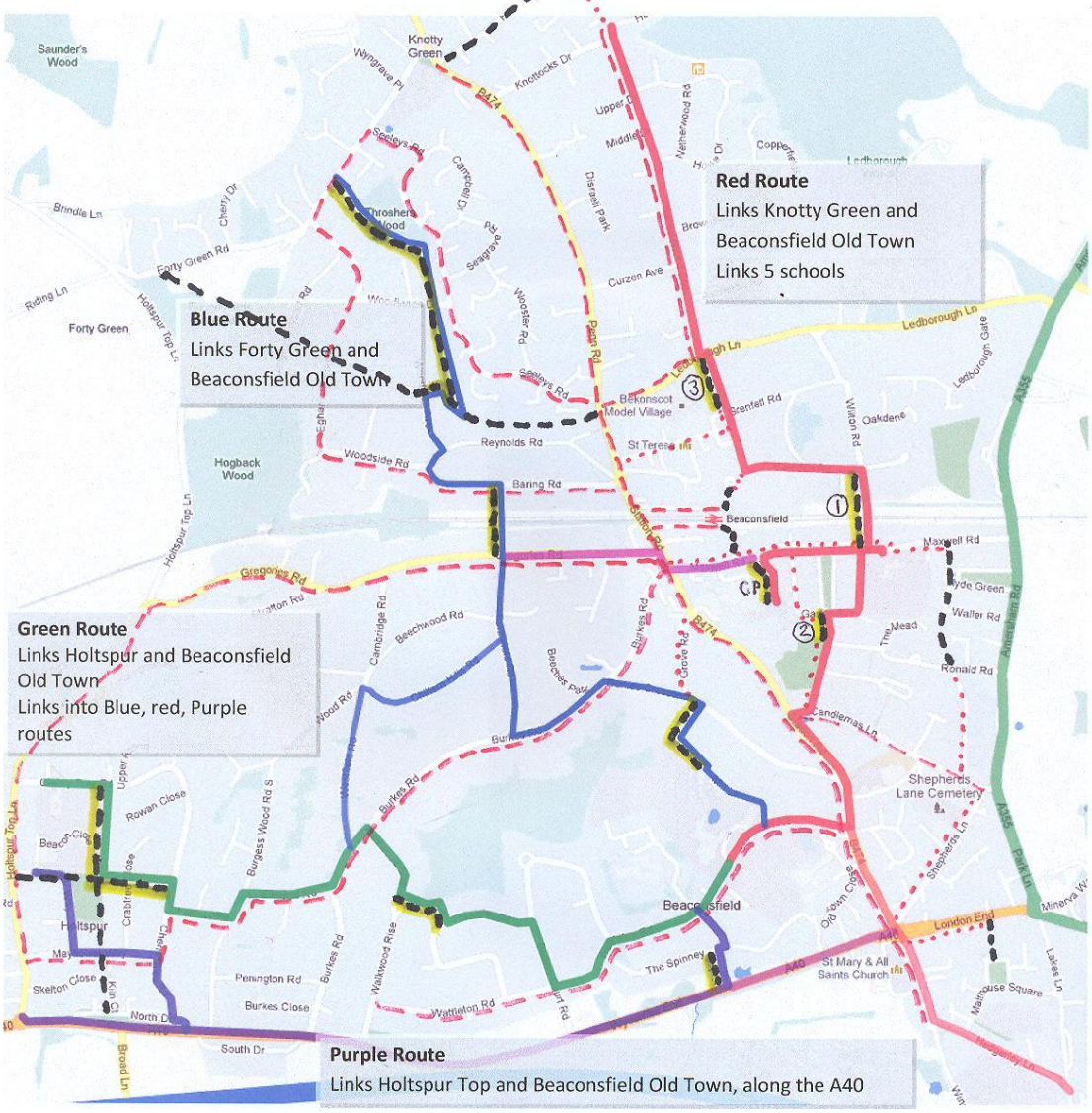


Figure 2 A rationality graph illustrating various project complexities and their relationship with varying levels of centralisation (de Roo, 2021).

As such, an issue that at first appears simple with a single, fixed target becomes rapidly more complex (Fig. 2). Treating the planner as the ultimate scientist, with an incredibly top-down approach, might make sense to an extent, but without a democratic and bottom-up process the planner would not even know that the issue exists. It is in the people's best interests that the planner represents their needs and wants, and- most importantly- listens to the needs of the citizens (de Roo & Voogd, 2021).

The route proposals



BCP proposals : Blue, Red, Green & Purple Routes (on-road, except ▬▬)
" " : ▬▬ Rights of Way & other off-road paths
" " : CP informal route through car park
" " : ①, ②, ③ BCP priorities
Station proposals : routes to station
" " : ▬▬ RoW & other off-road paths potentially useful for station (additional to BCP proposals)
" " : ..... other potential links (on-road)

Proposed routes by the Beaconsfield Cycle Paths Action Group (BCP) as discussed in the Jacobs report on cycle feasibility in the town (Jacobs, 2016). Please note the roads link school sites (see yellow highlights). Local government has not yet incorporated these plans.

Good Governance

This is where the problems arise. Complex problems by nature require complex solutions, and a panacea does not exist for something that affects every stakeholder individually. Owing to budget constraints, cycle infrastructure projects have been historically reduced to the point that their intended improvements could not be upheld. Despite significant bottom-up support and a willing community, the responsibilities of the relevant institutions were not forthcoming.

When the project is analysed from a single dimension (Fig. 3), the reasons for this rejection from the top down are clearer. Assuming that the scalar aspects are bunched together and that each level of implementation is equal, a bottom-up project is already doomed to failure.

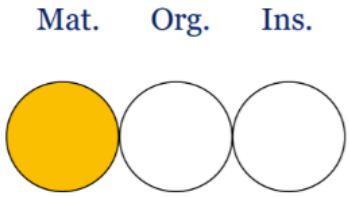


Figure 3 A primitive 3-cell planning model (de Roo, 2021)

This is due to the fallacy of scale. By presenting the views of local residents and non-locals as equal, one ignores the vested interest to improve liveability that locals have. In a location such as Beaconsfield, where many merely transit the town, any investment that restricts said transiting will be viewed extremely negatively and some might even portray the project as not serving the needs of the community- effectively highlighting a minority point. A solely bottom-up approach cannot compete with doubt in the minds of organisers and as such, without a change in governance will, the project cannot be entirely a success.

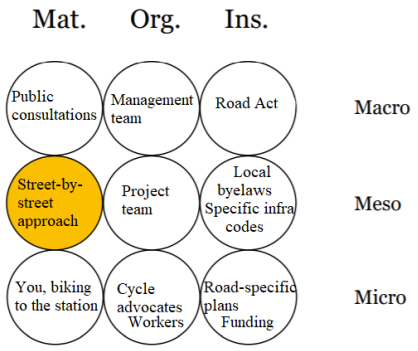


Figure 4 An adapted 9-Cell planning model for Beaconsfield's cycle paths (adapted from de Roo, 2021)

The reality is that the project was popular with almost all actors, especially when examined in the 9-cell planning model (Fig. 4). When the individual impacts are broken up in such a way that the scalar levels can be observed, it becomes apparent that residents would see a marked increase in liveability. In fact, if the programme had been expanded nationally, the rewards of people-centric planning could have been reaped by everyone. Ignoring the interconnected complexity of our society oversimplifies planning to the point of abstraction.

It is in this difficult position that the spatial planners in this case study find themselves. Navigating the fine line between clear environmental, social, and health benefits, and the lack of money for local authorities (BBC, 2020) and outward hostility is difficult and often spatial planners are forced to merely patch up issues (Fig. 5), leaving all sides unsatisfied. This could be especially problematic given the poor reputation that this renovated infrastructure will garner, potentially halting future investment in similar projects for some time due to its political unpopularity. Often acting as consultants *and* the public face of disastrous projects, public sector planners in the UK risk further privatisation to avoid bringing further negative press to British governmental planning. Such privatisation at the expense of the taxpayer would spell an end to the role of politician-planner as we know it. The role of public sector planners is more precarious now than ever before.

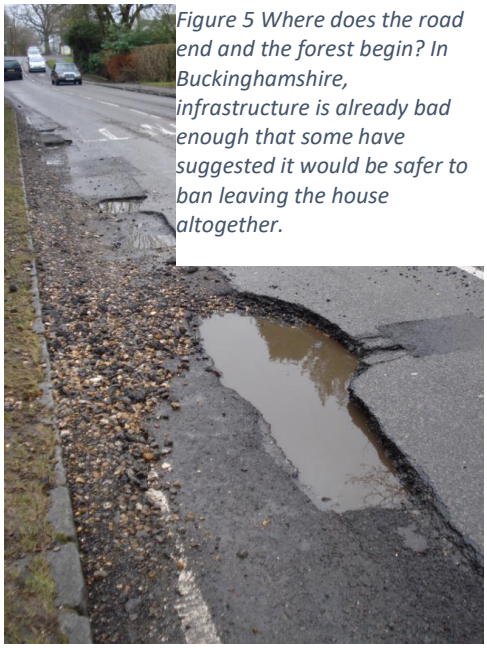


Figure 5 Where does the road end and the forest begin? In Buckinghamshire, infrastructure is already bad enough that some have suggested it would be safer to ban leaving the house altogether.

Conclusion

Ignoring the nuances of an interconnected society relegates bottom-up policy to the scrapheap. Even today, the BCP is fighting for the rights of cyclists and pedestrians in Beaconsfield but must contend with complacency from above. Their voice is being heard, especially on a local level, but much greater power should be given to decentralised authorities, which would then receive their financial aid from a national framework. As a representative body of the residents, cycle advocacy groups have one major advantage over local councils: as a (predominantly) single-issue group, they can concentrate the voices of the most informed and impacted citizens and magnify them. As a form of proportional democracy, therefore, their efficacy should not be questioned.

We have seen how, in Beaconsfield, skewed conceptions and fiscal constraints have limited the scope of a popular cycling infrastructure project. The once-promising Little Holland cycle scheme has been hurt by shifting policy plans from the national government and resulting limited funding. A better understanding of the complex nature of the planning problem from senior ministers could have helped the policy gain more widespread traction, both in Beaconsfield and more widely afield. For similar projects in the future, the consequence is clear: in an environment where we can travel freely, such as within countries, norms to road safety should be constant to ensure satisfying not just the needs of locals. It is also important to commit to financial support from the onset of a project, to avoid disappointment. Separating planning policy and funding from politics could be one way to achieve this, but the implications of an undemocratic and untransparent planning department, or series of planning firms, are unclear. After all, “If planners ignore those in power, they assure their own powerlessness” (Forester, 1989, p.27).

Bibliography

Albrechts, L., 2003. Planning and power: towards an emancipatory planning approach. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* Volume 21, pp. 905-924.

BBC, 2020. *Local government: Councils warn of insolvency risk without big cuts.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-54907185
[Accessed 3 March 2021].

BCP, 2015. *BCP comments on Jacobs report.* Beaconsfield: s.n.

BCP, 2020. *The Independent Examination of the Chiltern and South Bucks Local Plan* , Beaconsfield: BCP.

BCP, 2021. *BCP- About.* [Online]
Available at: https://beaconsfield-cycle-paths.org.uk/about/
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Beaconsfield Town Council, 2018. *Beaconsfield Town Council is working to safeguard our Green Belt and our residents' futures..* [Online]
Available at: https://www.beaconsfieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/general/beaconsfield-town-council-is-working-to-safeguard-our-green-belt-and-our-residents-futures/
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Beckley, R. & Green, D., 2012. *Beaconsfield: Buckinghamshire Historic Towns Assessment Report.* [Online]
Available at: https://old.buckscc.gov.uk/media/1566626/Beaconsfield-Final-Report.pdf
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Buckinghamshire County Council, 2016. *Beaconsfield Cycle Route Feasibility Survey,* Beaconsfield: Jacobs.

de Roo, G., 2021. *A Decision-Making Model.* Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

de Roo, G., 2021. *The Planning Issue and the 'Nine Cells' Model.* Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

de Roo, G. & Voogd, H., 2021. *Planning in Abstraction.* 2nd ed. Groningen: Universiteit Groningen.

Department for Transport, 2016. *Improving Beaconsfield town centre for cyclists and pedestrians.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/speed-management-measures-station-road-beaconsfield
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Department for Transport, 2017. *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy.* [Online]
Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918442/cycling-walking-investment-strategy.pdf
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Electoral Commission, 2019. *Results and turnout at the 2018 May England local elections.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/england-local-council-elections/results-and-turnout-2018-may-england-local-elections
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Forester, J., 1989. In: *Planning in the Face of Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 27.

GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, 2021. *Beaconsfield UD through time.* [Online]
Available at: URL: http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10212248/cube/AREA_ACRES
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Jacobs, 2016. *Jacobs Report: Cycling feasibility in Beaconsfield,* Beaconsfield: Buckinghamshire County Council.

Knight, C., 1847. In: *The National Cyclopaedia of Useful Knowledge, Vol. III.* London: s.n., p. 898.

McSmith, A., 2010. *The market premium: where house prices are booming.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/property/house-and-home/the-market-premium-where-house-prices-are-booming-2146989.html
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Merrick, R., 2018. *Theresa May accused of being 'held hostage by extreme Brexiteers' as crucial customs decision 'shelved'.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-customs-union-rules-brexit-brexiteers-tory-conservatives-a8332101.html
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

National Archives, ONS, 2013. *Census reveals details of how we travel to work in England and Wales.* [Online]
Available at:
https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160108133552/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/mro/news-release/travel-to-work/census-reveals-details-of-how-we-travel-to-work-in-england-and-wales.html
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Office for National Statistics, 2011. *Local Statistics.* [Online]
Available at: neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Office of Rail and Road, 2020. *Estimates of Station Usage, Beaconsfield.* [Online]
Available at: https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/estimates-of-station-usage/
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Reid, C., 2019. *'Cherish The Bicycle' Says Dutch Government -- Here's That Love In Map Form.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2019/01/08/cherish-the-bicycle-says-dutch-government-and-heres-that-love-in-map-form/?sh=289a487d2726
[Accessed 7 March 2021].

Image Credits in Order of Appearance:

Cover Image by Alamy Stock Photo for The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/jun/09/lets-move-to-beaconfield-buckinghamshire-property)

UK Government Logo (https://www.gov.uk)

Beaconsfield Town Council Logo (https://www.beaconsfieldtowncouncil.gov.uk)

Residents of Beaconsfield by Rotary International (https://www.beaconsfieldfestivaloflights.co.uk)

Non-residents by Jon Baxter for GetSurrey (https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/surrey-news/opinion-cyclists-drivers-just-cant-16386862)

Cycle Advocacy Group by Beaconsfield Cycle Paths Action Group (https://beaconsfield-cycle-paths.org.uk/about/)

Typical Buckinghamshire road for the Bucks Free Press (https://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/11205332.council-pothole-payouts-drop-to-zero/)

Declaration of conflict of interest:

The author, Jacob Leman, understands that a conflict of interest is present- as a planning student, I am likely to promote policies that further chances of future employment. In this argumentative essay, it would be inappropriate to ignore this conflict of interest as it may have impacted conclusions drawn.