

Give it a Go...

Ocean's 12 let loose in London

by Wendy Johnson

Spend any time around the Ocean Estate in the London borough of Tower Hamlets and you might spot some of the local women riding their bikes on their way to work, the shops, or the local community centre. What won't be obvious is that three months ago, many of these women had never even sat on a bicycle before.

After twelve weeks of training with sustainable transport charity Sustrans as part of the Tower Hamlets Healthy Borough Programme, twelve women from the estate – dubbed the Ocean's 12 – have completely embraced two-wheeled travel.

Rebecca Davis, Sustrans Project Coordinator, has been working with the Ocean's 12 since their very first training session back in the spring. 'These women have had to overcome so many barriers

to get where they are now' she says. 'They come from a culture where women on bikes are not the norm and challenging that has taken real guts and determination.'

'I think they would all agree that it's been worth it, though, and they are already feeling the benefits. Being able to ride a bike is incredibly liberating, fun and a great way to keep fit.'

Helping to improve fitness is a key part of the project. As many as 30 per cent of adults in Tower Hamlets are estimated to be clinically obese, but the problem begins long before adulthood – the borough has the third highest obesity rate for four to five year-olds in the country.

'Giving these women the skills and confidence to cycle means they can share that with their children',

"I never thought I would cycle to get around, go to work and things like that, but now I am"



Rebecca explains. 'One of the women now intends to teach her young son to ride a bike so they can go out together as a family. Instilling that familiarity with cycling at a young age can really help children embrace healthy habits that will stick with them into adulthood.'

Sureya Bibi, a primary school teacher and young mother of three year-old Yahya, is one of the Ocean's 12. 'I was excited but nervous when I started,' says Sureya. 'but I was really determined to learn. People do still stare at me because I'm an Asian woman on a bike, but I'm having too much fun to care. I could happily just ride all day.'

'Before I began learning, I wanted to cycle to have fun and as a form of exercise. I never thought I would cycle to get around, go to work and things like that, but now I am. My next step is to get more confidence on the roads. I just want to get out there.'

Rebecca continues: 'Sureya came onto the training course with huge enthusiasm to learn to ride a bike, and went from simply mastering her balance in a school playground, to changing gears and conquering hills in a nearby park, then making small journeys on the local roads. She plans to start cycling every day to her new job, so her new cycling skills are already changing her day-to-day life.'

Confidence on the roads is something many women say they lack. Last year, Sustrans surveyed women across the country to find out why 79 per cent of British women never cycle at all. The most common reason was that they didn't feel safe enough, with many claiming that cycle lanes entirely separated from other traffic was what it would take to encourage women to cycle more.

In London, Sustrans is working on exactly that, and has just opened a brand new series of greenways with Transport for London and London boroughs that are ideal for people like Sureya and the rest of the Ocean's 12. They are quiet and attractive cycling and walking routes to and within green spaces that link up to family-friendly destinations. They're perfect for the new cyclist, those with young children or anyone returning to cycling after a long break, so it's worth checking them out this summer.

Recently developed routes in Tower Hamlets include a new cycling and walking bridge over the Regent's Canal at Mile End Park, which connects to people's homes and is used daily by thousands of people. The bridge is part of what will eventually become a two-mile greenway linking Bethnal Green with Victoria Park and the Olympic Park.

Other routes in London include a new greenway which opened in June, alongside the Ravensbourne River in Lewisham. It's a very pleasant environment for cycling, within the wildlife, woodland and wetland haven of Becken-

ham Place Park, and makes a new connection between two existing sections of pedestrian and cycle routes, so it's great for practical journeys to work, school or the shops, as well as just for fun at the weekends.

Both projects are among the many that are part of Sustrans' GOAL project – Greenways for the Olympics and London – to create a network of great quality walking and cycling routes across London.

As for the Ocean's 12, cycle training is only the start of their relationship with two wheels. Their passion for cycling is infectious and is spreading in the borough. Many, like Sureya, plan to get their families cycling too. Sheouli Khatun, another of the group, persuaded her sister-in-law to take up cycle training and is herself applying for a bursary to become an instructor, teaching cycling to other women at her community centre.

'I always wished to cycle but was too afraid,' Sheouli says. 'I thought it was not possible for me but now I really like it. I think many more women should enjoy cycling.'

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