



Improving working conditions in the cargo bike sector

Executive summary

- The cargo bike logistics sector has potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while improving air quality and public spaces.
- Cargo bike couriers experience precarious work and health and safety risks. The workforce also lacks diversity, but challenges riders face tend to be overlooked in research, policy, and planning.
- Policymakers and cargo bike firms can improve conditions by providing fair employment; expanding cycling infrastructure; improving health and safety; diversifying the workforce; improving management practices to support wellbeing; and working together to scale up the sector.

Introduction

Cargo bikes are a greener, healthier, and more efficient replacement for motorised vehicles. They can help address major urban challenges:

- Transport produces [24% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions](#), making it the largest emitting sector.
- Road vehicles [account for the majority \(91%\) of emissions](#) from domestic transport, with cars and taxis as the leading contributors (52%).

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the benefits of cargo bikes both economically and environmentally, but riders face various challenges to their health and wellbeing. Based on interviews with riders and managers at 15 cargo bike companies, this briefing note is intended to offer practical approaches to improving working conditions, so that growth in the sector corresponds with growth in good, green, gainful jobs.

Recommendations

1. Improving working conditions

As the cargo bike sector grows and plays an increasingly important role in decarbonising urban logistics, it is vital that good and fair employment is achieved, unlike traditional van and courier industries. Recent research has shown van drivers experience unhealthier and more precarious work conditions compared to cargo bike riders. However, some riders currently still operate in a precarious working environment. Firms should ensure that riders are paid at least the London Living Wage (£11.95), have guaranteed [Living Hours](#) as set out by the Living Wage Foundation (LWF) - which includes a guaranteed minimum of 16 hours a week (unless the worker requests otherwise) -, paid sick leave, and permission for trade unions to access workplaces to support those most in need of representation. Riders should also be paid for breaks, as well as overtime if they work more than 8 hours in a day.

2. Health and safety

Riding a cargo bike in a car-dominated environment heightens riders' exposure to risks. Riders should be encouraged to report near misses and other road aggressions, which should then be passed onto transport authorities who should take these reports seriously. Riders should also be provided with fully functional bikes and access to regular mechanical checks and support, as well as extensive training, including road safety training. Companies should also evaluate riders' competencies after training by pairing them with a more experienced rider. Training programmes could be developed as vocational qualifications to be delivered in further education institutions.

3. Improve cycling infrastructure

Cargo bike riders face the challenge of navigating a highly car-centric environment with cycling infrastructure that is not suitable for their spatial needs. The network of segregated cycle lanes should be expanded, and existing barriers for bikes across London's cycling network should be removed, such as narrow lanes and chicanes. Firms should also provide riders with appropriate facilities at their depots including toilets, places to rest, phone and battery charging points and refreshments. Transport for London (TfL) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) should also consider creating couriers' hubs in public spaces for riders to rest and expanding charging points.

4. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

The lack of gender and ethnic diversity in the cargo bike workforce, and experiences of physical and sexual harassment, can make it difficult to recruit and retain women, non-binary people, and people of colour. Firms should adopt a clear EDI strategy to diversify the workforce at all company levels, including management, and ensure that facilities offered at work are inclusive of all ages, abilities, and genders.

5. Technology and organisational and management practices

More consideration of the impact of companies' internal communication and management practices on riders' wellbeing is needed. Firms should introduce appropriate HR frameworks and policies, as well as professional guidelines for internal communication. This includes, for example, defining suitable hours for communication and moving away from 'personal' communication platforms like WhatsApp, to workplace-appropriate platforms, such as Slack. Line management and employee responsibilities should be well delineated, so riders have clarity around reporting and raising issues. This should avoid an overly hierarchical structure by seeking to introduce 'horizontal' organisational structures and practices.

6. Scale up the cargo bike sector

Significant reductions in carbon emissions and air pollution can only be achieved if the cargo bike sector expands in cities. An industry alliance should be formed to advocate for collective goals, such as increasing the uptake of bikes for deliveries and investing in safer streets for cycling, and a public information campaign should be created to promote cargo bikes as a viable alternative to vans and cars, both for businesses and individuals. Both local and national government should nurture and support the cargo bike sector. This should consider fiscal and other types of support, for instance re-introducing government funding for purchasing cargo bikes or helping to identify low-cost or underutilised land for new depots.

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