

## WestTrans Study Trip to San Sebastian

November 2016

### Background

London, including West London, is under growing pressure to identify better, cleaner, greener and healthier ways to travel. Air quality is a significant challenge and remains high on the agenda following Planet Earth's successful High Court appeal and the London Mayor's ambition to clean up London's air.

Cycling ticks all these boxes but isn't everyone's solution to travel. Questions remain; how can we encourage more people to cycle or walk? How can we travel cleaner if we're not cycling? Electric powered cars, busses and bicycles could play a role.

The City Council of San Sebastian has recently secured European funding to pilot a number of schemes that could be reproduced in West London. These schemes fit with the transport, environmental and health aims of West London.

### Aim of the study trip

The delegates from WestTrans and its partnership boroughs highlighted three examples in San Sebastian to investigate:

- Public electric bicycle scheme
- Bicycle infrastructure
- Electric busses and charging infrastructure

Electric bikes may encourage more people to cycle because of their ease of use. London and West London both have public cycle hire but not electric bike hire.

In addition, San Sebastian has invested in infrastructure to improve cycling and provide segregation where feasible. We were keen to see how they implemented these ideas, how successful they were and which elements of their success could be transferred or replicated in West London.



San Vicente - Old Town

Lastly, the City Council operate three electric busses. Given the possibility of an ultra-low emission zone in London out to the North and South Circular Roads, electric vehicles, busses and their charging infrastructure is a subject borough officers need to see and understand first hand.



San Sebastian, Spain - near the French border.

Population 185,000

Land Area: 60.89km<sup>2</sup>

### About San Sebastian

San Sebastian is located in the Basque region, on the northern coast of Spain, 12 miles from the French border.

The City sits on the mouth River Urumea with the ‘Old Town’ closest to the sea. Since the demolition of the city walls (1800s) the city has expanded rapidly and also developed into the surrounding hills. New out of town technology parks being the latest expansion to provide employment land away from the congested city centre.

Tourism is a major industry here; San Sebastian is a famous tourist destination in Spain and is renowned for its many tapas bars and restaurants.

The City is also the largest employment centre in the area and as such, congestion, parking stress and competition for road space remain issues for the City Council to manage. It should be noted that these issues are significantly worse during the tourist season.

### Issues facing the City

San Sebastian’s topography, outside the city centre, is very hilly which is a serious barrier to cycling and also explains the extremely high levels of motorcycles and scooters ownership, almost 13%! The city has invested heavily to address this through the construction of walking/cycling bridges between

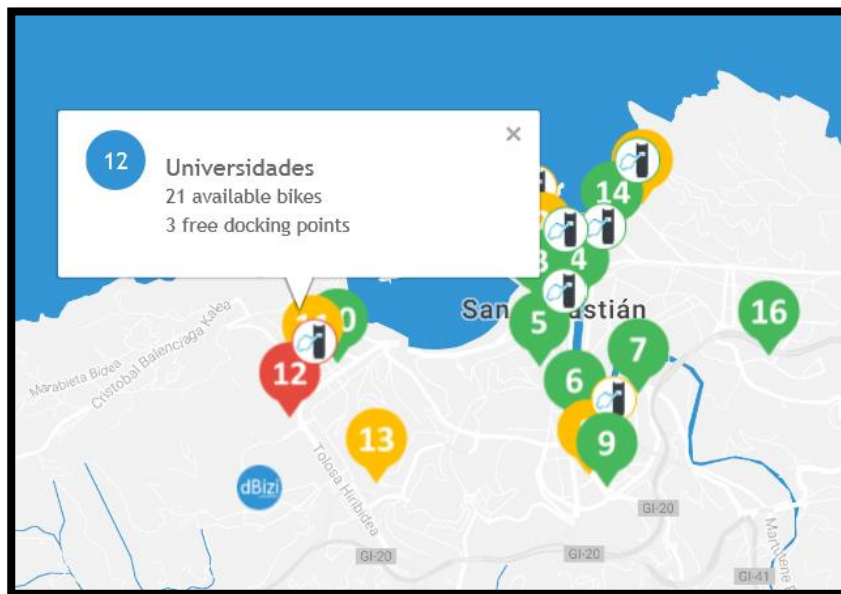
steep interfluves, tunnels where appropriate and vertical lifts in the worst cases.

During the summer months, cycling can be so popular that cycle lanes become congested. Many cyclists are reluctant to use the roads - the city council is implementing a series of measures including speed reduction to assist cyclists on the main carriage way.

The Old Town is a grid of narrow streets, just wide enough for small goods vehicles, there are no separate footpaths. Access to this area by motor vehicle has been restricted, encouraging the rise of cycle logistics in the City.

In comparison to London, San Sebastian is a breath of fresh air but air quality is on their agenda. Rising car trips and congestion is being met with policies to arrest and reduce rising pollution, most notably, electric busses, bicycles and improved public transport services.

### Electric bike scheme



**dbizi app shows the availability of bikes and docking stations in real time.**

<https://www.dbizi.com/>

San Sebastian, with European funding, is trialling a public electric bicycle hire scheme with docking stations deployed around the City and a network of cycle paths to travel on.

We found the electric bikes really easy to ride and good fun too. The power assistance from the motor has three power settings and the motor constantly assists as long as the rider is pedalling. After cycling around the City for a couple of hours, we all had at least 50% battery power remaining and none of us felt tired or uncomfortable for our efforts. It is possible to switch the motor off and pedal the bicycle manually.

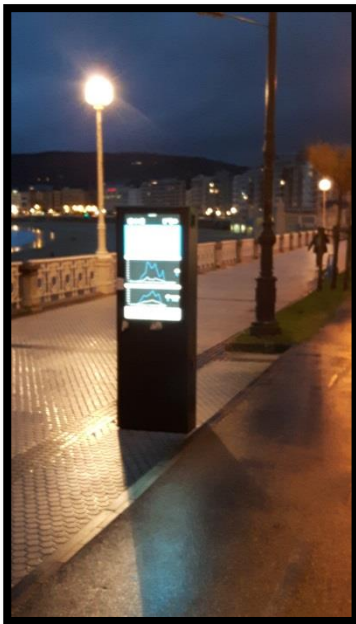
The cost of hire is very competitive; for €40.00 annual membership, a 30 minute hire can cost as little as €0.60 - more than enough time to cycle through the City. Short term memberships are also available from €8.00 for a week at the same hourly hire rates.

The electric bicycle hire scheme is a pilot scheme to see if electric bikes can promote greater uptake of cycling and for this reason the scheme is

heavily subsidised. To make this a financially viable mode of transport, prices and usage would need to be significantly higher.

## Bicycle infrastructure

### Political will of the City Council

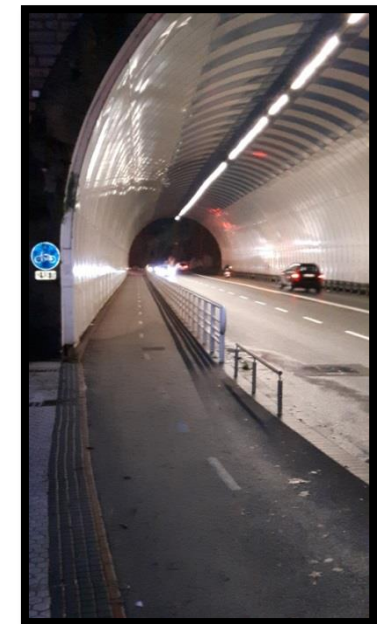


Cycle Counter

It was generally felt by us that the City Council of San Sebastian is very committed to delivering improvements for cyclists and is not afraid to make contentious decisions in their favour.

The Mirakontxa Pasealekua tunnel, by Pico Del Loro, was a four lane carriage way for motor traffic only. In order to improve cycle routes throughout the city and create better east - west connections for cyclists, one lane of traffic was removed from the tunnel to provide a segregated cycle path.

Despite the backlash from car users and some residents, the route is popular with cyclists and to prove this the Council installed a cycle counter near one of the exits. The City Council continues to make bold decisions to create a better environment for walking and cycling, some of which are mentioned in this report.



One traffic lane removed for a cycle route



## Cycle paths, surfaces, tunnels and crossings

Continuing with the tunnel theme, a disused railway through the hillside has been converted into the longest cycle tunnel in the world, 850m long. The tunnel is narrow and not appropriate for motor vehicle use but makes an excellent cycle route (in both directions) saving commuters from steep inclines or a long diversion around the hill.

Cycling this route was easy, quick and a grateful respite from the drizzle.

Throughout San Sebastian, we were impressed by the continuity of the cycle paths, crossings and surfacing. Cycle paths rarely ended, the transition from segregated path to a cycle path in a pedestrian space or traffic restricted space was clearly laid out and generally respected by all users.

Cycle paths did not merge with the carriageway and where paths crossed roads, they generally had dedicated crossing spaces parallel to the pedestrian crossing, similar to Toucan Crossings in the UK.



**Disused rail tunnel now a cycle route**

In quieter areas (roads with lower traffic flows) speed limits had been reduced to 30kph to help create a safer environment for cyclists. The total width of these roads would not allow space for segregation.



**San Sabastian street scene with segregated cycle paths and shared space paths. Paths are continuous and use one of two designs throughout depending on street type.**

## Station Parking



Secure cargo bike parking at Donostia Station

A new cycle parking facility has been built at Donostia Station, it is a secure facility controlled through an app (mobile phone application) which controls entry to the parking area until identity and payment has been confirmed. At this point a code is sent securely to the smartphone to enable access to the parking area.

Costs are very low, less than €2 per day and the site is managed to ensure bikes are not abandoned. It is one of the few sites that has sufficient space for alternative cycles such as cargo bikes.

Unlike the UK, new developments in San Sebastian do not have a planning requirement to provide any cycle parking spaces at all!

## Electric busses and charging infrastructure

San Sebastian's bus operation, dBus, is a public private initiative offering a number of routes through and around the City at frequencies up to every 7 minutes on the busiest routes, and for some of the outlying districts, a taxi/minibus service.

They recently acquired funding to trial three electric busses, one of which we travelled on, on route to the bus station for a site visit. The busses are 'bendy busses' and apart from the lack of noise, pollution and vibration, it performed just as well as any diesel fuelled vehicle! The issues arise when looking at distance, cost and recharging times.



Bus routes. All fares cost €1.70





Electric charging unit

The distance is limited to around 200km, depending on the route, more specifically how hilly the route is in the case of San Sebastian. Low temperatures further reduce vehicle range.

The initial cost of the busses is staggering, €500,000 - we are still waiting for trials to complete to give us an operational cost over a longer time frame. Revenue from all bus routes (diesel, biofuel and electric) covers 64% of the operational costs - the City subsidize the balance.

Recharging times are advertised as ‘overnight’ in the brochures which in real time is 9 to 12 hours depending on how much power remains in the batteries. Too long for London considering capital costs? Recharging infrastructure is large, about the size of a telephone box and can only serve one vehicle at a time. London would and in some cases does have power supply issues when a large number of electric vehicles charge from the same location.

If the uptake for electric vehicles increases, costs will become more competitive. Recharging improvements continue and battery technology continues to improve too.

Anyone interested in trialling electric vehicles could contact the City Council or FREVUE <http://frevue.eu/>

### Cycle Logistics

There was just enough time in the schedule to call into Txita (<http://txita.adoxnet.net/>) a cycle logistics company, serving the City with last mile logistics solutions. Txita have an impressive setup, a range of cargo cycles to maximise their delivery capability and are excellently located for local deliveries but still accessible for national carriers to drop their packages without having to enter the city centre. To boost their income, they also sell advertising space on their cargo



Txita cargo bike and (right) floor map for route planning

bikes, offer a summer cycle taxi service and act as agents for cargo bike manufacturers.

However, even with a business as enterprising at this they are only just surviving. Probing a little further, we discovered the City (who own this building) allow Txita to use this space free of charge - to promote cycle logistics. The owners of Txita do not believe the business would remain viable if they had to pay competitive rents. It's difficult to see how this model can be transferred to London given the competition for land and rent values.

### In summary



Electric bus - on charge

Electric bikes are easy and fun to use but will they convert those who don't currently cycle? The scheme is heavily subsidised - is it value for money?

Investing in infrastructure pays off - both tunnels in this report are well used and connect otherwise severed areas. This has helped increase cycling. There are instances where West London would benefit from such tunnels or bridges - especially to cross the North Circular Road at Brent or parts of the Western Avenue.

To some degree, San Sebastian might be considered or viewed as a transport experiment lab. There is a lot going on here and much of it is very good and worthwhile but many of the projects are costly and without funding it would be difficult to see how we could reproduce them in West London.

As European funding is still available (confirmed by LEPT, Nov 2016); west London boroughs should explore these options further, either individually or in a concerted approach.