

Report on Towards Carfree Cities conference (York, 28 June – 1 July 2010) for Energy Lancaster

With funding from Energy Lancaster Dr Griet Scheldeman and Dr Dave Horton, two social scientists from Lancaster Environment Centre, gave an innovative workshop on an EPSRC project called 'Understanding Walking and Cycling' at the international 'Towards Carfree Cities' conference held in the UK for the first time, in York, June 2010.

Academics, practitioners, policy makers and activists from across six continents attended the workshop 'Putting the people into carfree cities'. The aim of the workshop was to invite participants to reflect critically on which *people* we put into carfree developments, and which – if any- we leave out. Planners of the past have sometimes worked with homogenous conceptions of the person, but cities for walking and cycling need to include lots of different ways of walking and cycling; for example, handrails on slopes can easily be forgotten if you plan only for the 'able-bodied' citizen.

Scheldeman and Horton presented ethnographic data – on real people walking and cycling in real cities - gathered so far in the ongoing 'Understanding Walking and Cycling' research. The emphasis was on the notion of empathy to reach real 'understanding', i.e. what something means to someone. Participants were then invited to steer away from the often abstract notion of 'carfree city', and instead to learn from each other and real life experience. In groups of three they ventured out onto the streets of York, with the brief to talk to each other and try and understand how they each experienced and negotiated routes, places and traffic. Afterwards contributors expressed pleasant surprise at what they had found out about each other and at how a straightforward activity like walking is often taken for granted, but in fact holds variation and different meanings to each of us.

More information on the conference and the carfree cities network can be found at this website:

<http://www.worldcarfree.net/conference/>

More information on the EPSRC 'Understanding Walking and Cycling' project can be found at:

http://www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/research/society_and_environment/walking_and_cycling.php