

Inside the private email threads shaping London's e-scooter trial.

Along the roadsides of most large European cities lie the mangled limbs of electric scooters, loved for their convenience but discarded with ease, and seemingly some violence. In January 2024, a City of London resident tripped over an e-scooter left neglected on a pavement, causing bruising and swelling to both her knees, and difficulty walking for days following the incident. She emailed the council, imploring that it would investigate and address the broader issue of threat to public safety caused by the “proliferation” of micromobility vehicles.

Emails released under Freedom of Information laws show how, rather than investigating the issue further, council officers forwarded the complaint to the e-scooter company involved. After receiving assurances from the company, the issue was treated as resolved.

This instance is not unique. Rental e-scooters remain illegal to use privately on public roads in the UK, but London's e-scooter trial was launched in 2021 to allow selected operators to run shared scooter schemes, as policymakers assessed safety and environmental impact. Throughout this experimental phase, emails show how local authorities have had to manage operational problems as they arise, and how the micromobility companies themselves are having a hand in shaping how aspects of the trial operate in practice.

Emails show how London councils running the government's e-scooter trial have routinely handled safety complaints and operational breaches through private correspondence with e-scooter companies, while some companies offered perks, such as ride codes and promotional collaborations, to council teams during the trial period. The correspondence, which involves the City of London and Hammersmith & Fulham councils, suggests that many of the day-to-day decisions affecting public spaces, such as parking breaches and technical glitches, have been addressed through off-handed exchanges between companies and borough officers.

In one incident, a City of London officer alerted operator Voi that scooters had been deployed in a disabled parking bay outside Guildhall. The officer asked the company to remove the vehicles and to confirm how the issue had occurred. Voi replied, outlining the warnings and fines it had issued to users and cited its internal parking compliance figures. No further enforcement action is recorded. Similar exchanges appear repeatedly throughout the correspondence.

Technical issues with the scooters themselves are also shown as being addressed directly between council officers and operators. In one exchange, officials raised concerns that scooters were entering designated “no-ride zones” because of GPS drift affecting geofencing systems used to control where vehicles can operate. “I assume you will get your team to test this ASAP,” one council officer wrote. The operator responded that it would investigate the issue and carry out additional testing.

Across correspondence, complaints about obstruction and safety are frequently forwarded to directly to the companies concerned and treated as operational matters to be resolved through dialogue rather than formal action.

The emails also show how operators are cultivating working relationships with council transport teams during the trial. Correspondence from Hammersmith & Fulham council shows operators offering ride codes and promotional partnerships linked to local transport initiatives. In July 2022, for example, shortly after e-bike operator Dott launched services in

the borough, the company offered ride codes to members of the council's transport team covering up to 15 free 20-minute journeys. The council's gifts and hospitality register for the same period records receiving no such perks from micromobility operators.

Industry representatives say such close collaboration with councils is necessary as the regulatory framework for micromobility continues to evolve. Maggy Gerbeaux, director of public affairs for Dott in France and Belgium, said operators work closely with local authorities in order to share data and improve services. "It's important to have a good relationship with the city and with elected officials," she said, adding that companies share data and work with authorities to adapt local policies.

Indeed, the correspondence shows operators regularly sharing operational updates and performance data with council officers. In one exchange with City of London officials, an operator reported parking compliance rates of about 91 per cent, and detailed warnings and fines issued to riders who parked incorrectly.

This close relationship has meant, however, that much of the practical regulation of London's e-scooter trial is being carried out through ongoing communication between councils and companies. In the correspondence, operators even appear to play a role in shaping how key aspects of the trial function. In one email, Lime suggests reconsidering a "go-slow" riding zone on Talgarth Road in west London, arguing that riders need to maintain speed to keep up with surrounding traffic.

In other exchanges, companies confirmed they would implement revised geofencing restrictions provided by Transport for London, effectively enforcing road rules through software updates to their vehicles. Urban mobility specialist Maël Martinie said the pattern reflects a broader challenge facing cities, as new transport technologies emerge faster than the regulatory frameworks designed to protect users. "They take on a market niche, and then they move until the local authorities react," he said.

London's e-scooter trial has now been extended several times as the government considers whether to introduce permanent legislation allowing rental scooters on UK roads. The correspondence suggests that, in the absence of a firm regulatory framework, much of the trial's day-to-day governance takes place through conversational exchanges between borough officials and private operators. For residents who've learned to watch their step keenly and narrowly avoid tripping over blocked pavements, or who are struggling to access disabled parking bays, the processes behind these decisions affecting their boroughs remains largely invisible.