

POSITION STATEMENT: ACTIVE TRAVEL

KEY MESSAGES

- Physical activity rates in the UK are decreasing and the population is living an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, which can contribute towards obesity and other chronic illnesses;
- Active travel can be an easy way to incorporate physical activity into our daily routine and can promote several positive health outcomes, including obesity prevalence;
- More focus on active travel in planning and transport sectors is required to help provide safe and accessible opportunities for the public to use active travel on a daily basis.

Definition: Active travel is a form of transportation, such as the commute, typically made by foot or bicycle [1].

Overview

Physical activity levels in UK are steadily decreasing and many of us are living predominantly sedentary lifestyles [1]. Physical inactivity directly contributes to one in six deaths every year in the UK, increasing the risk of many chronic conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, stroke and cancer [1, 2].

Evidence suggests the best way to achieve the substantial health-enhancing potential of physical activity on a population level is if people can incorporate physical activity into their daily lives [3]. Active travel not only plays a part in tackling obesity; it has been shown to improve both physical and mental health and wellbeing; and is vital in addressing air pollution caused by carbon emissions – another crucial public health issue

Physical activity and active travel in the UK

39% adults in the UK are physically inactive – which means they don't meet the recommended guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity and two core strength exercises every week [4, 5]. The economic burden of physical inactivity is said to cost the UK economy £7.5bn annually (including £0.9 billion to the NHS alone) [1].

The North West of England is the UK's most physically inactive region across the four countries – as many as 47% of adults do not meet national guidelines [6]. A recent study of adults' perceptions of physical activity found many adults struggle to make time for physical activity, with

almost one quarter citing a lack of time as their reasons for not being active [8]. Figures from the Active Lives survey and National Transport demonstrate that the uptake of walking and cycling for transport in the North West is lower than the national average across all frequencies.

Figure 1: Walking and cycling for travel statistics [9]

	ENG average	N.WEST average
Cycling for travel:		
Once a week	6.3%	4.9%
3 times a week	3.3%	2.3%
5 times a week	2.1%	1.4%
Walking for travel:		
Once a week	41.6%	38.3%
3 times a week	22.7%	19.8%
5 times a week	16.7%	14.4%

What does the evidence say?

- Active travel reduces risk of obesity (lowers BMI and percentage body fat), diabetes, hypertension and respiratory problems [10].
- Active travel improves psychological wellbeing [11]
- Active travel to school can increase concentration by up to four hours, with children arriving at school more alert and ready for the school day [12]
- The health benefits of cycling far outweigh the risks of road traffic accidents [13]
- Walking or cycling as part of the commute was associated with reduced adiposity [14]
- Cycling to work was associated with reduced adiposity relative to exclusive car-use [14]

- Active travel is the most cost-effective way to increase physical activity, reduce ill health and reduce air pollution by cutting down emissions from road transport[15].
- More than 12,000 premature deaths from air pollution and close to £10bn would be saved over 10 years if England and Scotland reached their walking and cycling goals[16].

National policy

Protected cycle lanes, car-free days, the pedestrianisation of streets and cycle-to-work schemes all help to encourage more people to use active forms of transport, improving air quality, public health and wellbeing. However, at present government policy and spending overwhelming favour road transport and our cities and towns are increasingly built around accommodating cars, not pedestrians or cyclists.

The Government currently spends on average £287m on walking and cycling – the equivalent of around £4.30 per head. This represents just a small fraction of the £32bn annual transport budget. In 2017 the Government announced it wanted to make walking and cycling ‘the norm’ and published a new Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy including the potential of a £1.2bn funding boost[17].

At a local level, the recent Transport for the North 30 year strategic plan unfortunately made little reference to increasing active travel opportunities in the future. This was a significant missed opportunity to reduce the increasingly sedentary population in the North.

Global health, safety and economic forums, including the WHO say 20mph/30kmh speed limits, particularly in urban areas is best practice. The ‘20’s plenty’ campaign argue policies enforcing

more 20mph speed limits offer huge population-wide benefits such as, reducing the health burden of crashes, chronic diseases, inactivity, stress, pollution, loneliness and inequalities[18].

Our position and what we will do

Advocacy: As part of our work programme, we will continue to advocate for measures to increase physical activity, specifically through:

- Active travel, specifically walking and cycling, and improved spatial planning measures e.g. 20mph zones
- Physically active settings, specifically workplaces and schools

Knowledge Exchange: We will continue to support events that encourage physical activity and active travel. For example, Cycle to Work Day, Walk to Work Day, Car Free Day and Walk to School Week actively promote this through our social media channels and through guest blogs from the relevant physical activity organisations.

Policy: We will continue to respond to consultations on proposals that influence active transport or have the potential to. In 2018, we responded to the consultation of the Transport for the North’s 30 year strategic plan to promote physical activity, raising concerns about the lack of recognition and plans for promoting active travel as a sustainable mode of transport. We will continue to promote our Local Government Declaration on Healthy Weight, which recognises transport and town planning as important factors in influencing physical activity levels in the local population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Healthy weight should be considered in all policies; transport and town planning must play their part in promoting healthy weights through increased access to safe walking and cycling routes.
- Increase spending on walking and cycling per head and ensure this is equally distributed throughout the country, to ensure all towns and cities benefit from active travel options.
- Increasing physical activity alone will not solve the obesity crisis – it is a multi-faceted issue that will require a multi-method approach, alongside measures to reduce access and marketing of unhealthy food and drink, product reformulations and improvements to food labelling and health literacy.

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