

active travel news

Issue 14

Higher education and active travel

Encouraging children to be active through play and travel

A healthy life course

As we enter into 2009, policy on active living is moving in the right direction, with active travel at the core. Look out for the launch of the national physical activity plan for England, updates to the Climbing Higher strategy in Wales, the Department of Health's Change4Life initiative really getting going, and guidance from NICE on how to promote physical activity for children.

Sustrans believes we have a duty to create the conditions for active living, and specifically active travel, throughout the life course. Walking and cycling should be promoted and facilitated at schools and children's centres, in further education, at workplaces and across

communities, enabling us all to lead physically active lifestyles.

At every step in the life course, and in each new setting, the message should be reinforced that healthy living and active travel are the norm, while sedentary and polluting ways of travelling are just so last century!

Malcolm Shepherd
Chief Executive

Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity and works on practical projects to encourage people to walk, cycle and use public transport to benefit health and the environment.

Active Travel works with policy-makers and practitioners to promote walking and cycling as health-enhancing physical activity.

Photography credits: Sustrans staff, Leeds Metropolitan University and Margaret Eagle-Clark.

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Higher education and active travel

The higher education sector can play a crucial role in the promotion of healthy living. With most students living near to their classes, trips to lectures are likely to be easily achievable on foot, by bike or on public transport. Colleges and universities can thus encourage lifelong healthy and sustainable travel behaviour.

The 2007 Foresight report warned that obesity could cost the UK nearly £50 billion a year by 2050, and recommended improvements to the built environment, to encourage people to walk and cycle more of their everyday journeys. This stark warning has focused attention on previously neglected areas of society, and on programmes which encourage healthy living right through our lives – from children’s play, to school travel, and then to the last stage for many young people before the adult world of families and work.... higher education.

If the environment around universities and colleges is made more active travel friendly, staff, students and neighbours can reduce the risk of ill-health caused by a sedentary lifestyle – including obesity, diabetes, coronary heart disease, cancer,

osteoporosis, and mental health problems – through healthier travel choices.

Higher education is a major constituency. There are 109 Universities and 169 Colleges in the UK¹ with some 170,000 academic staff and over 2 million full-time and part-time students². As national programmes encourage active travel to school, it is natural that attention should turn to the transition from school to universities and colleges, and to the higher education setting as a scene for the promotion of healthy living.

Leading universities, in particular, are now piloting a more active approach to promoting healthy living among students, but also staff. Innovative approaches now being demonstrated include the *UTravelActive* project.



Leeds *UTravelActive*

Students at the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University are now getting to and from campus on a fleet of new bicycles, hired for the academic year. Based on the successful Velocampus at Nantes University in France, Velocampus Leeds is offering 200 bicycles for hire to students at the two universities and at least another 300 bikes will expand the scheme over the next three years. The initiative is part of *UTravelActive* - a four year project to encourage sustainable travel. Other *UTravelActive* activities include bike buddies to help boost beginner cyclists' confidence on the roads by teaming them up with someone more experienced; safer cycling and walking route planning and advice; self-help bike maintenance sessions; social rides, walks and events.

However, the *UTravelActive* project partnership are aware that the key to ensuring sustainable active travel behaviour among staff and students is creating a physical environment that is conducive to walking and cycling. Leeds City Council are currently undertaking a survey of the main routes to both universities and university teams are auditing the cycling facilities available on campus, with a view to providing a detailed plan of infrastructure improvements needed.

In the public health white paper, *Choosing Health* (2004), the government observed that "Young people need support as they go through the transition into adult life. We will support the initiatives being taken locally by some colleges and universities to develop a strategy for health that integrates health into the organisation's structure to:

- create healthy working, learning and living environments;
- increase the profile of health in teaching and research; and
- develop healthy alliances in the community"³.

This is clearly a wise approach.

Official guidance now recommends that architects, designers, developers, employers and planners who are involved with campus sites, including universities, should ensure different parts of the site are linked by appropriate walking and cycling routes⁴. As universities and colleges seek to differentiate themselves through all aspects of the student lifestyle and experience, it is to be hoped that their commitment to healthy living and their green credentials will feature ever more strongly.

The Health Promoting Universities network (HPU), developed since the mid-1990's with leadership from the University of Central Lancashire, is an example of the move in higher education to creating healthy settings. UCLAN describes the aim of the network as "to integrate a commitment to health in the fabric of settings – within their cultures, structures, processes and routine life"⁵.

The HPU notes that universities and colleges are concerned with quality and excellence. By investing in the health of their staff and students, they invest in the overall health of the organisation. Equally, as large institutional settings where students and staff spend a lot of time, universities and colleges offer the opportunity to develop life skills and health awareness among an increasingly diverse population.



Active Travel Scotland is working in partnership with Edinburgh and Stirling Universities, Paths to Health and Cycling Scotland to promote active travel among university students, staff and visitors.

University of Stirling

A survey of 430 staff at the University of Stirling revealed that almost 20% of those who drive to campus would prefer to cycle or walk with improved infrastructure and provision of safer and more comfortable environments cited as having a potential major effect. About 20 staff and students recently participated in an active travel campus audit. They addressed concerns about infrastructure, potential walking and cycling improvements to the main campus.

University of Edinburgh

At the University of Edinburgh, staff and students have been offered commuter cycle training to boost confidence among new and returning cyclists. In the New Year, four main campus sites will be audited to develop a mapping and signage scheme.

Training future professionals to be active-travel-aware

There is however an additional, hugely important dividend to be gained from creating a healthy travel environment for students. If those who will go on to work in planning, transport, development, architecture, local government, regeneration or community work have gone through their professional training in an active travel friendly setting, we can hope they will take the experience into their working lives and create health-enhancing environments in their turn.

As the HPU has identified, universities and colleges offer the opportunity to:

- educate and influence the next generation of decision-makers and managers
- build a multi-disciplinary understanding of public health within and across subject areas
- advocate for health at regional, national and international levels.

We will return to this subject in a future edition of Active Travel News.

References

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- ² **Universities UK, 2008**, *Higher Education in Facts and Figures*
- ³ **Department of Health, 2004**, *Choosing Health: Making healthy choices easier*
- ⁴ **National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2008**, *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*
- ⁵ **Doherty et al, 2006**, *The healthy settings approach: growing interest within colleges and universities*, *Education and Health*, 24

Encouraging children to be active through play and travel



Sustrans' new programme **Active Play and Travel: Tackling Obesity** is exploring how children's physical activity levels can be increased through encouraging outdoor 'free' play and active travel.

Outdoor free play and active travel

Play can be loosely defined as what children do in their own time, for their own reasons, and is recognised by academics and professionals alike as an essential part of the healthy development of children and young people¹.

Over recent decades environmental and social changes have interacted to reduce children's ability to travel about alone and with friends, to travel actively to activities such as music, art or football, and to enjoy free play. This reduction in active travel and outdoor, free play opportunities is recognised as being a significant contributor to the rise in levels of obesity in children.

"Compared with previous generations, children spend less time playing outdoors and have lower participation rates in active transport. Many studies have identified lack of neighbourhood safety as a potential barrier to children's physical activity"².

More recent research supports this important role of physically active play for children's health and well being, finding that outdoor and unstructured play is one of the best forms of exercise for children,

concluding that "walking and cycling provide children with more physical activity than most other activities"³.

Traffic is the barrier

Fear of traffic, among both parents and children, remains a major deterrent to both outdoor play and active travel, despite falling child pedestrian fatalities. Findings from the latest National Travel Survey 2006 for example, show 59% of adults accompany their primary aged children to school because of traffic danger⁴.



A recent survey commissioned by Play England has shown that whilst 71% of adults could play and explore in their local neighbourhoods every day when they were

children, just 21% of children can do so today⁵. This ‘retreat from the street’ removes a crucial initial step for children’s active independence.

The real barrier traffic presents to children’s outdoor, active play is recognised in the Government’s new document *The Play Strategy*⁶, with proposals for improving safe routes to play, supporting 20 mph and Home Zones. This echoes National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance on the prevention and management of obesity, which recommends providing facilities and schemes such as walking and cycling routes and safe play areas, as well as “making streets cleaner and safer through measures such as traffic calming”⁷.

Delivering the necessary changes to the built environment and addressing behaviour requires a new coalition of interests reaching beyond public health, into transport, play, planning, design, open space and education services. The *Foresight Tackling Obesities* report clearly highlighted the importance of building physical activity into children’s daily lives as a key intervention to maintain a healthy weight⁸, and the Department of Health flags up the partnerships required to make this happen. The cross government obesity strategy for England says “unstructured play is vitally important to children’s physical and emotional wellbeing....local authority planning and transport departments have an important role in encouraging active travel such as cycling and walking, the use of parks and green spaces, and promoting opportunities for active and unstructured play”⁹.

The Active Play and Travel programme

Whilst Sustrans and others have run successful projects that facilitate active travel to and from school, the natural synergy between promoting and enabling active outdoor play and active travel through



enabling children's wider independent access across their neighbourhoods is not broadly being met¹⁰.

With funding from the South West Regional Public Health Group, Sustrans has initiated a new programme *Active Play and Travel: Tackling Obesity* (APT TO), to explore how this can be achieved. Initially in Poole and Bournemouth, APT TO is coordinating and implementing environmental and motivational interventions which promote walking, cycling and active, outdoor play.

"Opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity"¹¹.

APT TO works with the local authorities to identify and influence significant transport and planning strategies (such as open/green space, cycling, play, sustainable modes of travel to school, building schools for the future) to secure infrastructure improvements that benefit both sustainable, active travel and outdoor, free play. One innovative motivational aspect of the



programme is linking the Bike It programme in schools to work with families attending nearby Children Centres, so as to engage with parents in an early years setting. APT TO has assisted Bournemouth and

Poole in bidding to the new Play Pathfinder programme. A check list developed in this work 'Ensuring children and young people can enjoy independent and active access to play provision', has been referenced in *The Play Strategy*⁶ and is now being developed into a larger resource, with case studies identified through complementary work to map active travel among children across the South West, and will be nationally available in 2009.

APT TO is now selecting a second demonstration area, also in the South West, to run from April 2009.

Updates on APT TO and downloadable resources can viewed at www.activetravel.org.uk/play

References

- ¹ **Play England, 2007**, *The Charter for Children's Play*
- ² **Carver et al, 2008**, *Playing it Safe: The Influence of neighbourhood safety on children's physical activity – A review, Health and Place, 14*
- ³ **Mackett, 2004**, *Making children's lives more active*
- ⁴ **Department for Transport, 2007**, *National Travel Survey 2006*
- ⁵ **Play England, 2007**, *Play Day 2007 - Our Streets Too!*
- ⁶ **Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008**, *The Play Strategy*
- ⁷ **National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2006**, *Obesity: guidance on the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children*
- ⁸ **Government Office for Science, 2007**, *Foresight Tackling Obesities: Future Choices*
- ⁹ **Department of Health, 2008**, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: a cross-government strategy for England*
- ¹⁰ **Play England, 2008**, *Places to Go: A summary of research evidence*
- ¹¹ **Dietz, 2001**, *The obesity epidemic in young children, British Medical Journal, 322*

Pupils urge TravelSmart take up



During 2007, 1,500 homes in East Inverness were offered support from Sustrans' TravelSmart team in switching to more active travel. Junior Road Safety Officers from four local primary schools wrote to households in their catchments urging them to travel leaner and greener.

60% of households requested personalised information to help them on their way.

Results show that sustainable travel modes are up: walking by 22%, cycling by 27% and public transport by 11%. Car journeys are down by 13% - saving almost a million car kilometres per year.

Further information:

www.sustrans.org.uk/travelsmart



Get active, getting there! in Scotland

Active Travel Scotland has launched three Active Travel Partnership Initiatives with the University of Edinburgh, the University of Stirling and the community of North Perth. These initiatives aim to encourage staff, students and local people to travel in ways which will benefit their health, well-being and the environment. Working with Cycling Scotland and Paths to Health, the initiatives include signage, mapping, infrastructure improvements, cycle ride and walk leader training, cycle commuter courses, organised rides, walks and more.

University of Stirling

A baseline survey of 430 staff at the University of Stirling revealed that about 18% walk or cycle to campus (7 and 11% respectively) and 14% use public transport. Almost 20% of those who drive to campus would prefer to cycle or walk. Improved infrastructure and provision of safer and more comfortable environments were cited as having a potential major effect on encouraging more people to cycle.

To address concerns about infrastructure, an active travel campus audit was carried out in collaboration with Living Streets. About 20 staff and students participated in the site visits and discussed potential improvements to the main campus access points and on-site conditions for walking and cycling.

University of Edinburgh

At the University of Edinburgh, Cycling Scotland has offered commuter cycle training to boost confidence among new and returning cyclists. Starting in January, connections between four main campus sites will be audited to develop a mapping and signage scheme.



Active workplaces

Active Travel Workplace Toolkit

Active Travel Cymru has developed the Active Travel Workplace Toolkit to facilitate workplace health promotion. Developed in partnership with the Sports Council for Wales, the toolkit gives employers ideas and practical information on how to promote walking and cycling to their staff.

The toolkit features a number of case studies from organisations across Wales who have successfully implemented active travel schemes.

In addition to providing examples of existing workplace active travel projects, the toolkit also gives advice on how to go about putting a scheme together, from getting the support of senior management, to promoting initiatives to staff. Practical guidance is offered on topics such as cycle storage and running a pool bike scheme.

Copies of the Active Travel Workplace Toolkit can be downloaded along with additional information from www.activetravelcymru.org.uk/toolkit

Green Exercise – The Natural Health Service

In an effort to combat the rising trend of obesity in the UK a newly funded collaboration has been created within the voluntary sector in Wales to drive forward physical activity projects in the natural environment.

The Green Exercise Partnership aims to play a key role in helping to achieve the objective of Wales becoming more physically active in order to be a healthier nation. It will bring together Sustrans, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) and Groundwork Wales, alongside other environmental voluntary organisations. The partnership not only aims to provide a multi-sector approach to incorporating physical activity and the natural environment, but also to contribute to policy making and to help increase understanding at all levels, particularly for the development and delivery of Health, Social Care and Well-being Strategies.

Each partner will lead on one of the project themes, which include Healthy Workplaces, Neighbourhood Action and People on the Move. Sustrans will contribute to the Healthy Workplaces element helping employers attain their Corporate Health Standard. BTCV will work on Neighbourhood Action, engaging local communities in physical activity projects and Groundwork will target People on the Move, encouraging individuals to take action to improve their health.

News in brief

Active travel benefits the health of disadvantaged people

The newly published *Active travel and health inequalities* information sheet from Sustrans reviews evidence regarding the benefits of physical activity for people in the most deprived communities. It concludes that physical activity has an important role to play in tackling health inequalities.

Further information: www.activetravel.org.uk

Why Walk? and Why Play?

Why Walk? and *Why Play?* are the latest in a series of information leaflets from Sustrans including *Why Cycle?*, *Get Cycling* and *Cycling with Children*. Walking and play are the simplest ways to get active and fits easily into everyday lives. Both leaflets explain why walking and play can hold the key to a healthy lifestyle and include related facts and figures.

Further information: www.activetravel.org.uk

Getting kids active

The British Heart Foundation has published the *Get kids on the go!* booklet to encourage children to participate in regular physical activity. The booklet contains plenty of ideas on how to inspire children to get up and go!

Further information: www.bhf.org.uk

Road transport and its impact on health

Choosing Health in the South East: Road Transport and Health presents an overview of road transport and health in the region. It draws on data from a range of sources to demonstrate the extent to which transport affects many aspects of health.

Further information: www.sepho.org.uk

On-line cancer statistics

A new interactive web-based resource, *Cancer e-Atlas*, has been developed to improve access to cancer statistics across England. It aims to provide health care professionals, commissioners, health service managers and the public with information on incidence, mortality and survival for common types of cancers in men and women.

Further information: www.ncin.org.uk/eatlas/

For all the latest news visit www.activetravel.org.uk

The Evidence!

The Evidence! is a regular information service identifying research evidence on the benefits of physically active travel.

Lack of opportunities for children to be active

Research from Australia suggests that for some children, opportunities to engage in active free play in the local neighbourhood may be scarce due to a lack of park provision close to home – particularly in outer-urban areas – and many children’s limited experience of independent mobility. The evidence suggests that improving access to parks might encourage parents to allow children greater independent mobility.

Veitch et al, 2007, Children’s active free play in local neighbourhoods: a behavioural mapping study.

Active commuting linked to lower obesity levels

This study investigated the association between modes of transport to work, and levels of obesity and overweight in men and women. It found a lower incidence of obesity and overweight amongst men who walked and cycled to work, and also amongst those who travelled to work via public transport.

Ming Wen & Rissel, 2008, Inverse associations between cycling to work, public transport and overweight and obesity: Findings from a population based study in Australia. Preventative Medicine.

The above research papers are available to download from The Evidence! at www.the-evidence.org.uk

