

Rural Safe Routes to Schools Project Review





An introduction from **Sustrans**

At Sustrans we strive to deliver practical solutions that give people the opportunity and motivation to make more sustainable journeys. The Rural Safe Routes to Schools programme in Northern Ireland is a shining example of this endeavor.

As a result of this pilot project, thousands of young people all over Northern Ireland are now choosing to walk and cycle more often to school, bringing healthy, environmentally friendly and independent travel to our children. It is a great success story in which Sustrans and our many partners and funders can be justly proud.

At Sustrans we focus on innovation and practicality. All our work seeks to challenge the widely held belief that a change in travel behaviour is difficult to achieve. This project, like all other projects that Sustrans delivers, gives the lie to this. It demonstrates that not only is significant behaviour change possible, it's also popular.

So why is it so important to encourage children to walk and cycle more? Like everywhere else in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, car use is on the rise. In the last 20 years the number of children being driven to school has doubled, this is despite the fact that the average school journey is just over three miles, or a 20 minute bike ride. The consequences of our ever more sedentary lifestyles are rising levels of obesity and traffic pollution which contributes to high levels of asthma. Both of these chronic conditions add considerably to Northern Ireland's health budgets each year.

Add to this concerns about climate change (personal car use contributes 13% of the UK's total carbon dioxide emissions), congestion at peak hours (as much as a quarter of traffic on the roads at 8.50am is on the school run), and you have a pretty powerful argument for doing things differently. Like all children, the young people of Northern Ireland want to travel independently to school. Nearly 50% of children in the UK would like to cycle to school, but only 2% do.

Parents, similarly, are keen for their children to travel actively, but fear of traffic and busy roads encourages them to add to the congestion.

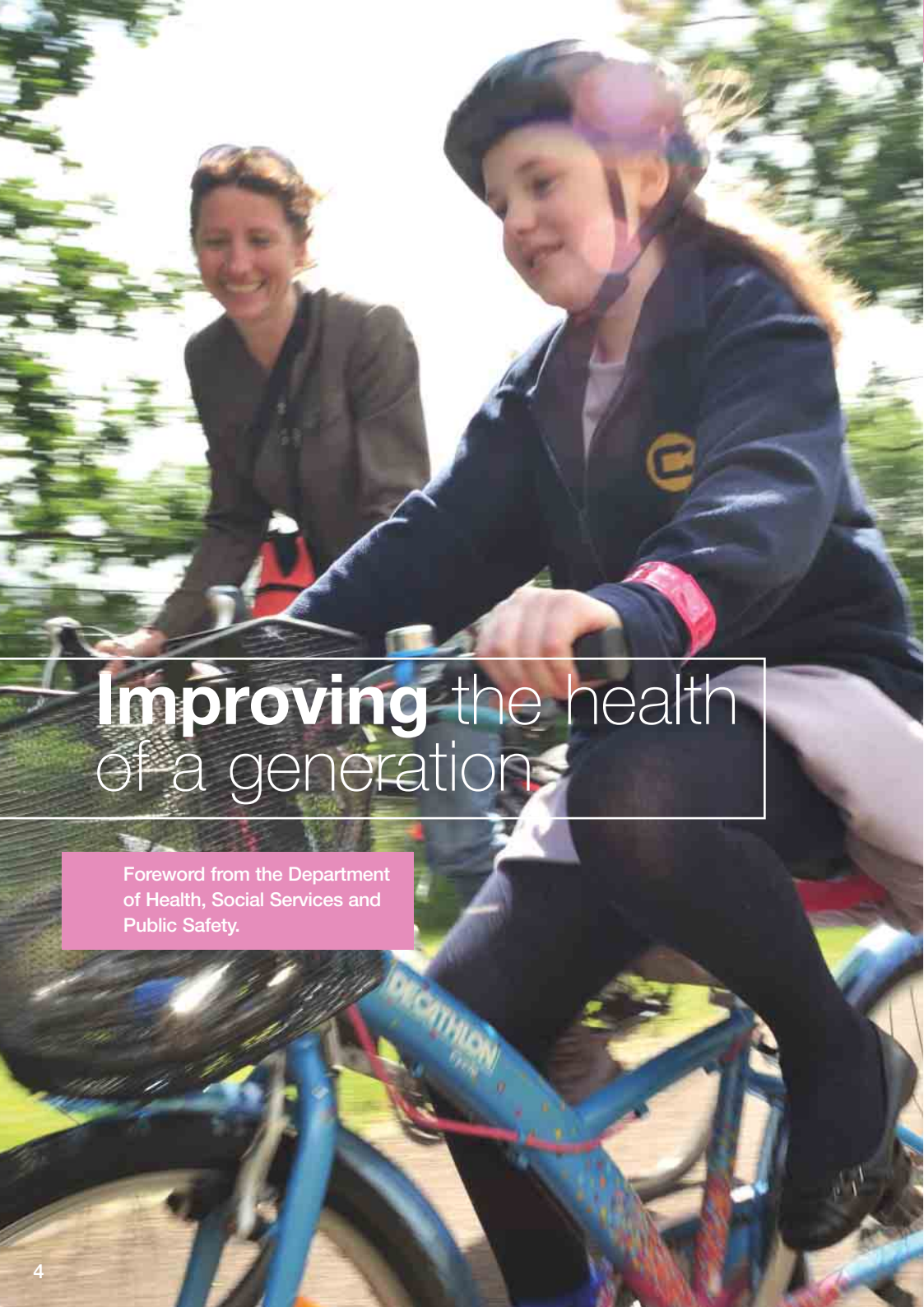
So what can we do? Sustrans' solutions are not high tech, they are based on years of experience in enabling children to travel differently, and most importantly, our solutions work. The reason they work is because they engage and interest people.

With the support of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) through the EU Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity, Department for Regional Development (DRD) Roads Service, the Department of Education and the DOE Road Safety Education Branch, this is precisely what this pilot project set out to do. As you'll see, this initiative has had a dramatic impact.

Sustrans has been putting the case for more sustainable travel for over 30 years. We have the people and know how, we have the evidence and economic case, and we have the policy initiatives.

What we need now is for this successful pilot to be rolled out to schools across Northern Ireland, and for much greater investment in cycling and walking to be sustained over many years. This should be prioritised on the basis of the sound evidence that demonstrates that active, low carbon travel is better for people, better for our economy, and better for our environment.

Malcolm Shepherd
Chief Executive, Sustrans



Improving the health of a generation

Foreword from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In Northern Ireland, currently around one in four girls and one in six boys in Primary One are overweight or obese. Many of these children are not as physically active as they should be, they do not have a healthy balanced diet and this can contribute to an unhealthy lifestyle. By increasing the amount of physical activity in children now we can work towards improving the health and well being of the child through their whole life course.

In order to achieve this, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has established an Obesity Prevention Steering Group which will oversee and implement a number of the recommendations contained in the Fit Futures Implementation Plan and provide expertise in the development of an

overarching Obesity Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I therefore support the work of Sustrans in promoting walking and cycling to school as a means of increasing the opportunity for children to take part in physical activity and which in turn encourages parents, guardians and teachers to participate.

A project such as this which has a focus on promoting healthy and sustainable physical activity can contribute to the improvement of the health and well being of the people of Northern Ireland.

**Dr Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer for the Department
of Health, Social Services and Public
Safety. Northern Ireland**



What is Rural Safe Routes to Schools?



The first of its kind in Northern Ireland, the project sought to bring together a wide variety of agencies and resources that were already working on encouraging active school travel, and focus efforts on achieving two key objectives:

- reducing car use on the school run by 10%
- increasing levels of cycling and walking.

Schools in rural areas were invited to apply to Sustrans to take part in the project which was funded to the tune of £1.3 million, and would look at all aspects of school travel, from the production of school travel plans, to improving the environment around schools for those travelling by foot and bike, to cycle training and other behaviour change initiatives.

Whilst more than 70 schools applied, indicating the demand from schools for this kind of support, Sustrans had to whittle this down to 18 to make best use of the funding available. The final selection of schools were all primary schools, varying in size from 50 to 450 pupils, with the majority of pupils living less than two miles from school.

The aim of the project was to work directly with schools that were keen to increase levels of walking and cycling, and help them to create a pro-walking and cycling culture which would continue and grow in the future.



To achieve this we developed a ten step approach:

- 1 build confidence within schools to promote walking and cycling
- 2 help the school to set up a School Travel Group, chaired by a “champion” of active travel, comprising pupils, staff, parents and governors to organise regular events and to develop a School Travel Plan
- 3 liaise between the school and agencies to ensure the provision of cycle parking, high quality pedestrian crossings and new and improved walking and cycling paths
- 4 advise and support the school on running special events to both inspire and reward children and parents for walking and cycling to school
- 5 ensure the provision of training to encourage safe walking and cycling
- 6 share information and celebrate success and good practice between schools through a regular newsletter
- 7 co-ordinate support for schools across the wide range of government departments responsible for school travel
- 8 support the development of a School Travel Plan and events in the classroom by ensuring their relevance to the school curriculum
- 9 rigorously evaluate the impact through before and after surveys of pupils, parents and staff and their attitudes to walking and cycling to school
- 10 oversee official completion of different aspects of the projects, inviting ministers and local elected representatives to celebrate the success of schools and pupils, and promote the benefits of active school travel to the wider public.

49%

of children are now driven to school, compared to 64% before the project.

7%

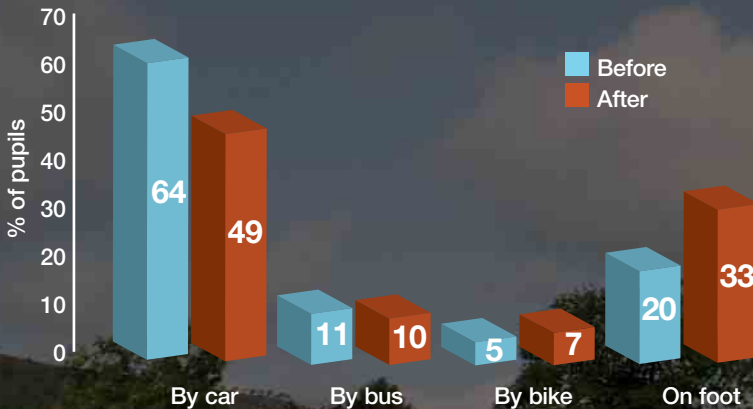
of pupils now cycle to school compared to 5% before the project.

33%

of pupils now walk to school, compared to 20% before the project.

As with all of Sustrans' work with children and schools, there is evidence that the project has brought about significant changes in travel behaviour. Sustrans' Research and Monitoring Unit surveyed 3,500 pupils, 200 staff and 2,000 parents, before and after the project.

How do you usually travel to school?



Source: Sustrans, 2008

Note: Data based on survey responses from around 2,000 pupils before and after the project, asking the question "How do you usually travel to school?" 'After' results also recorded 0.3% for the reply 'Other'.

83%

of parents thought that Sustrans had been successful in getting them to think about the way they travel.

79%

of Head Teachers believe the initiative had a very good or excellent impact on helping their pupils become more physically active.

"The benefits and changes in attitudes by parents, pupils and staff have been exceptional. Our recommendation would be to get involved now and reap the very worthwhile benefits of this scheme."

Gail Ferguson, Principal, Kilbride PS, Doagh

"I have noticed an improvement in the concentration levels in class"

John McCrea, Principal, Ballinamallard Primary School

"Parents are now happy to allow their child to walk or cycle home from school as the school area is now perceived as a safer place."

Joan Aldridge, Principal, St Marys Primary School, Derrytrasna

"The support from Sustrans has enabled us to embed walking and cycling into the school routine."

Mrs Ann Smart, Principal, St Mary's Primary School, Cushendall

"It keeps you really fit and I like the new track because it's making more people walk."

Joshua, Killylea Primary School, Co Armagh





DARD Minister Michelle Gildernew with Joan Aldrige and pupils from St Mary's Primary

Barriers to walking and cycling:

- speed of traffic along the main road outside the school
- no safe crossing area for children
- poor visibility to the west of the school gate
- problem with the volume of traffic in the school lay-by at school opening and closing times.

What changed:

"We applied for the scheme because it gave us the opportunity to address some of the major concerns regarding our pupil's safety and it would make the whole school environment safe. We began by having a **walk to school day** and were pleasantly surprised at the number of children that walked or cycled, but even more surprised at the number of accompanying adults.

"Slowly parents began to allow their children a little more independence and let them walk or cycle unaccompanied. When the **traffic calming measures** began on the road, parents could see that their children were safer.

"We built on the success of our early walks by introducing **themed walks** (Spooky Halloween walk). We provided walk to school **breakfasts**. Towards the

end of the project the **Walk to School on Friday** was well established as a school routine and we will continue with this every Friday.

"Throughout the project there were many opportunities to complete **classroom based work**. Our Walk around the World provided lots of content for Maths lessons as miles were calculated on a daily basis and each class in KS2 completed a variety of work based on the world around us.

"I applied for the project believing that the external work beyond the school gates would make St Mary's a safer school. I didn't realise that the biggest change in our school would be in our **attitudes**. We enjoy our school walks and the informal chats we have each Friday morning with a growing number of parents who walk to school with us. Our children enjoy cycling on a daily basis and our **new bicycle shelter** is always full of bikes."

Joan Aldridge, Principal, St Mary's Primary School, Derrytrasna

The benefits:

The number of children being driven to school has fallen from 82% to 52%.



The barriers to walking and cycling:

- national speed limit (60 mph) on busy main road outside school gates
- congestion at school gates
- inadequate footpaths
- poor cycle storage
- most pupils travelling by car or bus.

What changed:

“We were delighted to have been successful in our application and are absolutely thrilled with all that has been done to improve the route to school and make it safer for our pupils.

“We now have a part time **speed limit of 20 mph** at key times of the school day. This has made a vast difference to the speed of the traffic when children are arriving at or leaving school. Roads Service organised this and are monitoring it as part of a pilot scheme.

“Significant **improvements have been made to the paths** in the vicinity of the school and they have changed from being narrow, bumpy, footpaths to shared-use paths.

“Members of the local community, as well as our school population, are very positive about this improvement. The paths continue to be used regularly by an increased number of people.

“We have also received **new cycle storage**, with a new entrance for

bicycles at a safer and more convenient spot. With Sustrans’ support our cycle proficiency teachers have taken forward a new cycle training programme which is available to pupils in Year 5 and above. This includes some training outside the school grounds.

“The main benefit in school however, is the **change in attitude** of many of our school population. We now have half of our folks walking or cycling regularly to school. Our older pupils have developed the habit of walking or cycling and enjoy it so much. A number of our staff now “Park and Stride”, which never happened before. The great thing is that **this is sustainable**. We now have people in our community walking and cycling regularly. Much has been done to make the school journey as safe as possible.

“It was a joy to build relationships with all the stakeholders involved and, in our opinion, a great example of **teamwork involving various agencies**. We are delighted that so much was achieved within one year. It was a privilege to be involved.”

Karen Gilpin, Vice Principal, Hezlett Primary School, Castlerock.

The benefits:

The proportion of children driven to school has fallen from 74% to 55%.

Going **forward**

More regular walking and cycling among school children will not only deliver benefits to children, their families and communities, but will also complement and reinforce a wide range of government strategies, enabling joined up government.



Active school travel

Helping to put policies into practice

| Policies of NI Assembly | Relevant NI Assembly Department |
|---|---|
| Children and Young People | Office of First and Deputy Minister |
| Education for Sustainable Development | Department of Education |
| Fit Futures, Obesity Strategy for NI (proposed) | Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety |
| Healthy Schools | Department of Education |
| Neighbourhood Renewal | Department for Social Development |
| Physical Recreation | Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure |
| Programme for Government | Office of First and Deputy Minister |
| Regional Transportation Strategy | Department of Regional Development |
| Revised Curriculum | Department of Education |
| Rural Strategies | Department of Agriculture and Rural Development |
| Sustainable Development Strategy | Office of First and Deputy First Minister |

There are many reasons why this particular project was so successful. Schools were well supported by people skilled at working with children and communities on practical projects, and able to maximise the benefits of changes to the physical environment. In addressing safety concerns by investing in new paths and crossings the team motivated parents, children and schools alike.

Building on this, and benefiting from Sustrans' experience of working with children and communities, walking and cycling activities and events were designed to be accessible, fun and inspiring for children and their parents. This was further supported in school through curriculum work, as well as a School Travel Plan and School Travel Groups.

By developing a holistic approach to school travel, and working partnerships between

government departments, schools and Sustrans, the project was able to address health, safety and transport concerns, all of which are inter-related, resulting in more effective planning and implementation. The opportunity exists to build on and extend the proven success of Sustrans' work with rural schools in Northern Ireland, and encourage even greater levels of walking and cycling by integrating other elements of Sustrans' work in the UK. Sustrans' Bike It project, for example, is, on average, trebling levels of regular cycling to schools in England and Wales.

We very much hope that the Northern Ireland Executive fund and support the development of a full Active School Travel programme to increase levels of walking and cycling by children to school whilst reducing car use on the school run.



Now it's **your** turn

Would you like to benefit from this kind of initiative?

It is Sustrans' view that every child should have the benefit of a safe route to school. We want to make this a reality for more children, so if you would like to help us to access more funding for this kind of work, please register your interest and help us to make the case, and please talk to your local MLA and MP to encourage more spending on active travel.

Schools

If you would like Sustrans or a School Travel Advisor to work with your school contact Sustrans to register your interest by e-mail nischools@sustrans.org.uk, phone 028 9043 4569, or visit www.sustrans.org.uk/northernireland

Parents, Teachers or School governors

If you would like Sustrans to work with your school then contact the school Principal and ask them to make contact with Sustrans to register interest. If you would like to become a "School Champion" for walking or cycling at your school then contact the Sustrans School Travel Team at nischools@sustrans.org.uk Tel: 028 9043 4569

Making the Links: Secondary Schools and School Travel

Sustrans in partnership with Travelwise NI and Stranmillis College have produced a comprehensive curriculum plan – Making the Links: Secondary Schools and School Travel. This provides advice on how to compile a School Travel Plan and contains lesson plans for teaching children about sustainable travel. Download Making the Links from the Sustrans website: www.sustrans.org.uk/nischools

Education Boards

If you want Sustrans to work with schools in your area then please make contact with Sustrans and encourage enthusiastic schools in your area to register their interest with us at nischools@sustrans.org.uk, phone 028 9043 4569, or visit www.sustrans.org.uk/northernireland

Health Trusts

If you would like Sustrans to work in your local physical activity and child obesity strategies please e-mail us nischools@sustrans.org.uk, phone 028 9043 4569, or visit www.sustrans.org.uk/northernireland

Further support and information:

Travelwise, Belfast

Email: info@travelwiseni.com
Tel: 0845 378 0908
Online: www.travelwiseni.com

Eco Schools

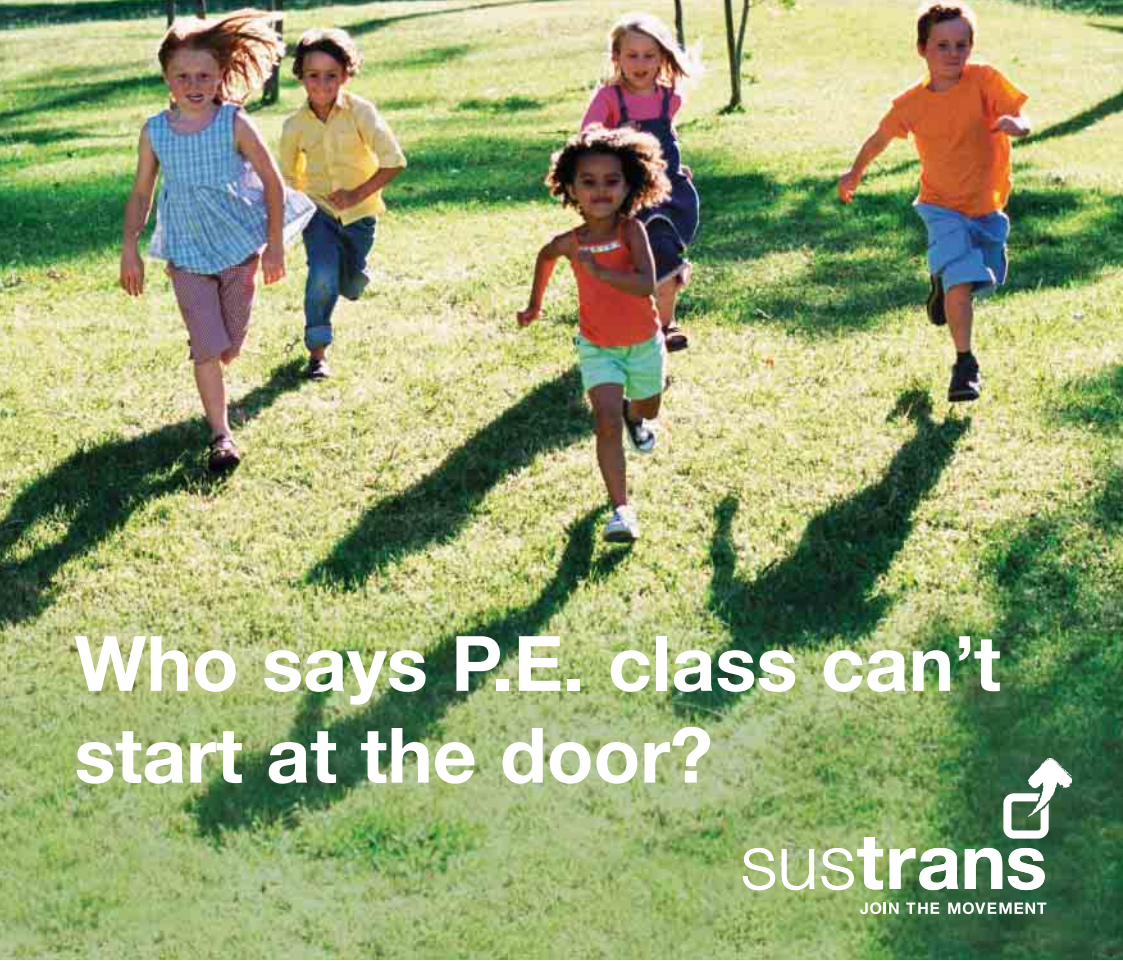
Email: eco-schools@tidynorthernireland.org
Tel: 0845 86 206 86
Online: www.tidynorthernireland.org

Environmental Education Forum

Email: info@environmentlink.org
Tel: 028 9094 2156
Online: www.eefni.org.uk

Sustrans' Rural Safe Routes to Schools programme was supported by





Who says P.E. class can't start at the door?



Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity.

Our vision is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment. We work on practical, innovative solutions to the transport challenges facing us all. If you think what we do sounds sensible, we urgently need people like you to help us do more. By giving from £5 a month you'll start to make a difference. Without this financial support, Sustrans and projects such as Safe Routes to Schools would probably not exist.

To find out more about Sustrans or to **become a Sustrans Supporter** please visit www.sustrans.org.uk or call **0845 113 00 65**.

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