

# Free Range Kids

Creating tomorrow's low-carbon, active travellers



# Foreword

by Malcolm Shepherd, Chief Executive of Sustrans



**Cast your mind back to your childhood. What memories make you smile? Riding your bike, exploring new and unfamiliar places? Probably, because these are the things that today's adults enjoyed as children, with 70% experiencing most of their adventures outdoors<sup>(1)</sup>, most likely well away from parental scrutiny.**

Playing on bikes and exploring new and unfamiliar places remain top of the list for today's children. But only 29% are experiencing adventures outdoors, often closely supervised by adults<sup>(1)</sup>.

Since the early 1970s the number of children taking themselves to school and playing outside has declined dramatically. Why? Over the same period the number of cars we own has more than doubled – cars now outnumber children by more than 2.5 to 1, and we use them a lot. Since the early 1970s the average distance people travel each year has increased by over 50%, and 79% of the distance people travel is now by car<sup>(2)</sup>.

Public space has been overrun by cars. As a result adults taking children to school are nearly twice as concerned about traffic danger as stranger danger, and fear of traffic is a major reason why parents don't allow children to play outside.

This loss of habitat has had a dramatic impact on young people. They are less physically active (and getting fatter), less independent, and having less fun than they would like. We have given up their freedom for that of cars.

At Sustrans we think enough is enough. For the sake of our children's health, and our environment, we must tackle traffic volume and speed and enable our children to get out and about on their own far more.

For the last 16 years, since introducing the concept of safe routes to school into the UK, Sustrans has been working to increase walking and cycling to school, and the ability of kids to be out and about and active. But we need to do more, much more, which is why we're launching our Free Range Kids campaign.

We want to see future generations of happy, healthy, bright and independent free range kids with the freedom, confidence, skills and opportunities to get around from their front door. Just as we did.

We call on partners new and old to join with us to return freedom to the heart of childhood, because it makes sense for a sustainable travel future, and because it's the right thing to do for our children.

Malcolm Shepherd

## About Sustrans

Sustrans is the charity that's enabling people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day.

**Our vision** is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and our environment.

**Our mission** is to influence practice and shape policy so everyone can travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day.

- we're a catalyst – we make smarter travel choices possible
- we campaign – we make smarter travel choices desirable
- we influence – we make smarter travel choices inevitable.

This report is just a snapshot of what Sustrans achieved during 2010. To find out about all our work visit: [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk) and download our Annual Review.

For more information on the data on Sustrans' work included in this report or the methodologies adopted by Sustrans to monitor its programmes please contact our Research and Monitoring Unit: [monitoring@sustrans.org.uk](mailto:monitoring@sustrans.org.uk)

# What needs to change?

When we look at how children and young people across Europe get around, it is clear that children in the UK are not being offered the same opportunity for active, independent travel as those in other countries.

In Germany, for example, 14-18 year olds make nine times as many journeys by bike as children in the UK<sup>(3)</sup>. And in Germany seven to eleven year olds cross main roads alone, walk home from school alone, travel to places other than school, use buses, and cycle on main roads up to three years earlier than children in England<sup>(4)</sup>.

One reason for this difference may be the UK's attitude to speeding – 36% of drivers admit to speeding in 30mph areas at least

once a week<sup>(4)</sup>, and only half of people consider driving at 40mph on a 30mph road dangerous<sup>(5)</sup>.

Sustrans wants to see independent and active travel back at the heart of childhood. We want to see a focus on creating free range kids – children and young people who experience freedom from their front door, and who have the confidence to travel independently, play outdoors and explore their local community, and have the skills, opportunities and support to do so safely.

Enabling this will require governments locally and nationally to play their part in both tackling the speed and volume of traffic whilst focusing budgets on creating the kind of public space that welcomes children.

## To create environments for independent, active children requires two things to be mainstreamed UK-wide:

- area-wide 20mph speed limits in residential and built-up areas
- investment in safe routes to make walking and cycling the norm for local journeys, particularly to school

**Sustrans will focus on the above as the building blocks for making active, low carbon travel by children the norm. This will bring health and well-being benefits; improve access and community life; and help deliver transport, education and environment policies. In particular we will concentrate on:**

- putting pressure on decision makers to implement 20mph in all residential areas by reviewing the extent and effectiveness of reduced speed limits.
- enabling the Sustainable Communities Act in England to remove national-level barriers to local councils and groups working towards achieving a community which encourages free range kids
- pushing for the promised review of School Travel in England to make walking and cycling the norm for school journeys

- influencing local transport planning and implementation across the UK to improve investment in sustainable transport so people of all ages and abilities can get about by foot and bike.
- working with politicians in the Welsh Assembly to further the duty to develop and maintain walking and cycling paths
- working with the Scottish Government to hit their target of 10% of journeys by bike by 2020, and to deliver and exceed their target for reducing childhood obesity by 2018 as described in A Route Map Towards Healthy Weight
- working with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure Bikeability Cycling Proficiency is adopted as the new standard and made available to every child.





## Life begins at 20

Speeding motorists and too many cars are high on the list of residents' complaints in communities UK-wide<sup>(7)</sup>. On busy streets residents know fewer neighbours, children are less likely to play outside, and fewer journeys are made by foot and bike<sup>(8)</sup>.

Reducing traffic speed to 20mph or less in residential areas is a crucial first step in reversing this trend, and enjoys the support of 71% of people in Britain<sup>(9)</sup>.

Sustrans has recently completed work on 11 streets around the UK, partnering with residents to pilot a new way of transforming their street by reducing traffic speed through simple changes to the design and layout.

As a result, a typical street can be traffic calmed and transformed into a greener and more attractive social space. As part of the process, neighbours can get to know each other better, coming together as a community.

In Somerset Street, Cardiff, where 60% of households have children and young people living at

home, the result has been hugely beneficial for children:

- 88% of parents said that their street was now safe enough for children to play compared to no residents at all before.

Resident Ian Williams has experienced the joy of seeing his two sons playing in the street, something never allowed previously. "This has made the street a safer place for the children to play in, whether it's riding their bikes, having a kick about with a football, or reading comics."

And it's not just children who can now make better use of the street

- 82% of residents say that traffic speed has been reduced, and 58% that the volume of traffic has reduced
- 82% of residents say that their street is now more welcoming and easier to walk around, and 17% plan to cycle more
- 78% of residents say that the street is greener and more attractive.

# Reintroducing children into public space

In 1971, 80% of seven and eight year olds travelled to school without an adult<sup>(10)</sup>. By 2009, only 11% of seven to ten years olds did the same, with 42% of primary school children now being driven<sup>(2)</sup>. In 1973, 75% of children played on the streets around their home. By 2006 this had reduced to 15%<sup>(11)</sup>.

The biggest concern of adults when it comes to children playing outside<sup>(12)</sup> and walking and cycling to school<sup>(13)</sup>, is traffic danger. This fear has driven parents to remove children from their natural habitat of the local community, and indoors to play, or, for those with access to a car, into the backseat to be ferried around.

As a result at 8.35 am nearly one in every five cars in urban areas is taking children to school, typically a distance of a few miles<sup>(2)</sup>.

Journeys taking children to activities, from football to softplay, are also clogging our roads. 'Escort' trips have, over the last decade, seen a 25% growth in distance travelled when the overall trend is for distance travelled to be static or in decline<sup>(13)</sup>.

With investment in slowing traffic speeds, and creating more walking and cycling networks to schools and beyond, we could get children out of cars and walking and cycling instead.

This would decongest our roads, reduce carbon dioxide emissions and increase levels of physical activity amongst young people, benefiting their health and well-being.

## What is Sustrans doing to reintroduce children to public space?

We are linking **schools** to the **National Cycle Network** so more children can walk and cycle. **The benefit to cost ratio is nearly 4:1 over just 10 years mainly derived from improved health due to increased levels of physical activity.**

We are reconnecting children to everyday destinations by **building new bridges and crossings over busy roads, railway lines and rivers** to bring as many as **one million children within reach of a safe route to school** and the National Cycle Network.

During 2010 **61 million journeys by foot and bike were made by children on the National Cycle Network. If these trips had been made by adults the annual health benefit would be over £21 million.\***

Our **partnership working with communities** to create liveable neighbourhoods can achieve **slower speeds for under £10,000**. One such street in Oxford saw average traffic speeds **reduce to 16 mph**.



\* Sustrans worked with WHO to develop the HEAT tools for measuring the benefits of active travel in adults. There is no equivalent tool for children to measure the lifetime value of active travel to children's health, but we support the development of such a tool.



## Children and the National Cycle Network

**The National Cycle Network offers children a great way of getting from a to b, and key to its success are the many sections and links that are traffic-free.**

During 2010 on the National Cycle Network:

- 420 million walking and cycling trips were recorded, 13 million more than 2009
- we calculate that 61 million of these were made by children, with over seven million trips to school
- the annual health benefit if these trips had been made by adults would be over £21 million\*
- of the three million people using the Network during 2010, we calculate that over 400,000 were children.

A typical example of a recent extension of the National Cycle Network is the Padiham Greenway, a former railway line in the East Lancashire town. Its successful development has brought the National Cycle Network deep into the heart of the local community, and the involvement of children has been key to its success.

As Mark Dixon, Chair of the local steering group and Headteacher at Padiham Green Primary School, says “Sustrans’ project has been a huge success. My pupils use the Greenway after school, they use it to get to school, they use it during school.”

In 2010, shortly after opening, the Greenway was already benefiting many children:

- the annual usage estimate was 259,403 trips, of which over 97,000 were by children
- half of the trips by bike on the Greenway were made by children.

In addition to children, the Greenway benefits the whole community:

- 7% of users were 65 or over
- apart from trips to school, the Greenway is also used to get to work, the shops and for leisure and pleasure
- safeness, directness, pleasantness and convenience are all high on the list of why people use the route
- 50% of users say their journey would have been more difficult without the Greenway
- 47% of users are using the Greenway everyday.

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# Enabling children to be free range

Reduced levels of physical activity in childhood has had profound impacts. The health of children is suffering, and it is predicted that by 2050 70% of girls and 55% of boys may be overweight or obese<sup>(14)</sup>.

And parents seem to be experiencing a crisis in confidence in letting children have their independence. A poll run on behalf of Sustrans found that nearly a quarter of parents in the UK are concerned about the lack of traffic awareness of 10 year old children<sup>(15)</sup>.

The good news is that children themselves want to be out and about more. Nearly half of children in schools where Sustrans works want to cycle<sup>(16)</sup>, and when it comes to play, 73% of kids would like to play out more where they live<sup>(12)</sup>.

Giving children the skills and information necessary to successfully negotiate public space is an important first step in helping them to fulfil this ambition. Just as important is involving parents so they have the peace of mind to let their children enjoy the freedom they crave.

## What is Sustrans doing to enable children to be free range?

**At around £20 a head** Sustrans officers worked over the 2009/10 academic year with over 180,000 children in schools to help them develop the skills and confidence necessary to more than **double the number of children cycling to school everyday**, and **reduce from 72% to 53% the number of children who never cycle**.

In Scotland we ran workshops with **nine to eleven year olds** to explore their school journey. Using **sensory mapping and storytelling**, the children developed a greater appreciation of the sensory richness of trips by foot and bike, **inspiring many children to make more active journeys**.

**With a benefit to cost ratio of 8:1** Sustrans completed work on personalised travel planning with **60,000 households** giving adults and children at home information and advice on walking, cycling and using public transport for local journeys. **Car use reduced by at least 12%**, with levels of walking and cycling increasing by at least 18% and 19% respectively.

Sustrans' school travel team supported **thousands of schools** with information and advice to put in place **walking buses, cycle parking, and safer crossings** to give children and their parents the confidence to walk and cycle more to school.





## Enabling children to cycle the school run

Sustrans' officers, working in schools UK-wide, are transforming the school travel experience. During the academic year 2009/2010 our cycling experts worked with over 180,000 children and their families in schools, developing the skills and confidence necessary to achieve:

- an increase from 14% to 27% in pupils cycling regularly to school and more than doubling the number of pupils cycling every day to 9%
- a reduction from 72% to 53% in children who had never cycled to school
- 99% of schools say they would recommend Sustrans' work to other schools
- 94% of local authority partners say that Sustrans' work has had an impact on reducing the levels of car use for school journeys.

And it's not just the children who benefit:

- over a third of parents surveyed thought their children were more physically active, and 30% that their children were generally healthier

- 14% of parents say that they themselves are generally more physically active since their child began cycling to school.

When talking to adults about letting their children cycle to school, it became clear that many were reluctant because they couldn't cycle themselves, so we piloted a cycle training course with mothers at a school in London.

None of them owned bikes, and some had never cycled before. The training was a great success, with some going on to achieve Bikeability Level 1 by the end of the course.

One participant went on to take further lessons and is now able to attend college every day after cycling with her two sons to school. Her three-year-old daughter rides on the back of her bike in a child seat.

A young girl with blonde hair, wearing a red school uniform, is smiling broadly. She is being embraced from behind by a woman whose hands are resting on her shoulders. The background is slightly blurred, showing other children in school uniforms. The overall mood is positive and supportive.

## More free range kids in Watford

Sustrans recently completed work with 20,000 households in Watford, giving families at home the information necessary to get about by foot, bike and public transport for more of their everyday journeys.

Wherever Sustrans delivers personalised travel planning we reduce car use by at least 10% area-wide, successfully tackling traffic volumes, one of the major concerns when it comes to parents allowing children to be out and about.

In Watford, Kathlyn Evans and her family were using their car for most daily trips when the Sustrans team arrived in their street. The family requested an information pack, and a home visit from cycling advisor Stephen Lawrence.

Kathlyn said: “We wanted to find safe spaces for my younger girls to go on their bikes and needed some advice on getting a bike for my older daughter, who’s got special needs. Stephen was great – he safety checked the youngest girls’ bikes and suggested we get an adult trike for my eldest daughter.”

Kathlyn’s younger daughters were eager to get cycling after Stephen’s visit: “They’d only been out cycling three or four times before the visit but now every time the sun shines they’re asking “Can we go out on the bikes?”. They feel a lot healthier and are pleased to be doing something for the environment!”

Overall outcomes of Sustrans personal travel planning in Watford include:

- a reduction in car trips of 13%, generating a 16% reduction in distance driven, saving over 26 million car miles each year
- a 33% increase in cycling trips, a 20% increase in walking trips, and a 13% increase in trips on public transport
- annual emission reductions of nearly 8,500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>
- a 19% increase in the level of active travel per person in Watford, potentially increasing overall levels of physical activity in the local population.



## References

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- (5) Brake and Direct Line, 2010 Report on Safe Driving 2009 - 11 Part Three
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- (16) Sustrans, 2010 Bike It Review 2009

"When you drive you see more cars, when you walk you see more people and animals. You see different kinds of things."



I was happy because I had finally got home to a peaceful atmosphere from a hard working day at school

old people's home. makes me upset.

I saw my lovely house

I wish I could run in the half circle

I saw a big police truck

Where my car was parked

happy

he ate to many pies

A house near my house is being built

"[When driving] if you see something quite exciting you just zoom past, you don't really get to see it and you might never walk past that place."

Driving map

# Free Range Kids – make your move

We hope that this report has demonstrated the potential for enabling children to be out and about on foot, bike and for play, and the benefits of this to tackling congestion and increasing levels of physical activity.

If you'd like to work with us to enable children to be more free range in your communities, Sustrans has specialists in active, low-carbon travel; designing public space; community and schools engagement UK-wide. We're sure to have someone working near you that can help you to put independent, active travel by children to school and beyond at the heart of your plans for delivering low-carbon, active travel.

**Make your move and get in touch to find out how we can work together to help kids be free range.**

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