Our children are increasingly suffering from obesity and poor health caused by physical inactivity. Only one in forty 11-year-olds meets the target of an hour of physical exercise a day. One of the major reasons for this is the loss of independence and freedom to be out and about and active in childhood.

Changing this will directly benefit children and our economy:

- the NHS is expected to spend nearly £10 billion every year on obesity by 2050 when it is predicted that 70% of girls and 55% of boys will be overweight or obese
- physical activity is positively related to children’s academic performance
- with nearly a quarter of cars on urban roads at 8.40am taking children to school, getting children out of cars and onto two wheels will reduce congestion

Health professionals are clear that regular exercise is crucial to a healthy lifestyle, and evidence shows that ensuring children can walk or cycle to school is a cost-effective way of beginning to tackle all of these issues. The success of our Olympic cyclists has inspired children, providing a window of opportunity, and young people want to cycle:

- nearly half of children say they want to cycle to school, yet only 2% do
- most children have access to a bicycle
- nearly half of boys and 36% of girls aged 11-12 ride a bike for fun at least weekly
- the average journey to primary school is 1.5 miles and for secondary school 3.5 miles – both well within cycling distance

Translating this into higher levels of physical activity is a real challenge, but the evidence from Sustrans’ work is that it is possible to achieve.

Sustrans calls on the Government to make a step-change in physical activity levels amongst children in England and significantly increase cycling to school by 2016 by:

- integrating cycling into the school curriculum
- investing to achieve a quarter of children cycling to school regularly
Cycle training is only the start

Bikeability – the modern day cycling proficiency – is available for schools, funded by Government via local authorities. This is welcome, but further support would ensure that after children receive their training, they can and will want to cycle for the whole school year.

Current investment would be more effective if it was incorporated into a more extensive programme in schools that the evidence shows dramatically increases cycling levels. Creating a cycling culture that involves the whole school community, particularly parents, and ensuring that there are safe cycling and walking routes to schools are the keys to success.

The next step – achieving cycling equality for every child in England

Whilst promises to invest more in competitive sport in school are welcome, health professionals agree that the easiest way to effectively increase levels of physical activity in children is to include walking and cycling in their daily routine.

The introduction of a minimum requirement for cycling education and support would help tackle childhood obesity and inactivity, and provide many opportunities for children, including those who don’t thrive in competitive sport, to be active.

This should be coupled with targeted work to help schools create a cycling culture. Sustrans’ experience demonstrates that it is possible to achieve this when schools:

- have an intensive one-year engagement with a cycling officer to bring a step-change in cycling levels to school, followed by two years of ongoing support
- participate in an accreditation scheme that rewards schools which continue to support and increase levels of cycling

What would the impact be?

Sustrans already has more than 120 expert officers working intensively in over 1,000 schools across the UK. We are also supporting several hundred more schools, many of which are now progressing through our School Mark to achieve the gold standard. Our approach has enabled hundreds of thousands of children to travel actively and safely to school.

In our first year of working with a school the impact is enormous. We see:

- double the number of children cycling to school everyday
- over a quarter of children regularly cycling to school, in comparison to the national average of 2%
- over two-thirds of parents who say that their child is competent to cycle to school – double the proportion at the beginning of the year

There are other significant benefits. Replacing car journeys on the school run will cut congestion, reduce carbon emissions and save fuel. Evidence also shows that cycling to school in childhood has a very strong influence on people using their bike for everyday trips in adulthood.

What will a gold cycling standard for schools look like?

Every school in the UK will:

- have more than a quarter of pupils regularly cycling to school
- have a member of staff to champion a cycling culture
- include cycling in the school curriculum
- provide covered and secure bike storage
- help pupils to plan and map the journey to and from school
- work with their local authority to address safety issues by tackling dangerous junctions and crossings around their school
- offer National Standard cycle training, bike safety and maintenance
- involve parents and siblings at whole-school events
What are the costs?

The cost of embedding cycling in schools in England by 2016, and transforming physical activity levels in children by the time of the next Olympics, is £118 million a year.

This is under £15 a year per child, less than the cost of 10 school dinners, but just as important to health and well-being.

Once established, the ongoing costs of Sustrans School standard is small, less than £2 per pupil a year, but maintaining momentum within schools is vital.

How can this be achieved?

Local authorities have duties to provide transport and support sustainable travel, including walking and cycling to school, but funding and capacity have fallen in recent years. Government needs to boost investment in active travel:

- school travel – £1 billion is spent in England each year on school travel, mostly on buses and taxis. Investing a proportion of this in embedding cycling in the school curriculum so children cycle regularly would transform school travel
- local transport – ongoing dedicated funding for safe walking and cycling routes, particularly to school, and 20mph speed limits would ensure the gold standard is achieved and maintained

What would be the benefits?

A shift in school travel towards walking and cycling would contribute to the government’s priorities in education, enabling all pupils to access a choice of schools while reducing transport costs and supporting greater independence.

Investment in cycling to school will improve health and wellbeing by increasing levels of physical activity in childhood, helping children to develop active travel habits whilst reducing traffic, pollution and deaths and injuries on local roads.

Merstham Primary School’s Headteacher, Nina Saunders, is thrilled with the results:

“When we started working with Sustrans in 2009 we had no cycle storage and only 9% of our children were regularly cycling to school.

“We’ve completed an award each year since then and now we have covered cycle storage for 20 bikes and at least 31% of children cycling to school regularly.

“The benefits to our pupils are immense: the added exercise improves their health, stamina and energy all of which are vital for learning.

“As they grow up, more people walking and cycling means fewer cars on the road, therefore a healthier future.

“Apart from anything else, walking and cycling are fun and that’s what our pupils appreciate the most. Cycling is part of our school’s culture and it is here to stay.”
How do we achieve a gold standard for schools?

Most children own a bike, and over half of boys and 45% of girls say that riding a bike is their preferred kind of play.

Harnessing this enthusiasm by working in schools with teachers, parents and pupils is the best way to establish a cycling culture with young people that will see them go on to lead healthier lives.

There are two stages required for a school to reach a gold standard.

**Stage 1— intensive engagement to introduce cycling**

Each school works intensively with a cycling officer who:

- works with the school management team to gain their full support for cycling as part of the school routine
- addresses parental and school concerns about the safety of children getting around on foot and by bike, with the help of the local authority and other partners
- uses assemblies and before-school sessions to explain the benefits of cycling and walking to children, their parents and teachers
- organises practical activities that help give children and their parents confidence to cycle more, including group cycle training, rides in the local area, and bike maintenance
- helps teachers link cycling to the school curriculum
- provides training for teachers and parents so they can lead cycling activities themselves
- organises local events, generating positive publicity and motivating children, parents, staff and community members to join in
- arranges their school’s involvement in Sustrans’ UK-wide mass-participation events, such as the Big Pedal which enables hundreds of thousands of children to cycle to school.
Stage 2 – embedding cycling with a gold standard

In order to ensure that schools continue to sustain the high levels of cycling after the first year they will need ongoing support. Sustrans operates a School Mark accreditation system that progressively rewards schools with bronze, silver and gold awards, as they work with the pupils, families and the community to build cycling levels each year.

Stage two involves the school working towards:

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<td>• a permanent member of staff with responsibility for the development of cycling to school</td>
<td>• at least three cycling-focussed assemblies a year</td>
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<td>• a cycling policy of which the whole school community is aware</td>
<td>• at least three school cycling events each year</td>
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<td>• clear targets for increasing cycling levels to 35% of pupils</td>
<td>• bike safety and maintenance sessions for pupils and staff run during school</td>
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<td>• all school development plans to include increasing cycling</td>
<td>• on-road cycle training for pupils in year six and seven</td>
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<td>• involvement of pupils in decision making about cycling</td>
<td>• cycling integrated as a teaching tool across the curriculum</td>
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<td>• monitoring of cycling levels with results used to support groups with low numbers</td>
<td>• availability of after-school cycle clubs and other community activities</td>
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<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Positive cycling environment</th>
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<td>• promotion to pupils and parents of safe cycling routes in the area</td>
<td>• engagement with the local authority to identify and improve dangerous junctions and crossings, and reduce speeding traffic</td>
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<tr>
<td>• promotion of cycling in the school prospectus</td>
<td>• provision of secure, covered bike racks within school grounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>• promotion of cycling in information on moving to secondary school</td>
<td>• provision of lockers and changing facilities for pupils who cycle to school</td>
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The Sustrans effect – the view from schools which have already achieved our gold standard:

**Aldington Primary School’s Head Teacher, Sandra MacCourt said:**

“Consistently high levels of sustainable travel choices made by parents are a proud achievement for our school – making students happier, healthier and more productive.

“We’ve even seen reduced congestion in the surrounding area so our work is benefitting the rest of the community as well.

“We will continue to work to support parents and pupils to cycle, scoot and walk to school safely and responsibly and hope the number of children walking, cycling and scooting to school continues to grow.”

**Epsom Downs Primary School’s Head Teacher, Sally Leach, is also celebrating the achievement:**

“We started working with Sustrans in 2007 and in a little over five years we’ve managed to get 57% of children regularly cycling. The numbers are still growing!

“We’ve had to get covered storage for over 60 bikes and the racks are full nearly every day.

“Our children are so enthusiastic about cycling and encourage each other to get to school by bike because they know it’s the healthiest, most fun way to travel.

“The whole school community is involved at every level so we feel confident we’ve made a permanent and positive change.”
About Sustrans

Sustrans makes smarter travel choices possible, desirable and inevitable. We’re a leading UK charity enabling people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day.

We work with families, communities, policy-makers and partner organisations so that people are able to choose healthier, cleaner and cheaper journeys, with better places and spaces to move through and live in.

It’s time we all began making smarter travel choices.