Background

Despite most children wanting to walk or cycle to school, and largely living near enough to do so, the proportion of children doing so has been declining since 1995. Now as many as one in four cars on the road during the morning peak are on the school run.

The Active School Travel Programme aims to reverse this trend and get more pupils travelling actively to school. Sustrans delivered the programme from September 2013 to July 2016 with funding from the Public Health Agency and the Department for Infrastructure, to help meet Programme for Government targets to increase the number of children walking and cycling to school. Over the three years, Sustrans worked with 191 schools across Northern Ireland, including 175 primary and 16 post primary schools.

Key successes of three year programme

The award-winning programme has seen a remarkable rise in pupils walking, cycling and scooting to school and a decrease in car use at schools engaged in the Active School Travel Programme. This is a 38% increase in the proportion of pupils travelling actively to school. Imagine, with sustained investment, what could happen over a longer period.

More active, healthier children

Obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges of our time. As many as one in four children aged 10 years old and under are overweight or obese in Northern Ireland. As a result this generation of children may be the first to have a life expectancy lower than their parents. Active travel through walking and cycling can help reverse this trend and also helps a child’s mental health. The vast majority of teachers (92%) thought the programme had a good or excellent impact on getting pupils more physically active. And the pupils themselves agreed that walking, cycling or scooting can “make me fit and healthy”.

Reducing traffic and associated carbon emissions around the school gates has the added impact of improving air quality which has become a significant public health issue especially in urban areas.
Case study: Big Pedal challenge

- In April 2016, pupils and staff at 114 schools in Northern Ireland cycled more than 127,000 miles, equivalent to five trips around the world, during the 2-week challenge. This saved almost 80,000 car journeys and over two and a half million balloons of CO2 emissions.

- Killylea Primary, a rural Co Armagh school, came first in Northern Ireland and second place in the whole of the UK. The school achieved an incredible 98% of pupils cycling and scooting to school throughout the challenge.

Improving road safety

The Active School Travel Programme was named joint winner in the Primary Schools category of the Northern Ireland Road Safety Awards in November 2015 for helping to improve children’s road safety awareness and skills. Indeed 83% of teachers surveyed in the programme thought it had a good or excellent impact on pupils’ road safety awareness.

Enabling children to get to school on their own steam provides them with the important life skills to negotiate busy roads and their daily environment. In addition, on-road cycle training equips children with vital road safety awareness and skills.

Vision

We are delighted with the results of the programme and excited about the potential to get many more children walking and cycling to school. While 55% of pupils now usually travel actively to school, as many as 81% would like to. Sustrans wants to make that happen for these children and we’ve got until 2021 to meet that challenge. The Public Health Agency and the Department for Infrastructure are funding Sustrans to continue the Active School Travel Programme across Northern Ireland for the next five years. But we know the programme can be more successful with the following:

- National Standard on-road cycle training for all P6 pupils in Northern Ireland.

- Investment in safe routes to schools, including 20mph zones around all schools. This would go a long way to persuade more parents to let their children walk or cycle to school.

- Installation of secure high quality cycle parking at all schools to encourage pupils and staff to cycle.

Help us make the school run just that – a run, walk, scoot or cycle.

Nearly 190,000 pupils, parents and staff took part in more than 3,300 active travel activities

More than 2,200 pupils in over 150 schools have achieved on-road cycle training certificates

100% of teachers recommend the Active School Travel Programme to other schools

Contact us

This summary is based on the Annual Monitoring Report for the programme. For more information or to see the Report’s Executive Summary contact:

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Figure of 190,000 includes repeat participants

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