

Access for all

The benefits of traffic-free shared paths for older and disabled people



Travelling actively benefits people's health and their environment. The Welsh Government's ambition is to "make walking and cycling the most natural and normal way of getting around"¹, and the Active Travel (Wales) Bill represents the first time a Government anywhere in the world has sought to enshrine in legislation a duty to develop and maintain a network of routes for active travel.

By enabling more people to choose to travel on foot or by bike, including older people and people with disabilities, the Bill will contribute to tackling transport poverty and barriers to employment, improving health and wellbeing, growing sustainable local economies and improving our environment for all.

Y MUNWCH Â'R MUDIAD

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Benefits of traffic-free paths

The networks that will be developed under the Bill will include sections of traffic-free paths. Paths like the Taff Trail or Lon Las Ogwen are particularly popular – even though they make up just a third of the National Cycle Network they carry 84% of the journeys made². Indeed, half the number of journeys made on traffic free paths are by pedestrians.

Traffic free paths are of particular benefits to people new or returning to cycling, especially, children, older people, women and people with disabilities. More than a quarter of users the National Cycle Network are over 55, and some 12% of trips were made by people with a long-term illness, health problem or disability³.

The benefits of shared use routes are well documented including in the Welsh Government's Walking and Cycling Strategy and Action Plan and in Sustrans' own annual monitoring reports. Encouraging more people to walk and cycle creates three principal types of benefit⁴:

- Health benefits, through increased exercise and by reducing traffic injuries;
- Environmental benefits, principally through reduced CO2 and other emissions; and,
- Economic benefits, by reducing congestion and through tourism spend.

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

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The benefits of action for disabled and older people

“In terms of Welsh society, opening up walking and cycling facilities for everyone is an important element in creating equal opportunities, for example, to meet the needs of disabled people and deprived communities.” *Welsh Government Walking and Cycling Strategy for Wales*

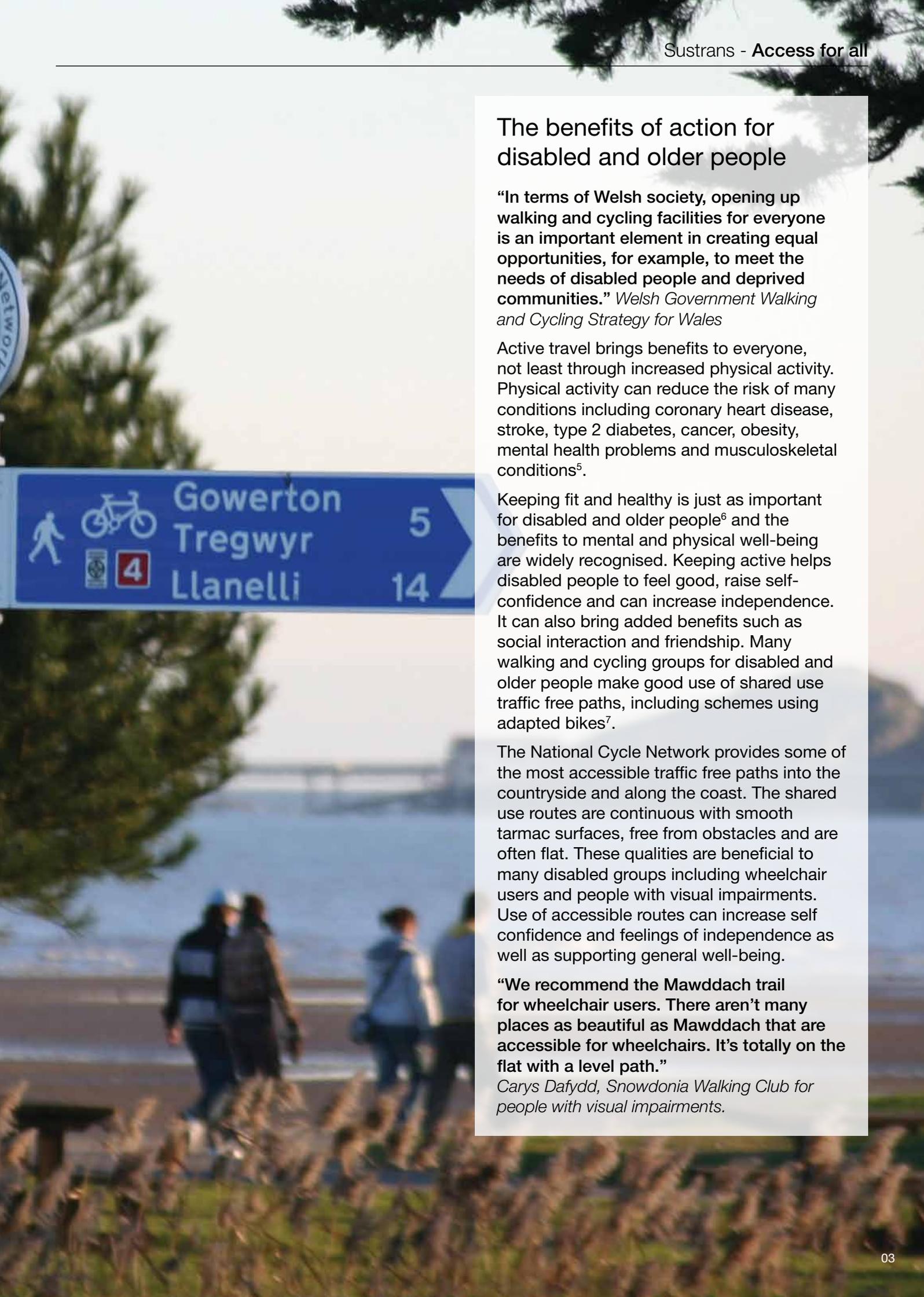
Active travel brings benefits to everyone, not least through increased physical activity. Physical activity can reduce the risk of many conditions including coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, obesity, mental health problems and musculoskeletal conditions⁵.

Keeping fit and healthy is just as important for disabled and older people⁶ and the benefits to mental and physical well-being are widely recognised. Keeping active helps disabled people to feel good, raise self-confidence and can increase independence. It can also bring added benefits such as social interaction and friendship. Many walking and cycling groups for disabled and older people make good use of shared use traffic free paths, including schemes using adapted bikes⁷.

The National Cycle Network provides some of the most accessible traffic free paths into the countryside and along the coast. The shared use routes are continuous with smooth tarmac surfaces, free from obstacles and are often flat. These qualities are beneficial to many disabled groups including wheelchair users and people with visual impairments. Use of accessible routes can increase self confidence and feelings of independence as well as supporting general well-being.

“We recommend the Mawddach trail for wheelchair users. There aren’t many places as beautiful as Mawddach that are accessible for wheelchairs. It’s totally on the flat with a level path.”

Carys Dafydd, Snowdonia Walking Club for people with visual impairments.



Sharing paths

Some traffic-paths are divided, with separate areas for pedestrians and cyclists. There are different ways of segregating paths such as by a change of level, surfacing material or by a white line. On other paths, there is no division and the whole path is shared by all users.

Having different types of users on the same path can be a source of concern where people do not act responsibly. Cyclists going too fast or too close to other people, or not ensuring others are aware that they're coming, is often cited a source of real concern. This can be particularly challenging for people with sensory impairments.

In response to this, some groups⁸ insist that, except in the most remote of locations, there should be separate paths for walkers and cyclists. An independent review of the evidence commissioned by Sustrans and undertaken by the highly respected Phil Jones Associates⁹ found that extensive studies had demonstrated that in practice, collisions are rare and conflict on paths carrying up to 100 users per hour is an extremely infrequent occurrence. Actual risk is much lower than the perceived risk, and discussion focussing on conflict increases its perceived existence.

Evidence also shows that there is no significant difference in the levels of conflict between the two types of path. Several studies have shown that users, and especially pedestrians, do not keep to the part of the path designated for them. Where there is separation cycle speeds also tend to increase so the actual conflict can be higher on segregated paths.

There are also benefits to shared paths, not least to older and disabled people and families. One of the benefits that people interviewed in these case studies identified was precisely the fact that there was an element of sociability.

Shared use paths create a safe space for families, including older and disabled people, to undertake activities together. This could be adults walking with children who are learning to cycle or people in wheelchairs being able to enjoy an activity with their families. Being on the same path and being able to make use of the whole path is a clear benefit for these users.

New shared paths are often provided along paths that are already legal for cyclists to use, such as bridleways, and that their resurfacing will make it possible for a greater range of people to use them – including disabled people, young people and the elderly.

Creating parallel segregated paths is much more costly with a fully segregated path costing up to three times as much as a shared path. It also requires more land as the overall width needed is greater on segregated paths – land that is often simply not available. It is not feasible or affordable to create entirely separate networks.

Case by case decisions

All paths are different and whether or not a shared or segregated path is preferable will depend on a range of factors, including the numbers of pedestrians and cyclists using the paths, journey purposes, visibility and the cost and availability of land. Alternative design features such as wider paths with better visibility and measures that encourage behaviour change may also be a more effective solution than segregation.

Based on all the evidence available, Sustrans favours shared paths apart from when evidence can be shown that the costs and benefits of a segregated path would be preferable.

Using paths responsibly

Sustrans supports the development of a Code of Conduct for people using the paths. Using the paths with respect for others and developing a better awareness of the needs of people with sensory impairments is important to tackling actual and perceived risks. It is up to everybody using cycle and walking paths to act responsibly and with consideration for others.

References

- 1 White Paper. *Consultation on Active Travel (Wales) Bill*, Welsh Government. May 20
- 2 *The Real Cycling Revolution*, 2012. Sustrans
- 3 *The Real Cycling Revolution*, 2012. Sustrans
- 4 *The Merits of Segregated and Non-Segregated Traffic-Free Paths*, August 2011, Phil Jones Associates, Ltd
- 5 *Our Healthy Future*, Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report, 2011, Welsh Government
- 6 *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*, Department of Health, July 2011
- 7 Examples include Pedal Power in Wrexham, Bikeability in Swansea, Bike Mobility in Haverfordwest and Pedal Power Cardiff. Local walking groups for disabled and older people also make use of the paths, including Clwb Cerdded Eryri, a walking group for people with visual impairments led by Snowdonia National Park
- 8 Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and Joint Committee for Blind and Partially-Sighted People
- 9 *The Merits of Segregated and Non-Segregated Traffic-Free Paths*, August 2011, Phil Jones Associates, Ltd

Anita and family

Anita is registered blind and her daughter Daisy, who's 6, is partially sighted. Cellan, her son who is 14, is a wheelchair user. They live in Bridgend and the local walking and cycling paths provide a place where they, along with Anita's partner Gareth, can all relax and enjoy the fresh air together.

Anita and her family can face challenges getting about every day. Walking along the main road with her family she is constantly on red alert and crossing main roads can be a real hazard. Cellan is sometimes forced off pavements on to the main road because they are too narrow for his wheelchair, have a poor surface quality, don't have dropped curbs or have cars parked on them.

The shared paths enable them all to get out and do an activity as a family in safety. As well as giving her a sense of independence, they allow her to enjoy the seaside and the countryside which she loves. The traffic-free paths are the only way for Cellan to get into the countryside without an off-road wheelchair, which is unaffordable for them.

"It's not easy for you to all go and do an activity if you've got a visual impairment and a wheelchair. We would be limited to what we could do otherwise. It's really great to all do things together."

- Anita Davies.

Recent improvements to the path as part of Sustrans' Valleys Cycle Network project have made it much safer and easier for Anita and her family so they are now more likely to use it. As well as the short trip to her parent's and the shops, they can now use the path for longer walks up to the Garw Valley and out to Aberkenfig.

Cellan's built up a lot of strength using the cycle paths. He plays table tennis for Wales and has ambitions to get into the Paralympics team for 2016. In order to do this, he needs to build his upper body strength further and the shared use path in Porthcawl is ideal for his training. The pavements aren't good enough and the roads are too dangerous so he finds the cycle paths are the only accessible surfaces for his training.

Anita is very aware of the potential for conflict between different users of the paths and is concerned that more is done to encourage responsible and considerate behaviour by all users, but she wouldn't want to lose the benefits of shared paths.

"It's just about cyclists taking responsibility. They should consider that you may have impairments. It's the same with cars on the road."



Dennis Edwards

Dennis is 83 and lives in Newbridge, Gwent. He's been a keen cyclist for many years and tries to get out with his friends, who are now in their 60s and 70s, a couple of times a week. They use road bikes and go anywhere between 30 and 60 miles on a bike. He's found the increasing number of shared use walking and cycling paths in his area hugely beneficial and he and his friends use them all the time.

One of the main benefits of using the paths for Dennis is safety. Like many vulnerable users he fears current road conditions, and feels some drivers have little consideration for cyclists. He had

an accident on the road earlier this year for which he needed hospital treatment, and feels that traffic free paths are a great deal safer. The provision of traffic free paths is very important to him and has made a vast difference to his cycling.

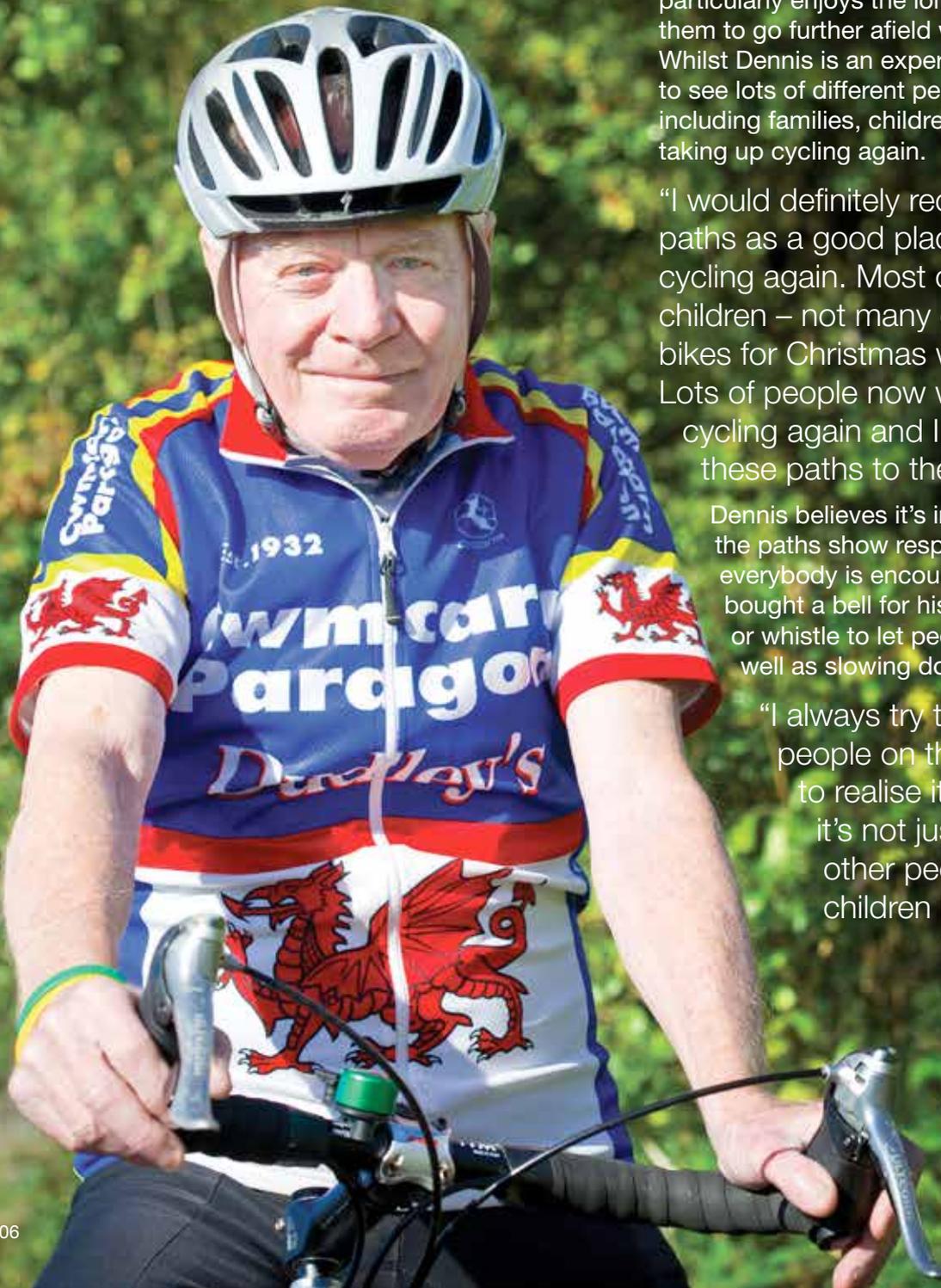
“You're taking your life into your hands on the roads. We try to get off them as much as possible.”

Access to the walking and cycling paths helps Dennis to keep fit and healthy and he and his friends have great fun together on their bikes. He particularly enjoys the longer paths which allow them to go further afield without leaving the path. Whilst Dennis is an experienced cyclist, he's happy to see lots of different people using the paths, including families, children and people who are just taking up cycling again.

“I would definitely recommend these paths as a good place to start taking up cycling again. Most of us have bikes as children – not many children don't have bikes for Christmas when we're young. Lots of people now want to take up cycling again and I'd highly recommend these paths to them.”

Dennis believes it's important that people using the paths show respect for each other so that everybody is encouraged to use them. He's bought a bell for his bike and will also shout or whistle to let people know he's coming as well as slowing down.

“I always try to respect other people on the path. You've got to realise it's not a race track; it's not just for us. It's also for other people, walkers and children learning to ride.”



Buddug Jones

Buddug lives in Rhosbodrual just outside Caernarfon and is registered blind due to a condition which has caused her eyesight to gradually deteriorate over the past 20 years. She gets a great deal of pleasure from walking with her guide dog, Freya, along the shared use traffic free paths in her area. She gets particular use from the Lon Las path from Caernarfon to Y Felinheli which is a shared use path along the Menai Straights and close to her home.

“The best thing is the independence of going out for a walk on your own away from the traffic. It gets me out in the fresh air every day and being away from the traffic noise is lovely. It gives the dog a nice quiet place to walk too - we both have to concentrate when there’s traffic and people about.”

“It’s flat all the way to Plas Menai and back and I meet other people out walking their dogs too, so it’s sociable as well.” The tarmac surface on the paths with no obstacles to fall over also helps to ensure she can relax and enjoy the walk.

Buddug is a member of Clwb Cerdded Eryri, a walking group for people with visual impairments led by Snowdonia National Park. They often use traffic free walking and cycling paths, particularly in winter when the ground is wet. The club has

enabled her to discover new paths across north west Wales and she even organises her holidays to avoid missing the walks. Buddug and her grandchildren, aged 7 and 12, now enjoy day trips together in the summer holiday, taking the bus to different paths that Buddug’s discovered and using the local Mawddach trail as a safe space for the grandchildren to learn how to cycle and Buddug to have a go at riding a tandem and enjoy cycling again, something she couldn’t have done on the road.

There are some shared paths that Buddug only walks with a sighted person because they’re busy and narrow. She’s also had some scary experiences when bikes have gone past her too quickly without notice. She still enjoys use of these shared paths and wants more paths and more people using them.

“I think people using the paths need to be more aware of other users and we need to be more tolerant of each other, but that’s life in general. Even though there are hazards, there are hazards everywhere, especially on the road. Crossing the road is much more hazardous. Crossing the road could kill you.”



“Keeping fit and healthy is so important to people with disabilities and shared use paths play a vital role as they often have so few opportunities to exercise. Segregation is not the way forward – people are isolated enough, and as has been demonstrated there is a social element when getting out, and segregation would not encourage this. It is, however, important that all users are educated to respect each other.”

Sybil Williams, Director Pedal Power, a charity making cycling accessible to all



Naomi Manston

Naomi is 37 and lives in Flintshire with her husband and daughter. She suffers from Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and has used a wheelchair for the past 5 years.

She was told at the MS centre that although she's weak in her legs she's strong in her arms, but it wasn't until a friend mentioned Pedal Power in Wrexham that realised she could use a hand pedalled bike to get out and cycle on a local shared use path. Naomi first used Pedal Power four months ago and enjoys it so much she comes back every week.

“There's nothing like getting out and being able to use a bike outside, in the same space where other people are walking and cycling. It makes me feel normal, like a regular person, like anybody else. There's a social element to it. There's nothing else like it. Even in the rain, I just put my waterproofs on and off I go!”

She's found all sorts of benefits from being able to cycle the Alyn Waters path regularly. The exercise gives her more energy for days afterwards and the strength to push herself. It's also helped her to maintain a normal weight range, which is not only good for her health, but also makes it easier for her to push herself around. As a result, she's more self confident, less dependent on her husband and carers and is practically able to get around better. Whilst there's an assisted bike in the MS Centre, Naomi loves being out in the fresh air and saying hello and having a chat with the dog walkers and other people using the path.

The best part of it for Naomi is being able to take part in an activity with her family. Her daughter's learning to ride a bike and because the path is off the road and flat it's been a great place for her to explore safely. Initially her husband walked along the path with them but he's now bought a bike so they can now go for days out together.

“I can feel more part of the family, it's opened up things to me, it's opened up my life. Before I didn't think there was anything I could do, actually take part in, but now I know I can cycle.”

Having a flat path with a good surface off the road is crucial to enable Naomi to use the bike and she wouldn't do it on the road. Alyn Waters is the main path that she uses but she's keen to try other paths and explore different areas. She's already planning to use another local path with her family when Pedal Power starts to rent bikes there on Saturday mornings and has ambitions to build up enough strength to go on the hilly path by her house.

Naomi agrees that people have to use the path responsibly but part of what she enjoys is seeing different things going on and the different activities that people do on the paths.

“It makes you part of general life. A lot of places you go are restrictive. Here, it isn't an issue. That's really nice.”

