Whole school approach to Physical Activity

Active Travel

Key points:
- a culture of active travel needs to be fostered through the systematic adoption of supportive programmes;
- the physical environment needs to be developed to support walking and cycling to school;
- a cross departmental policy framework is needed to signal Welsh Government’s endorsement of active travel as a key element of its strategy for increasing physical activity.

Sustrans welcomes the Welsh Government commitment to identifying and implementing practical solutions which tackle the increasing epidemic of childhood obesity and physical inactivity. The specific case we put forward is creating opportunities for and a culture of young people’s habitual physical activity must be the central tenant of the action plan, this echoes advice in 2011 from the UK’s four Chief Medical Officers. This paper identifies Active Travel (walking and cycling) as being accessible and life-enhancing forms of health benefitting physical activity and identifies issues and solutions for increasing active travel in the school environment.

Active travel to school needs to be recognised and promoted as an effective and equitable way of young people increasing their physical activity levels. Guidance from the National Institute of Clinical Health is unequivocal on the case for active travel; most recently in November 2012 the school environment was named as one of three settings with the greatest potential. A set of recommendations quoted evidence of effectiveness where physical activity has increased as a result of targeted active travel approaches. Recent academic research confirms that travelling actively to school is associated with an increase in the total amount of time children spend in moderate to vigorous physical activity.

For change to take place, three main points need to be addressed; a culture of active travel needs to be fostered through the systematic adoption of supportive programmes; the environment needs to be developed to support walking and cycling to school; and finally cross departmental policy needs to join up to create a framework for these environmental and behavioural adaptations.

Main recommendation: Welsh Government and its agents need to recognise active travel as an effective and equitable way of young people increasing their physical activity levels.

Creating a culture of active travel

Over half of primary school children are driven to school, despite the average distances being suitable for walking and cycling. In countries where active travel is more prevalent, childhood obesity is lower. Active Travel is a formative behaviour, unlike participation in sport where progression inevitably leads to drop off by less competitive children or where formal facilities restrain participation because of numbers, cost or access - walking and

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1 Department of Health (2011) Start active, stay active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries’ Chief Medical Officers
2 Goodman (2011) Activity Compensation and Activity Synergy in 8 – 13 Year Olds
cycling are activities which are independently maintained for life. In Wales Sustrans can point to the considerable success of schools which are part of the Bike It project; regular cycling has increased threefold, with a corresponding reduction in sedentary travel modes. 76% of respondents said they thought that Bike It had a good or excellent impact on getting pupils at their school more physically active.

Active Travel falls outside of PE and sport programmes and governing bodies’ structures. At the school or local authority level there is no ownership of the promotion of active travel; this is despite clear evidence that it is a very effective tool at increasing physical activity and physical literacy skills e.g. balance and coordination.

To create a culture of active travel we need to normalise it. A first step would be for walking and cycling to be the first choice for short journeys during the school day (particularly important in secondary schools where an increasing amount of travel between venues is happening because of school clustering). National cycle training is currently organised through road safety divisions within transport departments but it is not universally available in all areas or to all schools. Cycle training should link more closely with PE provision rather than being seen uniquely as a road safety issue.

2) Creating a physical environment to support active travel

With the introduction of the Active Travel Bill requiring all local authorities in Wales to develop appropriate networks for walking and cycling, now is opportune for an increased focus on school based active travel. Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Dr Ruth Hussey, on the day of the launch of the Active Travel Bill said;

“We know our environment and transport can have an impact on our health, and I believe the Active Travel Bill will make it easier in everyone in Wales to make healthier choices. Small changes to our daily routines, like walking and cycling short distances, can improve the way we feel as well as our physical health. By making changes to the environment and transport, the Active Travel Bill will make the healthy choice, the easier choice. This is a great step forward for Wales.”

Over the summer of 2013 guidance for local authorities is being developed to sit alongside the Bill – it is important to influence this guidance so that educational establishments are formally linked to the new legislation, both for safe routes to be prioritised, but also consulting with young people must be pivotal to the way councils approach the way they plan their network developments.

Travel planning is an under-utilised tool but done well it usefully allows schools to identify the constraints which limit active travel and put measures in place to overcome these. Sustrans experience is that schools respond well to travel planning when they see how it links to other initiatives, e.g. their Healthy Schools and Eco Schools programmes or classroom work. Measuring physical activity as part of the annual travel plan audit of travel behaviour would help schools make the connection between travel and health.

Reducing traffic speed in urban areas and creating more 20 mph zones would make a significant difference towards creating an environment where more parents feel confident to allow their children to walk and cycle to school. Schools, health professionals and physical

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3 Sustrans (2011) Bike It Head Teacher Survey – 127 respondents (UK wide)
activity staff need to advocate for reduced speeds and more 20 mph zones as a physical activity and health intervention as well as on safety grounds.

3) Making cross sector connections and facilitating supportive policies

Currently the liability on schools for travel within the school day is a barrier to walking and cycling being the norm for even short trips. This has been an issue for schemes such as the 14-19 Learner Pathway where students take some subjects at different learning centres to their normal school. Schools are reluctant to allow cycling because of the increased liability they have for learners during the day and the perceived difficulty in supervising travelling by bicycle compared to minibuses. There is good practice from England on this issue – South Gloucestershire saved money previously spent on minibus travel to fund a package of measures to facilitate active inter-school travel. One measure was cycle training; by providing level 3 cycling skills to 14-19 year olds, the school can demonstrate its management of risk. Clarity and leadership from the Welsh Government is needed to overcome this issue.

Voicing the curricular opportunities of active travel will resonate well with educationalists who are focused on school improvement (numeracy, literacy and closing the poverty related achievement gap). Active Travel can be studied as a topic across subject areas, for example Sustrans has developed a scheme of work to sit alongside our travel planning project. We have also been working with WJEC on a decision making exercise, planning a route to school for Geography GCSE. Other curriculum work could be identified which would further the move towards active travel being normalised both as a healthy and convenient travel mode.

Further reading: In June 2012 Sustrans was invited to submit evidence to the Youth Select Committee enquiry on safe, affordable and accessible transport for young people. The report can be found on the Sustrans website.

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February 2013