

General Election 2024:

Five steps to improve our neighbourhoods, health and the economy

Making it easier for everyone to walk, wheel and cycle



Summary

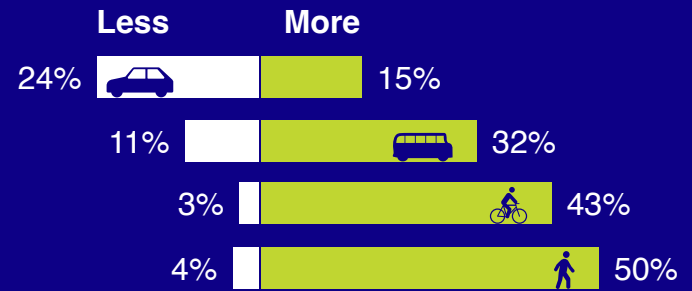
People want to walk, wheel¹ and cycle more of their everyday journeys.

But inaccessible pavements, unsafe streets, poor links with public transport, and the costs of bike ownership are holding them back.

That's bad news for people's health, the places they live and for our economy.

The next UK Government, in partnership with local leaders, could change that with five steps.

Percentage of residents who would like to use different types of transport more or less in the future²



1. Make our streets safe for children by:

- keeping pavements free of cars,
- developing safe routes to every school,
- doubling the length of traffic-free and quiet road cycle routes.

2. Give everyone access to a bike by:

- helping people excluded from the Cycle to Work scheme to buy a bike,
- removing VAT from children's cycle sales,
- improving access to cycle parking at home.

3. Build developments where all the essentials are close by:

- changing planning so that new homes are built near jobs, shops and other things people need,
- prioritising safe walking, wheeling and cycling routes in new developments,
- ensuring everyone can access nature.

4. Make the National Cycle Network work for everyone by:

- committing to a five-year investment plan for the National Cycle Network,
- supporting maintaining the Network so it is fit for the future,
- supporting improved access to the Network so that it is for everyone.

5. Create a transport strategy that works for everyone by:

- developing an integrated transport strategy for England,
- shifting more resources into active travel and public transport,
- focusing road investment on better maintaining existing streets.

- We recognise that some people who use wheeled mobility aids, for example a wheelchair or a mobility scooter, may not identify with the term walking and may prefer to use the term wheeling. We use the terms walking and wheeling together to ensure we are as inclusive as possible.
- Sustrans, 2024. [Walking and Cycling Index UK report 2023](#). If not referenced, all statistics quoted are from this report and its wider dataset.



The impact

If people could make more short journeys on foot, scooter, by wheelchair or bike and have active travel fully integrated with public transport for longer journeys, it would:

- make our neighbourhoods safer for our families,
- improve people's health,
- help people on low incomes get to work or access education,
- cut air pollution and reduce carbon emissions,
- and help our high streets thrive.

Councils, mayors and local leaders around the UK are already proving what's possible.

In 18 urban areas studied in Sustrans' Walking and Cycling Index, people walking, wheeling and cycling in 2023:

♥ prevented **21,000**
long-term health
conditions

☁ and saved **420,000**
tonnes of carbon
dioxide emissions.

Extrapolated to all UK urban areas, walking, wheeling and cycling in 2023 benefited the economy by over £32 billion³ and saved 2.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions.

At current levels of walking, wheeling and cycling over the next five years, the benefits from exercise alone would avoid over 595,000 long-term health conditions, saving the NHS a total of £13.5 billion.

Over 9.6 billion short trips are driven in urban areas across the UK every year. There is huge potential for more walking, wheeling and cycling and huge benefits from doing so.

Local authorities want to unlock this potential. If the next Government gives local leaders the tools they need, people could make their neighbourhoods healthier and happier places for their families to live and grow up in.

3. Previously unreleased data from Sustrans' Walking and Cycling Index 2023 UK aggregate data set. This was extrapolated in proportion to the urban adult population of the UK. UK population estimates for mid-year 2022 were used and downsized by 84%. This gave a total urban population of 46,359,891 aged 16 or over.



Step one: make our streets safe for children.

Every parent should be able to let their children play, meet friends and get around their neighbourhood without worrying about risks from traffic.

A healthy, active childhood can lead to a lifetime of health benefits, from better mental health to lower levels of obesity.

But the dominance of cars on our streets often prevents this. There's a lack of safe space for children to play in and too few traffic-free cycle routes for them to ride their bikes.

There are three things the next Government could do to change this:

- a. **Keep pavements free of cars.** Councils should have the powers to stop vehicles being parked on pavements. Not only would it help children get around, but it'll help all pedestrians, particularly disabled people. Two thirds of adults support stopping parking on pavements – this would be a popular quick win.
- b. **Safe routes to every school.** Every child should have the choice to walk, wheel or cycle to school. We can make it happen through a package of measures including cycle training, side road zebra crossings⁴, and 'School Streets' schemes where roads are closed to traffic during drop off and pick up times.
- c. **Double the length of traffic-free and quiet road cycle routes.** Only 31% of people say their streets are safe for children cycling. Traffic-free routes, along with routes on quieter roads, are proven to help new people cycle especially children. For example, London has quadrupled high-quality cycle routes since 2016. 1.26 million cycling trips now take place in the capital every day, equivalent to a third of journeys on the tube⁵.

And of course, these measures to make our streets safe and accessible for children would benefit everyone, and particularly disabled people.

4. TfGM, 2021. [Side road zebras](#). Zebra markings on side roads lead to drivers giving way 65% more than where there is no marking.

5. TfL, 2024. [Travel in London 2023 - Annual overview](#).



Step two: give everyone access to a bike.

The high cost of transport, from running a car to travelling by train, is a major barrier for many people across the UK.

Cycling can help people save money, but not everyone who wants a bike can afford one. E-bikes and non-standard cycles like trikes or handcycles help even more people cycle but are more expensive.

Three things the next Government could do to change this:

- a. **Help people excluded from the Cycle to Work scheme to buy a bike.** People on low incomes have the lowest level of bike ownership, but 70% of them say access to a bike would be useful. The next Government should provide financial support to people who can't access the Cycle to Work scheme, so more people who are not in work or who are on a low income can get a bike. The economic benefits that come from helping people to buy a bike – from improved health and access to work and education – far outweigh the costs.
- b. **Remove VAT from children's cycle sales.** Children don't have bikes in four in ten families. This rises to almost five in ten amongst households on a low income. Removing VAT would help more children access cycles, helping the next generation to cycle more.
- c. **Improve access to cycle parking at home.** Many people who want a bike don't get one because they have nowhere secure or accessible to park it at home. 60% of people on a low income or not in work told us secure home cycle parking would help them to cycle more. The next Government should provide more resources so councils can ensure people who live in smaller homes and flats have access to secure, accessible, and convenient cycle parking at home.



Step three: build developments where all the essentials are close by.

We need to build more homes. We also need to create better neighbourhoods for people where it's easy to get to a school, the shops and the doctors' surgery by walking, wheeling and cycling and to link up with public transport for longer journeys. This is a popular move: 55% of people support a ban on new housing in areas where driving is the only practical transport option.

- a. **Change planning so that new homes are built near jobs, shops and other things people need.** Instead of sprawling suburbs with expensive new roads, planning should support denser, high-quality developments with local amenities, traffic-free paths for walking, wheeling and cycling, and public transport links so people can get to work and shop locally without relying on a car. Taken together, these ideas could build the same number of homes on half the land and reduce car traffic⁶. This approach is likely to reduce local opposition to building new homes and make it easier to meet the UK's housing challenge.
- b. **Prioritise safe walking, wheeling and cycling routes in new developments.** We want to see measures to ensure new developments improve and link to existing and planned walking and cycling routes. New policies should also make it easier to build new routes.
- c. **Ensure everyone can access nature.** The next Government should put into law the pledge to ensure everyone can access nature within a 15-minute walk or wheel from their front door. As part of this, the Government should invest in improvements to the National Cycle Network to help even more people access green space and nature near their home.

6. Sustrans and Create Streets, 2024. [Stepping Off the Road to Nowhere](#).



Step four: make the National Cycle Network work for everyone.

The National Cycle Network is a national asset. It connects every corner of the UK through almost 13,000 miles of walking and cycling routes. It runs within a mile of half the population and over a third is traffic-free. But the current patchwork of small one-off grants and local authority projects makes it hard to make strategic, long-term plans for this important piece of national infrastructure.

Sustrans' vision for the Network is a path that truly is for everyone – people walking, wheeling, cycling, horse-riding and more.

a. **A five-year investment plan for the National Cycle Network as part of the next Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy.**

This will improve and extend the Network for everyone, supporting other policy objectives like public health and access to education and work.

b. **Maintain the Network so it is fit for the future.** A five-year investment plan will mean Sustrans and our local partners can maintain the Network in the face of the increasing impact from climate change including flood damage, longer growing seasons and the deterioration of bridges, tunnels and viaducts. At the same time, we will increase biodiversity, access to nature, and drainage.

c. **Improve access on the Network so it is for everyone.** A five-year investment plan will mean we can ensure the Network is for everyone including children, disabled people, people of colour and women. We will remove thousands of barriers that currently prevent people from using it and build more traffic-free routes to ensure people feel safe. In addition, investment would target improvements in urban areas with high levels of deprivation, poor transport connectivity and shorter life expectancy, opening up routes that link better with public transport to help people travel to jobs, town centres, education and other opportunities.



Step five: create a transport strategy that works for everyone.

For many years, England has lacked a national transport strategy. This means transport fails to contribute in a coherent way to tackling the big societal challenges facing the UK: the economy, climate change, the cost-of-living crisis, health and levelling up.

- a. **Develop an integrated transport strategy for England.** One that improves health; access to jobs and education; helps fight climate change; and makes our neighbourhoods a better place to live, by placing walking, wheeling and cycling, a thriving public transport network and initiatives like car clubs at its centre. This would help us grow our economy and create opportunity by better connecting communities and businesses to what they need to be successful. The national strategy would feed through to regional and local transport plans.
- b. **Shift more resources into active travel and public transport.** To support an integrated transport strategy, we need to put more resources into giving people the choice to walk, wheel, cycle and use public transport. This would reduce traffic which is good for everyone. More than half (56%) of people support shifting investment from road building to supporting walking and wheeling, cycling and public transport so they have more choice on how they travel. Only 17% oppose this move. Investment in footpaths and cycle routes and help for people to use them represents very good value for money, returning £5.62 for every £1 spent, compared to an average of £2.50 per £1 spent for road building⁷.
- c. **Focus roads investment on better maintaining existing streets.** England is facing a local roads maintenance backlog of £16.3 billion⁸ and this doesn't include the declining condition of our pavements. Prioritising roads investment on maintenance would improve the state of pavements, roads, cycle paths and bus lanes. This would better align with the UK's net zero strategy and create genuinely attractive alternatives to using a car.

7. IPPR, 2024.

[Stride and ride: England's path from laggard to leader in walking, wheeling, and cycling.](#)

8. Asphalt Industry Alliance, 2024. [Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance \(ALARM\) survey.](#)

About Sustrans

We work for and with communities, helping them come to life by walking, wheeling and cycling to create healthier places and happier lives for everyone.

Across the UK we involve communities in shaping our towns and cities. Together we campaign for and create spaces where everyone can move around safely and give people the tools and confidence to get out of their cars.

We inspire people to change the way we all travel every day, forging closer connections with our neighbours and reducing traffic to create a better environment and more sustainable society for everyone.

Join us on our journey. www.sustrans.org.uk

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