

Promoting Active Travel to School: Progress and Potential



Foreword

Public Health responsibilities will transfer from the NHS to local authorities over the next four years. As a result, local authorities will have further impetus to consider how to add health value to the services for which they are responsible.

For transport, this should mean giving greater priority to healthy active lifestyles through the promotion and enabling of walking and cycling.

The daily journeys to and from schools provide an ideal opportunity to put this into practice. Every parent wants the best for their children, especially to see them growing up happy and healthy. Being active is one of the best foundations for ensuring better health, which is why walking or cycling to school, wherever possible, is an important part of a healthy lifestyle.


Most schools now have plans to promote active travel to school and most local authorities have staff who support schools in taking action to motivate their communities. But do these investments make any difference? Is it really feasible to expect more families to walk to school?

There are a wide range of forces working against active travel. Rising car ownership and households where both parents need to travel on to work after the school run, coupled with parental choice in school admissions and the closure of small schools has led to more children not attending or even having access to a truly local school. With that in mind it is even more encouraging that we are able, through this report, to provide new evidence that shows that, yes, investments in this area are proving their worth.

Evidence presented in the following pages shows that on average local authorities in the South West have 600 more young people walking to school now, compared with just two years ago. This is just the beginning, if we keep the momentum going, there is the potential to encourage a further four-fold increase on that number.

There are numerous benefits to encouraging more active travel to school. They include not only having fewer cars on our streets at peak times and reducing the risks of obesity in young people but also promoting personal independence, fostering an appreciation of lower carbon living and empowering local people to make a positive difference to their own lives and the lives of others.

Together these make an essential contribution towards the realisation of sustainable and healthy communities which are the corner stone responsibilities of local authorities.



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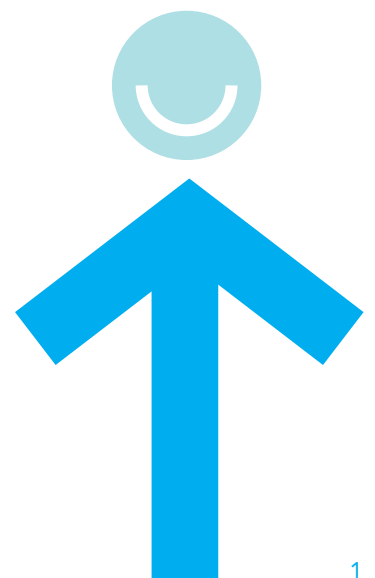


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Introduction

This paper answers the main questions people often ask about promoting active travel to school:

- How far can young people reasonably be expected to walk or cycle to school?
- Is any progress being made to get more young people active by promoting walking or cycling to school?
- What is the potential for encouraging more young people to walk or cycle to school?
- What can be done to get better value for money?



How far can young people realistically be expected to walk or cycle to school?

Setting a reasonable walking or cycling distance helps identify which young people, who are currently driven to school, could be encouraged to walk or cycle. Evidence, from nine local authorities in the South West, shows that the following range of distances are potentially realistic.

School type	'Realistic' walking distance (this is our short term target)	% of young people walking up to the realistic distance	Stretch distance (this should be our medium term target)	% of young people walking between the realistic and stretch distances	% of young people walking beyond the stretch distance
Primary	800 metres (1/2 mile)	75.8%	1600 metres (1 mile)	18.5%	5.7%
Secondary	2000 metres (1 1/4 mile)	90.2%	3200 metres (2 miles)	6.8%	2.9%

The 'realistic' distance is derived from School Census data which shows that around 76% of primary and secondary pupils already walk from within this range.

The 'Stretch' distance, derived from School Census data and supported by the Yellow School Bus Commission recommendations, can be used to raise standards when schools are already reaching or exceeding the 'realistic' distance.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends a walking distance of 3200 metres (2 miles) for primary and secondary schools. This is optimistic given the data available and fails to consider the impact of pupil age. In practice, therefore, this is not a realistic threshold for promoting walking to primary school.



Is Any Progress Being Made?

Evidence is available for 9 local authorities across the South West¹, for 2007/08 and 2009/10, providing a picture of the changing travel patterns for around half of the young people in the region. The table below shows the progress being made by each participating local authority to encourage more young people to walk to school².

Progress

Local Authority	Number of young people walking to school 07/08	Number of young people walking to school 09/10	Increase in number	Increase by percentage	Extra walking trips per local authority area per year
North Somerset	13,421	14,481	1,060	7.9	402,800
Bristol	27,747	29,656	1,909	6.9	725,420
Bournemouth	7,990	8,539	549	6.9	208,620
Poole	8,048	8,507	459	5.7	174,420
Dorset	20,734	21,531	797	3.8	302,860
South Gloucestershire	21,943	22,254	311	1.4	118,180
Plymouth	21,618	21,897	279	1.3	106,020
Somerset	33,619	33,766	147	0.4	55,860
Torbay	9,339	9,309	-30	-0.3	-11,400
All	164,459	169,940	5,481		2,082,780
Average	18,273	18,882	609	3.3	231,420

The data shows that there has been a 3 per cent increase in the number of young people walking to school in the last two years, amounting to an average of around 600 young people extra per local authority, on most school days. This ranges from an extra 7.9% in North Somerset (1060 young people) to virtually no change in Torbay.

This amounts, on average, to an extra 230,000 walking trips per local authority per year³.

¹ Full summary data for South West and other English Authorities can be found at www.sthc.co.uk

² A Technical Note describing how these results were calculated is available by emailing HWHL@gosw.gsi.gov.uk

³ Based on factor of 190 x 2 to reflect number of schools days per year and 2 trips per day

What is the Potential?

There is potential for much more progress, as shown in the table below:

Potential

Local Authority	Young people WITHIN walk threshold travelling by car 2009/10	Potential increase in number (based on encouraging 75% of these young people to walk)	Potential increase by percentage	Extra walking trips per local authority area per year
Bournemouth	2,443	1,832	21.5	696,255
Poole	1,958	1,469	17.3	558,030
Torbay	2,104	1,578	17	599,640
Dorset	3,960	2,970	13.8	1,128,600
South Gloucestershire	4,035	3,026	13.6	1,149,975
Bristol	5,241	3,931	13.3	1,493,685
North Somerset	2,540	1,905	13.2	723,900
Plymouth	3,310	2,483	11.3	943,350
Somerset	4,196	3,147	9.3	1,195,860
All	29,787	22,340		8,489,295
Average	3,310	2,482	13.1	943,255

A number of schools have already shown that it is possible to achieve walking from 100 per cent of pupils within the walking threshold⁴.

The short term target should be to achieve a shift away from car travel for 75% of the remaining young people living within the realistic walking threshold who currently travel by car. As shown above this amounts to around 2400 young people per local authority. This amounts, on average, to **943,000** more walking trips per local authority per year.

As schools set more ambitious targets, encouraging young people to walk further towards the stretch distance, further potential is achievable.

One of the biggest influences affecting levels of active travel is the choice that parents make about which school their young people will attend. In the last two years the proportion of children not attending their nearest primary school has risen marginally from 47.6% to 49.9%, whilst the proportion of young people not attending their secondary school has risen significantly from 42.3% to 48.4%.

⁴ Summary data on individual schools can be access via www.sthc.co.uk

What Can Be Done to Get Better Value?

Better value from investment in promoting active travel to school can be achieved by:

- Using smarter information about travel patterns to and from schools, such as provided by the School Travel Health Check (www.sthc.co.uk).
- Identifying and supporting schools with the most potential for change (i.e. where there are relatively large numbers of young people not walking or cycling within the walking threshold).
- Recognising and highlighting the economic value associated with the shift from car to walk and cycle. Current estimates⁵ place an annual £600 return (much of this made up by short and long term health gains) for each pupil making the shift from car to walk or cycle.
- Providing information for prospective parents about the benefits and potential of active travel before decisions on selecting schools are made to encourage a reduction in the number of “child miles” travelled for the school journey.
- Ensuring schools continue to feel supported to change the travel behaviour of their young people.
- Working jointly to promote active travel to school enables a more efficient approach to tackling transport and health issues.

Peter Ashcroft, Department of Health – South West
Andrew Combes, School Travel Health Check
October 2010



⁵ Value for Money: An Economic Assessment of Investment in Walking and Cycling. Dr A Davis, Department of Health-South West, 2010

Annex 1: The School Travel Health Check

One successful way of presenting data at the school and young person level is to use the School Travel Health Check (STHC). This takes the School Census Data and processes it to produce school friendly maps, spreadsheets and reports which give a clear indication of the facts from which individuals, schools and policy makers can decide what to do.

The School Census provides an annual snap shot of how every young person, on a single survey day in the year (normally September), travels to their primary or secondary school by walking, cycling, car passenger, bus etc. By mapping where young people live in relation to their school and knowing their mode of travel we can judge the potential for a shift to more active travel at individual and school level.

The STHC illustrates and recommends a short term, realistic, target of reducing car use within a realistic walk threshold of the school. The target and supporting evidence is illustrated within the map, spreadsheet and report. The percentage of young people walking within the realistic walk threshold is also RAG rated and changes over time shown for all schools in the local authority area.

Feedback from the local authorities who commission STHC shows that accurate information, clearly presented is well received by schools and supports lasting change away from car use to active travel. Equally, schools are comfortable sharing school level data amongst their peers and strive to improve on their previous years RAG rating.

The STHC delivers consistent data between local authorities and so makes comparisons possible from which we can learn the success factors behind schools and local authorities with high levels of active travel.

29 local authorities now use the STHC amounting to 24% of all state schools in England, and 1.5 million individual records.

The STHC has been recognised as best practice by the Sustainable Development Commission and within the 2009 Report of the Chief Medical Officer for England.

A summary of data for schools in the South West are available at: www.sthc.co.uk

Other References

School Census:
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/ims/datacollections/schoolcensus/sc2010/>

School Travel Health Check (for downloads of sample maps and reports)
www.sthc.co.uk

ModeShift - supporting sustainable school travel
www.modeshift.org.uk