

# THE IMPACTS OF WALK TO SCHOOL

## Overview

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLEES) in March completed the first phase of a three part, 18 month evaluation of the Living Streets' Walk to School programme. Living Streets is a national charity which works to 'create streets that really put people first'. The Walk to School programme is a portfolio of tools and methods which are used in conjunction with local schools to encourage children (both primary and secondary) to walk to school as part of their normal routine.

## Key findings

- Walking is important as part of national and local health, transport and environment policy objectives;
- Children who walk to school enjoy walking to school;
- Parents, and the perceived convenience to parents of walking to school, are the key determinants of whether children walk to school;
- The existing built environment can provide opportunities for or limit families' scope to walk to school;
- Living Streets' Walk to School programme, particularly in primary schools, successfully engages with children to increase walking behaviours;
- There is less scope to influence older children's walking habits, in part due to the larger catchment areas of secondary schools.

## About the programme

The Walk to School programme is a national project, delivered at the local level through Living Streets' Local Co-ordinators. This enables various different products and services to be tailored to local schools, their own needs and objectives. There are two levels of engagement with schools - 'standard' and 'intensive'. The decision to go down either route is negotiated closely with the schools, and reflects local contexts - for example, for some schools, local congestion and safe travel to school implications are an ongoing concern, and so closer working with Living Streets is identified as beneficial.

## Methods

CLEES, in collaboration with Living Streets, designed a dual approach to measuring the impacts of the programme - a national survey of schools and a series of local case studies. This allowed us to analyse a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, giving us a broad and deep understanding of the impacts of the programme within schools. We also conducted national and local stakeholder consultation, to develop an enhanced understanding of how the programme is perceived by public sector organisations.

## Supporting delivery of public sector objectives

At the national and local levels, all stakeholders that CLEES consulted identified that the ambitions and impact of the programme reflected public sector objectives. These cover health, environment and transport objectives. In particular, the Walk to School programme has a significant resonance with the health agenda, as a programme helping to create healthy lifestyle behaviours. Walking can contribute to levels of physical activity, and can help to reduce levels of obesity across the population. In relation to public service reform and demand management, delivering these health benefits can reduce the demand for public services.

At the local level, the engagement of Local Co-ordinators from Living Streets was regularly cited as a key resource contributing to local delivery of public sector schemes. Having a relationship with Living Streets for many local authorities is seen as an 'additional member of staff', whose expertise in travel helps to support and inform delivery of a range of local schemes. Particularly in view of constricting public sector resources, the Walk to School programme is contributing to active travel plans in local authorities. Active travel plans are being implemented to meet a range of policy objectives, including public health, climate change, reducing congestion, community cohesion and local economic performance.

## Environment and transport

Walking is widely recognised at the national and local levels as important for contributing to congestion and carbon emission reductions. Active travel, which includes walking, is a key ambition at all spatial levels, for environmental benefit.

It is critical for long term environmental benefit that active travel is adopted and maintained within populations. The Walk to School programme, due to targeting children, is recognised as a means to embedding walking behaviours for life.

There is a cyclical relationship between the environment and walking; one benefits the other. More attractive walking routes and better environmental conditions are considered important for people to enjoy, and hence maintain walking behaviours. The Walk to School programme is important in local areas as a contributor to physical upgrades; this supports walking in the environment and promotes long term walking adoption.

## Health and physical activity

Obesity and heart disease are key health concerns which walking has been identified as having the potential to reduce. For this to be impactful across populations, walking as a long term habit needs to be adopted and maintained. In particular areas, such as deprived communities, these health concerns are more considerable; therefore, the potential for Living Streets to affect health benefits may be greater in some areas.

Walking is part of a range of behaviours which comprise healthy lifestyles. Our research shows that once people start walking, they tend to enjoy it and keep walking. It is then important that the barriers which some face to walking are addressed, to enable these people to start walking, promoting healthy lifestyles.

## Local economic benefit

There is emerging evidence that the Walk to School programme contributes to local economies. In the context of reduced public sector resources, the programme may create savings to the state. For example, increasing walking behaviour has potential to reduce healthcare costs if populations become more active. The programme has been shown to contribute to local transport strategies and their delivery. Through investing in local contractors to deliver physical upgrades, Walk to School can directly support local businesses.

If walking is adopted more widely in local areas, this can support local businesses. Reducing congestion can encourage businesses to stay in local areas, and effective transport routes can attract businesses into a locality. Increasing footfall can help to support local businesses through increase in trade.

## Recommendations

The evaluation findings provide important lessons for a range of stakeholders involved in the health and active travel agendas. The key lessons include:

### Recommendation 1 - Scope out potential for community based programmes

A wider approach to targeting beneficiaries could be more effective. Targeting parents and younger families, as well as older people, could produce greater impacts to support the objectives of national and local policy. There is potential to join up active travel agendas with other service provision, to reduce demand for public services. For example, expanding support for walking to older sections of the

community may correlate to other agendas, such as reducing social isolation for older people. This might lead to reduced demand for social care, for some.

### Recommendation 2 - Explore in more detail the barriers for active travel

A key element of wider, community-based projects would be to identify what the barriers are for people who have so far not been engaged through the more narrow focus. It may be that programmes have to adapt to take into account inflexibilities in different people's schedules.

### Recommendation 3 - Target delivery in key locations

To enhance the impact of investment in active travel programmes, delivery might be targeted in locations in which the greatest benefits would be created. Our research for Living Streets has shown that deprived areas and areas with planned expansion may benefit most from the Walk to School programme.

### Recommendation 4 - Explore overlap and linkages with other local programmes

At the local level, particular areas may be engaged with other programmes working towards similar objectives. For example, the Hearty Lives programme in Hartlepool has important overlaps in terms of objectives with the Walk to School programme. Strategic engagement with external programmes may create opportunities for collaborative gain.



## Next steps

The research we have undertaken so far with Living Streets provides a baseline for evidence of the impacts of the Walk to School programme. In June, CLES will conduct the second of three phases of research - with which we can build up a picture of how the Walk to School programme influences longitudinally. The final phase of this evaluation will again explore change over time, and will explore the extent to which walking habits are maintained by pupils over the duration of the programme.

The findings of the Living Streets Walk to School research will inform and help shape CLES' wider policy work around a local economic manifesto. How active travel links with wider service reform and local economic debates is interesting and important, particularly in light of public service reform and the need to address health concerns.

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