

Active Travel and Health & Wellbeing

Active Travel (walking and cycling) has the potential to achieve major population-wide health benefits. It is one of the most cost-effective and easiest ways of embedding physical activity in people's lives, resulting in array of physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits. Furthermore, evidence shows that increased active travel will reduce air and noise pollution, help combat social isolation, ease congestion and bring economic benefits to businesses. Walking and cycling offer enjoyment, independence and contact with outdoor environments and these benefits may be particularly important for people with disabilities whose participation in other activities may be more restricted. Finally, active travel plays a crucial role in supporting the climate emergency agenda, where we see measures to combat climate change resulting in many co-benefits to health and wellbeing (See [B&NES Director of Public Health Report 2019/20](#) for an article on 'Climate Change and our Health').

One of the priorities in the B&NES Health and Wellbeing Strategy is '*Create healthy and sustainable places*' with an outcome of '*A built and natural environment which supports and enables people in our communities to lead healthy and sustainable lives*' [1]. Two of the four themes in the B&NES Fit for Life Strategy are **Active Travel** and **Active Design** [2] Inclusion of both of these key health strategies emphasises the vital role that active travel, infrastructure and the design of our built environment play in supporting and improving health and wellbeing.

Air and noise pollution

Air pollution is one of the largest environmental risks to public health in the UK, with between 28,000 and 36,000 deaths each year attributed to humanmade air pollution [3]. Air pollution can cause and worsen health effects in all individuals, particularly society's most vulnerable populations. Short term exposure can exacerbate asthma and respiratory conditions, and exposure over several years can contribute to the development of cardiovascular disease and lung cancer [4]. There is also growing recognition of the impacts of traffic noise on health and wellbeing. Noise pollution influences sleep, stress, anxiety, blood pressure and mental health. In children it can impact on school performance, memory and concentration [5].

Healthy weight

Over half of the B&NES (51.1%) and nearly two thirds of the England (62.3%) adult populations were overweight or obese in 2018/19 [6]. Having infrastructure that supports active modes of travel to increase physical activity levels, will not only improve cardiovascular health and reduce cancer risk, but will also play a fundamental role in helping our residents maintain a healthy weight.

Active travel and transport were identified as one of seven key themes as part of the B&NES Whole Systems Approach to Obesity programme in 2019, highlighting the critical role that they play in reducing obesity levels in B&NES and supporting maintenance of a healthy weight for all our populations.

Mental health

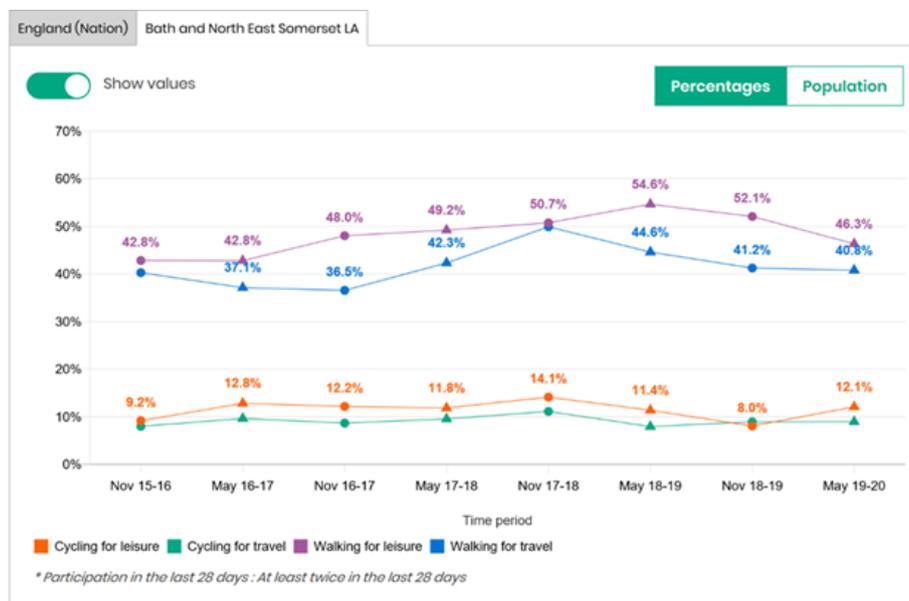
Walking and cycling are often reported as positive experiences in terms of stress management, and most studies find that commuters who combine public transport with active travel suffer less stress. Walking and cycling journeys are also frequently relaxing. UK research finds that active commuting is positively associated with wellbeing and is associated with reduced risk of feeling constantly under strain and being unable to concentrate compared to car travel [7]. Physical activity can also have a huge impact on our mental wellbeing, even a short burst of 10 minutes' brisk walking increases mental alertness, energy and positive mood and participation in regular physical activity can increase self-esteem and can reduce stress and anxiety.

Physical activity

Physical inactivity directly contributes to 1 in 6 deaths in the UK and costs £7.4bn a year. The growth in road transport has been a major factor in reducing levels of physical activity and increasing obesity [7].

Increasing physical activity has the potential to improve the physical and mental health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Doing regular exercise can help to prevent and manage over 20 chronic conditions and diseases, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers. Even small increases in physical activity among those who are the least active can bring great health benefits. A former chief medical officer noted: *“The potential benefits of physical activity to health are huge. If a medication existed which had a similar effect, it would be regarded as a ‘wonder drug’ or ‘miracle cure’”* [7].

In B&NES, there are between 30,000 and 35,000 adults (16+) that are estimated to be inactive, doing less than 30 minutes of physical activity a week¹ [8]. B&NES Schools Health Survey findings from 2019 showed that only 35% of pupils walked at least part of the way to school on the day of the survey. The graph below shows there has been a decline in the amount of people walking for leisure and travel in B&NES since 2018/19 (May 19/20 figures will have been affected by COVID-19 lockdown 1) [8].



For most people, the easiest and most appropriate forms of physical activity are those that can be incorporated into everyday life, such as walking or cycling. Therefore, it is imperative that the built environment in B&NES is designed, created and built to support and enable people to incorporate movement, particularly walking and cycling into their daily lives. Walking and cycling infrastructure design should include a range of aspects, measures and facilities that will make active travel and movement the easy and attractive option for everyone.

Reducing health inequalities

It is essential that the creation of ‘active environments’ is implemented across all areas of B&NES, resulting in safe, accessible and sustainable movement and travel for all social groups which will help improve health outcomes and **reduce inequalities.**

¹The last data set from the Active Lives Survey included three months of data from the first COVID-19 lockdown which would have affected physical activity levels. The report published in May 2020 showed that 34,400 adults were inactive and the report published in May 2019 showed that 29,600 were inactive).

The Marmot Review includes Policy E '*Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities*' with a clear policy recommendation of prioritising policies and interventions that reduce both health inequalities and mitigate climate change, including **'improving active travel across the social gradient'** [9]

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health inequalities and has put a spotlight on the importance of the wider determinants of health, such as where a person lives, the built environment and transport, further emphasising the need to create environments that support people to live healthier lifestyles.

Key evidence on the impact of the built environment on public health

In 2014, Public Health England (PHE) published the ['Everybody Active, Every Day' framework](#), a national, evidence-based approach to support all sectors to embed physical activity into the fabric of daily life and make it an easy, cost-effective and 'normal' choice in every community in England. One of the four action areas of the framework is **'create environments to support active lives'**, that make physical activity the easiest and most practical option in everyday life [10]. PHE published their [Health matters: getting every adult active every day](#) guidance in 2016, which builds on the Everybody active, every day framework. It emphasises that the easiest way of moving more and increasing physical activity is by incorporating movement and activity into our everyday lives, but our neighbourhoods and towns have largely been designed around the car. It states *'Pedestrians, cyclists, and users of other modes of transport that involve physical activity need the highest priority when developing or maintaining streets and roads'*.

In 2018, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published their ['Global action plan on physical activity 2018–2030: more active people for a healthier world'](#), in response to the requests by countries for updated guidance, and a framework of effective and feasible policy actions to increase physical activity at all levels. The global action plan sets out four strategic objectives achievable through 20 policy actions. Strategic objective 2 is **'Create active environments'**, which includes actions *'Improve walking and cycling networks'* and *'Strengthen road safety'* [11].

Improving air quality is vital to making our streets healthier. Air pollution affects the health of everyone and unfairly impacts on the most vulnerable people in our community. Air pollution contributes to health inequalities, because deprived communities are often in areas with higher levels of pollution or near busy roads and people who can afford to do so tend to choose to live in quieter streets [12]. 29% of B&NES carbon emissions come from transport, so increasing walking and cycling have an important role to play in improving air quality. It is estimated that 92% of Nitrogen Oxide emissions in B&NES is caused by road traffic emissions. It is well established that NO₂, particularly at high concentrations, is a respiratory irritant that can cause inflammation of the airways (for example, cough, production of mucous and shortness of breath). Studies have shown associations of NO₂ in outdoor air with reduced lung development (lung function growth) and respiratory infections in early childhood and effects on lung function in adulthood [13].

As outlined above there are several key national publications that have identified and emphasised how the built environment can affect health and wellbeing. Therefore, it is imperative that we create environments which encourage and facilitate people to move, walk and cycle more, increasing physical activity levels, supporting healthy weight maintenance, improving air and noise pollution and reducing inequalities.

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