

# Letter: there is too much traffic for Alex to walk to school, so we drive. A call to action based on a 42-year trend

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## A CALL TO ACTION FOR SAFE ROUTES FOR CHILDREN

We, as physical activity researchers, clinicians, transport specialists and advocates, call on you to use your powers as a transport minister to drastically step up your programme of infrastructure and behaviour change.<sup>1i</sup> This is to help children travel safely and actively for local journeys within their communities by addressing parental/carer fears for their safety.

Such a change requires dedicated funding of at least 10% of the national transport budgets to pay for infrastructure interventions supported by a behaviour change programme. This was first proposed and justified in a report<sup>ii</sup> by the Association of Directors of Public Health as long ago as 2008, endorsed by over 100 concerned academic, health, transport and other organisations. Scotland has made a very welcome start with the doubling of funding for active travel from the Scottish Government, announced in 2017. This gives momentum to the local authorities keen to see a step change in active travel but it is just that, a start. More is needed to raise the UK nations to active travel levels comparable with many mainland European countries. Moreover, public polling suggests that the majority would support such a step change to favour active travel.

We need to take action because children's independent mobility has declined sharply across the UK since the 1970s, when it was first measured. We see this

<sup>i</sup>The call to action has been made in a paper published today. See: Oliver *et al.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>ii</sup><http://www.adph.org.uk/?s=take+action+on+active+travel>

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**Figure 1** Traffic inducing traffic.

not least in terms of increasing car use for the school journey. This reflects the fact that across these four decades politicians and highway engineers have planned for increased car use. So that is what has resulted. Yet, across the same period we have accumulated much greater scientific evidence for the health impacts of this decline in physical activity. The importance of routine physical activity, such as active travel, for heart health, weight management, and mental well-being are just three of the myriad aspects of health gain which are now routinely denied to children. In the process, we have also exposed them to higher levels of pollution inside vehicles, something largely unknown among parents/carers. Children are then habituated into car use as the social norm which is likely to influence their adult travel behaviours (and how they raise the next generation).

We are not starting from scratch. There are locations across the UK where infrastructure provision is making it possible for more children to travel actively, although that these remain exceptions. Successful UK programmes have occurred recently, not least the Cycle Demonstration Towns and Sustainable Travel Towns programmes in England, the London Cycle Superhighways, and the Smarter Choices, Smarter Places programme in Scotland. These were shown to be highly effective and had excellent benefit to cost ratios, unlike many schemes devoted to

expanding the road network capacity for the short-term benefit of car users. In Wales, the Active Travel Act 2013 has concentrated minds on what must follow if the Act is to be shown to have led to a shift in travel behaviour.

If we achieve significant increases in activity among children then we will have enabled increased travel choices for many adults too. Moreover, the health benefits follow the behaviour so that we know that safer environments for children to travel actively, such as to school, will lead to significant cost savings in the future to the National Health Service, contribute too to carbon reduction targets, and ingrain sustainable travel behaviours among tomorrow's generation of adults. And it will have contributed to a broader set of solutions needed to resolve associated issues, not least urban congestion, poor air quality and public transport reliability.

The rhetoric of improving the environment in favour of children's active travel has been visible for at least two decades but tangible changes have largely been absent from transport planning. We suggest that the time is right to redress the imbalance and give back to today's children many of the freedoms that older adults recall and benefited from in terms of the levels of independent mobility.

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## REFERENCE

- 1 Oliver CW, Kelly P, Baker G, *et al.* There is too much traffic for Alex to walk to school, so we drive: a call to action based on a 42-year trend. *Br J Sports Med* 2018. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098933 [Epub ahead of print].