



Briefing note, September 2013

# Linking Transport, Health and Wellbeing



Linking policy in the fields of transport, health and wellbeing is becoming increasingly important to decision makers. This note is a summary of a high-level impact seminar which was organised by University College London (UCL) in collaboration with the Department for Transport (DfT), in September 2013. This seminar presented recent academic research and considered its relevance for current policy debates.

## Main conclusions from discussions

- Walking should be given greater prominence in consideration of transport and health
- Walking has the potential to solve both health and transport externality issues.
- Walking to commute should be promoted.
- Wellbeing should be given a much higher priority in decision making
- Consideration of wellbeing should be integrated into policy priorities.
- Policy-making should be more cross-cutting
- Society and the economy would benefit from more cross-departmental and cross-institutional policy making.
- There are large potential benefits from fostering closer links between academia and policy making.

## Key messages from the presentations

- **Wellbeing** is an increasingly important consideration when formulating transport policies, both nationally and locally.
- **Fostering children's independence and mobility**, particularly through active travel, is crucial for ensuring healthy societies.
- **Concessionary bus travel for older people** has substantially increased levels of public transport use, with associated increases in walking and benefits to public health.
- **Urban green spaces** have diverse benefits for physical and mental health, as a consequence of our human evolution, and their provision needs to be taken more seriously.

## Areas for further research

Further evidence is needed in relation to:

- The economic benefits of urban planning and transport provision
- The health benefits of promoting sustainable transport
- Improved methods to appraise sustainable transport policies

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# Summary Presentations

## “Three things to do with transport to make you feel better” by Professor Nick Tyler, Civil, Environmental, Geomatic Engineering, UCL

Nick Tyler looked at how transport can affect wellbeing and suggested three approaches to try to make that relationship as positive as possible.

1. Make the improvement of wellbeing a primary policy objective, and design the way we plan (cities) to support wellbeing, including removing the need for motorised transport.
2. Reconceptualise our cities in a more holistic way – cutting across the normal sector-silos and contemplate what such thinking means for the transport system and its delivery, including the impacts on environmental emissions.
3. Determine what the transport environment requires of people and how this relates to what they can actually do, in order to improve the design and implementation of accessible transport systems.

## “The importance of children’s mobility” by Professor Roger Mackett, Centre for Transport Studies, UCL

Roger Mackett showed that children are walking less than they used to, mainly because they are travelling more by car and fewer are going out without an adult.

There are a number of reasons why the decline in walking matters:

- the reduction in physical activity contributes to various long-term health conditions and obesity;
- less opportunity to interact with the local environment inhibits learning decision-making skills;
- there is less opportunity for developing social networks;
- there is evidence that physical activity by children can influence examination performance.

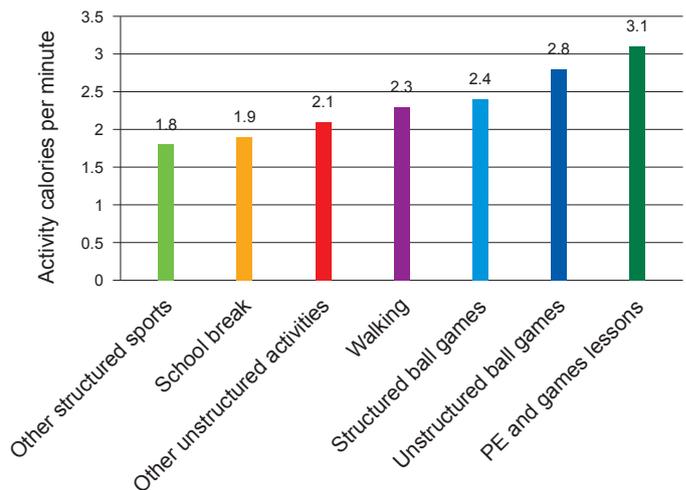
Whilst there are risks (and greater perceived risks) that may affect parental attitudes and behaviour, including traffic danger, fear of assault or molestation, convenience of accompanying children by car and the distance to school, it was shown that some of these concerns are not really valid.

Some policy implications were outlined:

- The need to increase the emphasis of the closeness of school to home in the school selection process;
- Making the local environment safer for walking, cycling and playing by children;



## The most energetic activities for children:



Source: Children’s car use project at UCL

- Discouraging the use of ‘No playing’ signs;
- The need for more initiatives to get children to increase their walking and cycling, including evaluation of schemes and dissemination of findings;
- The need to increase awareness of the long-term health implications of inactivity in childhood.

## Summary Presentations

### “Active travel and bus passes: the impact on public health” Dr Elizabeth Webb, Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL

Elizabeth Webb examined the impact of the National Bus Pass on public transport use, the amount of active travel and levels of obesity. She found that the National Bus Pass for older residents of England has increased public and active transport use and may have conferred a protective effect against obesity. There is also a protective association between active travel to work and cardiovascular risk.

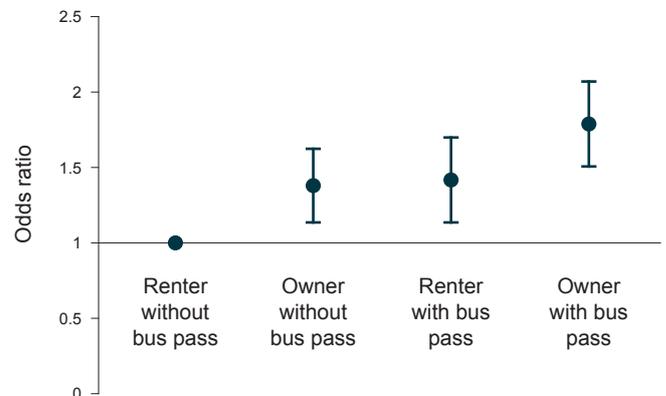
Key findings included:

- Eligibility for free bus travel was associated with around a 50% increased use of public transport among older people.
- Those who used public transport had about 25% reduced odds of being obese compared with those who did not, as did those who were eligible for free local bus travel.
- Having a free pass was associated with four times greater amount of active travel, seven times greater bus use and 15% greater likelihood of walking 3 or more times per week.
- Almost 70% of participants travelled to work using private transport. Using public transport, walking, or cycling to work was associated with a 20% lower likelihood of being overweight.
- Walking or cycling was associated with a lower likelihood of having diabetes, and walking was associated with a lower likelihood of having hypertension.

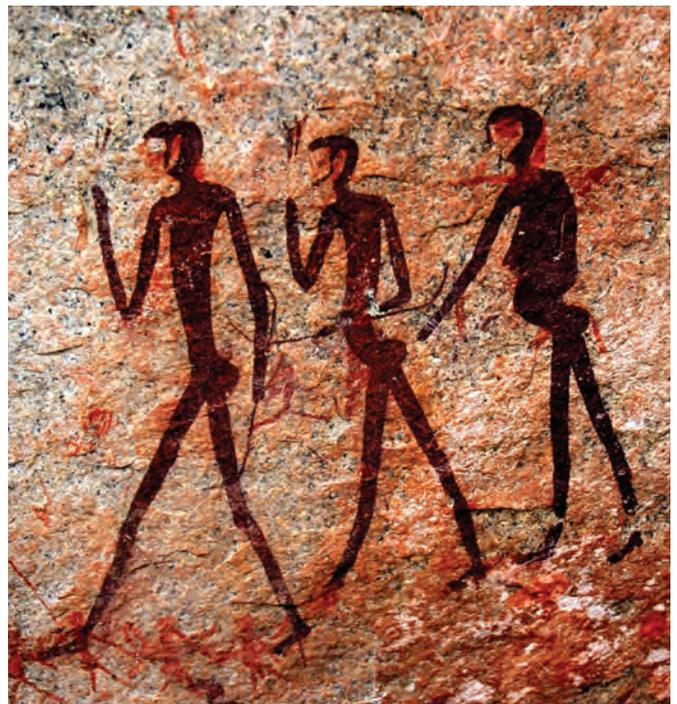
### “Evolutionary Determinants of Health and Urban Wellbeing: a walk in the park?” by Gustav Milne, Institute of Archaeology, UCL

Gustav Milne pointed out that although we are now adapting culturally to modern urban life, we have not evolved anatomically at the same speed. There is therefore a profound dichotomy between the world we currently live in, and the one we were genetically, metabolically, biologically, physiologically and psychologically designed to inhabit. If, for example, we don't adopt nutrition and activity regimes that broadly simulate those of our palaeolithic ancestors, then obesity, diabetes and cardio-vascular problems will inevitably follow. Our bodies are designed to be active, to take exercise on a daily basis: so transport policies and town plans should be designed around this most basic genetic imperative. Transport policies should integrate these aspects when planning urban streets, highways, junctions and the provision of public transport facilities.

### Walking $\geq 3$ times a week



Adjusted for age, sex, population size of area of residence, car ownership, amount of travel



It was suggested that:

- Walking and cycling should be encouraged as a social norm.
- Safe and direct route ways for short and long-distance pedestrian and cyclist trips should be provided;
- Urban planners should reconfigure the modern town, taking into account the psychological, biological, social and physiological importance of urban green space, as well as the greater provision of playing fields/pitches

## Summary of the discussions

### The importance of walking

Walking policies, in particular, were discussed, as this mode was felt to be generally undervalued by policymakers. Most participants agreed that:

- Walking as a way of travelling is cheap and effective. It is also an opportunity to engage directly with nature.
- Encouraging an increase in walking can result in quick policy wins that have long-term benefits, particularly with regard to health.
- Both planners and politicians need to be made aware of the benefits of walking. The economic value of walking should be better promoted.

The key policy levers available to deliver more walking include:

- the lowering of the speed limit to 20mph in residential areas
- walking clubs
- improvements to walking paths (e.g. better lighting)
- engagement with parents, schools and communities
- the improvement of signage so that it displays the time taken to walk to a destination rather than the distance in miles.

### Improving policy-making

More generally participants considered that wellbeing should be central to government decision making. Economic growth is a significant part of the story, but should not overshadow the importance of wellbeing.

There is a need within government for more inter and cross-departmental collaboration. In addition, there should be more cross institutional policy making between different stakeholders. This includes:

- Local Health and Wellbeing Boards need to join up with the local planning and transport bodies in towns and cities.
- Cross-departmental cooperation between departments such as DCLG, DfT and DH is key for better spatial planning, and improving the walking environment.
- Local consultation will be important. Academics and policy makers need to involve local communities from the start (i.e. when setting objectives)
- There is a need to establish a common language between those working in the transport, health, education and planning fields.

Departmental officials welcomed the credibility that evidence-based academic research can bring to debates; such research can also help to overcome technical problems and promote values that could be incorporated into policy.

### Further research

Many participants agreed that there is a need to further examine:

- The economic benefits of urban planning and transport provision
- The health benefits of particular types of transport provision and how this will reduce pressures on the NHS in the future
- Different ways of appraising social/health impacts of transport in addition to monetary appraisal, such as multi-criteria analysis

### Background

This seminar is part of a programme of activities funded through an EPSRC 'Impact Acceleration Award'. The initiative aims to create bridges between senior researchers, key policy makers and practitioners working in transport to ensure that significant research outputs are rapidly absorbed into policy making and practice, and have practical impact.

Exploring the links between transport, health and wellbeing is a growing research field, and there are many recent findings which could be integrated into policy making. This seminar was an opportunity for key policy makers to hear about recent UCL academics' findings and to discuss with the researchers concerned their relevance to policy making and practice. The following institutions were represented: DfT, the Department of Health, Public Health England, Transport for London, Greater London Authority, Newcastle Upon Tyne, the Open Data Institute, Age UK, Arup, RAC Foundation, Transport KNT, Campaign for Better Transport, The Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation, Cogitamus Ltd and University of Birmingham.

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### References

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- Mackett, R. L. (2013). Children's travel behaviour and its health implications. *Transport Policy*, 26, 66-72.
- Webb, E., Netuveli, G. & Millett, C. (2012). Free bus passes, use of public transport and obesity among older people in England. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 66, 176-180.
- Evolutionary Determinants of Health: the Eden Protocol: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/milne-sporting-chance>