

Inquiry into safe places to play and hang out

Sustrans response

April 2010

Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity.

Our vision is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment. We work on practical, innovative solutions to the transport challenges facing us all. Sustrans is the charity behind the award winning National Cycle Network, Safe Routes to Schools, Bike It, TravelSmart, Active Travel, Connect2 and Liveable Neighbourhoods, all projects that are changing our world one mile at a time.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Sustrans

Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity. Our vision is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment. Our mission is to work everyday on practical and imaginative solutions to the transport challenges affecting us all. Our aim is to transform the UK's transport system and culture, so that:

- the environmental impacts of transport, including its contribution to climate change and resource depletion, are significantly reduced
- people can choose more often to travel in ways that benefit their health
- people have access to essential local services without the need to use a car
- local streets and public spaces become places for people to enjoy.

Our work includes the National Cycle Network, Safe Routes to School and Bike It, Low Carbon Travel, Active Travel (to promote health) and TravelSmart (Individualised Travel Marketing).

1.2. Our response to this inquiry

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Children and Young People's Committee of the National Assembly for Wales' inquiry into safe places to play and hang out.

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the impact transport policy can have on social interaction and social cohesion within urban communities, and the desirability of moving away from our current over-reliance on private motorised transport.

Studies from as far back as the 1970s show that lower motor traffic levels are associated with significantly higher levels of social interaction, and that in neighbourhoods that are conducive to walking and cycling people are more likely to know their neighbours, participate politically, trust others and be socially engaged. By creating environments which support walking, cycling and active play within urban areas, urban transport policy can make a vital contribution to social cohesion, neighbourhood revitalisation and community well-being.

Sustrans have been helping to ensure children and young people's safe and independent travel for the past fifteen years. Through our work on the school journey, we have provided information, support and encouragement to thousands of families to help them walk and cycle more. We have raised and invested millions of pounds into the creation of safe walking and cycling routes, many of which provide informal play and safe social space for young people. This submission focuses mainly on DIY Streets which works to make residential streets safer and more attractive, in order to reclaim these doorstep spaces for the whole community, including children.

In summary, we suggest that

- **Traffic is a key barrier which needs to be addressed in order to enable children's play, as well as their ability to travel safely and independently. Local residential streets are a key public space which are currently under-used and under-valued as social space due to the negative impacts of car traffic**

- **Communities need to be engaged in the process of designing better streets. This will require “revenue” funding to be made available to accompany capital expenditure in transport**
- **Sustrans’ pilot DIY Streets project has been shown to significantly improve the conditions for children’s play, and funding for this type of approach should be allocated**
- **Sustrans has made a series of recommendations regarding children’s access to play provision which could be adopted by Welsh Assembly Government as guidance or policy to local authorities**
- **Behavioural projects which support children, young people and their families to make healthy active travel and play choices should be funded by Welsh Assembly Government.**

2. Children's play, safety and the street environment

2.1. The problems caused by traffic

Traffic is a key problem in neighbourhoods across the country. As car use has increased, so more of our streets have become dominated by cars and speeding traffic, separating people from each other and from the destinations they want to reach. Roads clogged up by congestion are unpleasant, reducing quality of life. This all leads to a vicious spiral by causing more people to drive or stay indoors, further reducing face-to-face contact and damaging local social networks.

The importance of traffic problems is repeatedly cited in national and local surveys. For example, in the 2007/08 Survey of English Housing it was the single highest concern reported by people about their local area – ahead of 'litter and rubbish' and 'vandalism'. When the British Crime Survey broadened its definition of 'anti-social behaviour' to include speeding traffic and nuisance parking, these were the most commonly mentioned concerns (twice as common as the more publicised behaviours of 'teenagers hanging around' and 'people being drunk or rowdy'). Our own research reinforces this: 84% of the 2,131 residents we consulted with across the UK during 2009 said that traffic issues (e.g. speeding traffic or nuisance parking) are problems on their streets. An earlier survey we carried out in 2007/08 with over 270 residents showed that 86% did not feel their street was an area where they would socialise. Qualitative monitoring information from our TravelSmart projects reinforces these findings; many of our door-step conversations with householders identify their concerns about traffic in their communities. Quality of life surveys across the country repeatedly show that traffic congestion is rated as one of the three things that most need improving.

Streets full of cars and speeding traffic prevent children from playing outside, as parents worry about their safety. 'Making the Connections' - the Social Exclusion Unit's report into transport and social exclusion (2004) found that three-quarters of parents let their children play outside less than they used to, and nearly a half are concerned about busy roads. In the English Play Strategy consultation (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008), 74% of adult respondents wanted 'a number of general traffic-calming measures' to 'allow children to play more safely in and around their streets and on the way to play areas'.

Busy roads provide barriers particularly for the elderly, the young or those with mobility restrictions. Numerous studies, including most recently a University of the West of England study on three streets in Bristol ('Driven to Excess', 2008) have shown that there is less social interaction on heavily-trafficked streets. This in turn leads to increased fear of crime as fewer people know their neighbourhoods and use their public space. 83% of residents we surveyed in 2007/08 wanted to improve the sense of community in their area.

'Making the Connections' shows that the problems caused by traffic are most pronounced in disadvantaged areas (including problems of noise and pollution). Car-dominated transport systems perpetuate social injustice and isolation as they reduce access to jobs, shops and services for the quarter of households in Wales that do not have access to a car. In communities like Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr as many as 35% of families are car-less (2001 Census data). Children in deprived areas are five times more likely to be hit by a car than their more affluent counterparts. More than a quarter of child pedestrian casualties happen in the most deprived 10 % of wards.

The problems caused by traffic also extend to our health. As traffic has increased, so people walk and cycle less for everyday trips and have become increasingly inactive. The latest data from the Welsh Health Survey (2008) indicates that only about 30% of adults undertake sufficient physical activity to benefit their health (the current recommendation is 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on 5 or more days of the week). At the other end of the scale 34% are classed as sedentary (not achieving 30 minutes on any day of the week). This is contributing to the current obesity epidemic (and the increase in a range of other health conditions such as cardiovascular disease). The Welsh Health Survey (2008) shows that over half of men (62%) and women (53%) are classified as overweight or obese, the proportions rising to 72% and 62%, respectively among 45-64 year olds. The Millennium Cohort Survey found that 22% of Welsh children aged three were overweight and just over 5% were obese. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (2005-6) showed that Wales had among the highest levels of overweight and obesity among the participating European and North American countries at 21% and 18% for 15-year-old boys and girls, respectively. Obese children, especially girls, are more likely to come from lower socio-economic groups. To address this, government strategies (including *Creating an Active Wales* strategy) recommend creating local environments that encourage everyday walking and cycling and active play (recognising these are the easiest ways for most of us to incorporate exercise into our lives). This is further reinforced by guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Public Health Guidance 08, 2008). This includes making sure our streets are safe for everyone to walk, cycle or simply socialise and be outdoors, and for children to play.

2.2. The need to involve residents in developing solutions to these problems

It is now well recognised that if problems within local neighbourhoods are to be successfully addressed, then local residents must be involved in developing the solutions. For example, in 'The social value of public space' (2008) the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 'Regeneration strategies or policing approaches intended to 'design out crime' can end up 'designing out' people. Approaches that strip public spaces of all features vulnerable to vandalism or misuse actively discourage local distinctiveness and public amenity.'

In Sustrans' 2009 consultation, 70% of residents said they wanted to be involved in improving their streets, rather than the council doing it without them. However, unlike other sectors, community involvement hasn't yet been embedded into transport practice. This makes traffic problems hard to tackle since they require communities to engage with highways authorities. For example, an evaluation of local area agreements and local strategic partnerships (CLG, July 2009) showed that the transport sector has been the one where they have most struggled to secure change. Help is needed to bring communities and councils together (confirmed by our recent consultations with both residents and organisations).

Involving communities is not just important to ensure that the right problems and solutions are identified, it is also important for general wellbeing. A 2008 Young Foundation report found that 'Providing greater opportunities for residents to influence decisions affecting their neighbourhoods' was important for wellbeing, as was facilitating 'regular contact between neighbours' and helping 'residents gain the confidence to exercise control over local circumstances'. (Source: Hothi, M Neighbourliness + Empowerment= Wellbeing. Is there a formula for happy communities Young Foundation 2008.)

2.3. Relevant policy and guidance in Wales

There are signs within official policy that this kind of approach has now been acknowledged and acted upon. *Wales Transport Strategy* makes provision for this type of work by enshrining the principles of "Safe routes for communities" and supporting 20mph zones. Guidance is also

supportive: the 2007 *Manual for Streets* jointly published (and this is significant in itself) by Department for Transport, Department for Communities and Local Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. Its espousal of a “place over movement” approach for lightly-trafficked residential streets, and recommendations for quality auditing to replace the safety audit, and a collaborative design process, are all significant steps towards creating more people-friendly streets. Concern remains that the document deals only (explicitly, at least) with new streets in residential areas, leaving the development of new mixed-use streets and all retro-fitting work in somewhat vague territory. A “sequel” document (working title: *Manual for Streets 2: Wider application of the principles*) is currently being drafted which is intended to address these gaps.

The recently published ‘Creating an Active Wales’ recognizes the importance of the environment in creating everyday physical activity opportunities to reverse the trend of sedentary lifestyles. The Welsh Assembly Government’s Play Policy (2002), was supported by the Implementation Plan (2006) which contains a number of recommendations which remain relevant today.

3. The Evidence from DIY Streets

3.1. Why DIY Streets

To address the problems caused by traffic, UK government funded a small number of Home Zones from 2001 in England and Wales. A home zone is a street or group of streets where pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles share the space on equal terms, with cars travelling at little more than walking pace. Home zones challenge the traditional distinction between carriageway and footway in order to redefine the street as a valuable part of the local community's living space. The actual design features in a home zone vary widely, since the process of design should be led by resident input and should respond to the architecture and other existing features of the community. Nevertheless, most home zones combine features which physically calm traffic (e.g. chicanes, pinch points) with features that “psychologically” calm traffic by making the space look and feel very different to a conventional street (e.g. a shared, level surface for both vehicles and other activity, planting, artwork)

The implementation of the government's programme of home zones was mixed, with specific difficulties arising in relation to the process of involving residents in some areas, and general concern about the high costs of implementing the shared surface which was a feature of many of the home zones. On the other hand, more traditional traffic-calming schemes, although much less expensive, tend to be unpopular both with residents and drivers as it is not implemented in order to create a more social space but rather as an end in itself.

In response, Sustrans established the DIY Streets pilot to work closely with residents in 11 areas across England and Wales to develop more affordable people-led solutions. Picking up on the community-led process, and some of the more innovative aspects of the design approach piloted in home zones, this project is proving to be successful, and we plan to work with further communities using this approach over the coming years.

3.2. Play in the process of DIY Streets

As outlined above, an important aspect of the DIY Streets project is the process of working collaboratively with residents over a number of months to develop the design. One of the goals of this process is to work with residents to help shift perceptions about the street from being exclusively a space for cars, to being a space that could have multiple functions. Activities include street walks and drop-in sessions, closing the street for parties and trials of possible designs. Children were also involved intensively with a number of the public arts projects which formed part of the final designs of a number of the DIY Streets projects. A selection of images from these events probably best illustrate the ways in which this process can help create play opportunities – it is not simply the physical changes to the street that lead to the benefits accrued through a DIY Streets project.



Children customise the proposed location of a raised table during a street trial in Sheffield



A local young person helps the DIY Street designer to set out a proposed design using straw bales during a trial in Torquay



Young residents of Heol Degwm, Bridgend, pose proudly with artwork in their street which they helped to design



Children help design mosaics to be laid into the new features in their street in Cardiff



Young people learn new skills by helping to carve totems which were then installed as a gateway to their street in Manchester



Young people in residents use their street space to learn cycle skills at an event in Coventry.

3.3. Findings from the DIY Streets project

Interim evaluation findings was made public at the national DIY Streets conference in March 2010, where project partners, residents, and others gathered in Bristol to review the project's outcomes. From the door-to-door surveys carried out in six of the eleven streets, there were significant improvements in residents' perceptions about traffic. Nearly 60% believe traffic speeds had fallen and more than 75% believe volumes had been reduced. More than two-thirds also felt that their street had become greener and more attractive, relating strongly to improvements in perceptions about streets being places which were safe for socialising and children's play.

To understand these findings in more detail, below are two case studies from the project.

Clapton Terrace, Hackney

Clapton Terrace is north-east of central London, situated in the borough of Hackney. It is a short street running parallel to the busy A107 adjacent to Clapton Common. The street faces onto a small area of communal land.

The street was heavily used as a 'rat run' in order to cut time spent in traffic queues. Though no accidents had been recorded, the street was described as 'an accident waiting to happen' by many residents. The volume of traffic and perimeter fencing meant residents felt cut off from the central green space. There were also concerns about high levels of parking by non-residents in the daytime. In addition, because there are a lot of flats, there was a proliferation of rubbish bins which littered the pavements and blocked the pavement for pedestrians.



Before



After

Facts and background:

- Capital (build and materials) cost: £50,000
- Type: Terraced Georgian housing mainly consisting of flats
- No. of dwellings: 80 properties
- Length of street: 165 Metres
- Project partnership between: Sustrans, London Borough of Hackney and the residents of Clapton Terrace
- Funded by: Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, London Borough of Hackney and Transport for London (TfL)

Street issues:

- Speeding traffic
- Heavily used as a cut through (rat run) by drivers avoiding the traffic on Upper Clapton road

- Proliferation of rubbish bins littering the street
- High noise levels

Solutions found:

- Entrance surface treatment - Either end of Clapton Terrace has had a surface treatment to signal to drivers that they are entering a new environment, with the intention that they will drive accordingly.
- Raised speed table and pedestrian area - A large speed table has been placed in the middle of the street. This slows down traffic and also acts as an informal pedestrian crossing to the communal bins and common land opposite their houses.
- Trees have been planted in between the bins and the entrance to the common land these add greenery and a focal point for the houses opposite.
- Communal rubbish and recycling bins - There are now 7 communal bins (5 rubbish and 2 for recycling) which means the pavements now have space for pedestrians, including those with prams or wheelchairs.
- Median strip - This is still to be built once funding has been confirmed by TfL (most likely in 2010). The strip will be placed on Clapton Common to block traffic from turning right into Clapton Terrace and therefore stop it being used as a rat run by drivers.

Findings:

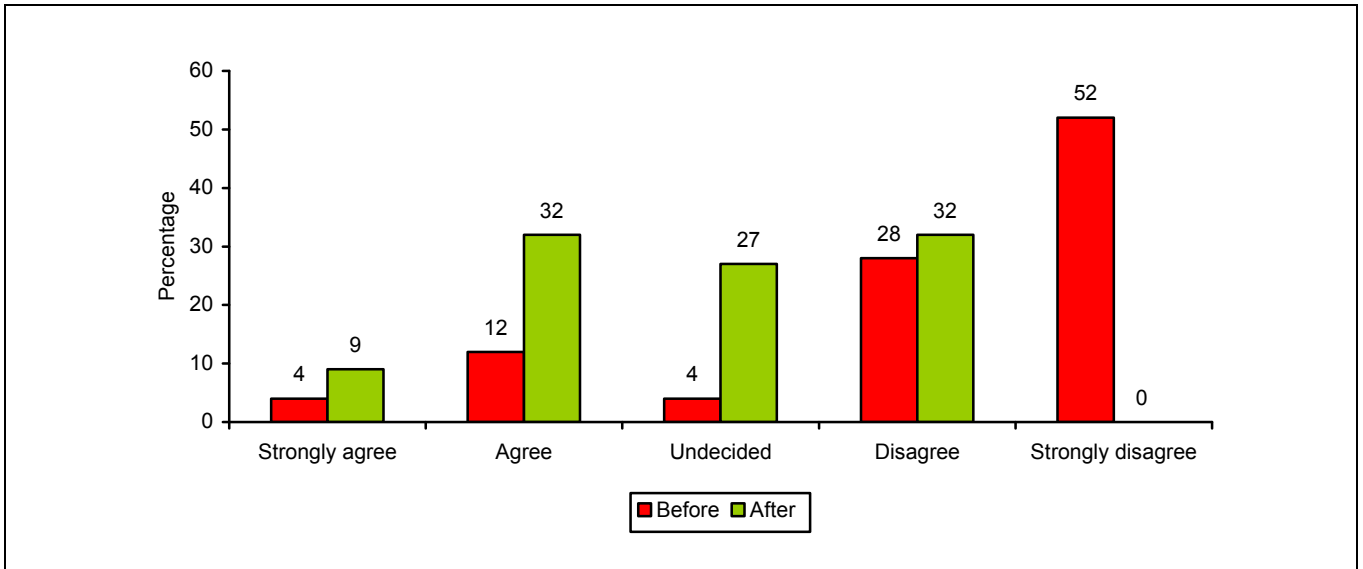
- 55% of residents agree that traffic speeds have been reduced
- 14% of residents agree that traffic volumes have been reduced

This is further backed up by traffic volume and speed counts which were conducted at the outset and again when the project was complete. The volume data shows an 18% drop in volume from 205 vehicles on average over a 24 hour period before the project to 167 after the project was completed. The speed data collection shows almost a mile per hour drop in the average speed from 15.5 to 14.8 miles per hour.

- 86% of residents say the street is greener and more attractive than it was
- 76% now feel that the street is pedestrian friendly up from only 54% at the outset
- 60% of residents surveyed say they are socialising with people in their street who they didn't know before
- 90% of those surveyed would recommend DIY Streets to their friends, family and neighbouring streets

All of the factors above have an impact on whether children and young people will be allowed to spend time in the street for play and other activities, but the evaluation also asked directly how safe residents felt their street was for these activities, before and after the changes to the street.

Do you feel your street is safe for children to play?



Somerset Street, Cardiff

Somerset Street is a short row of terraced houses found near the centre of Cardiff in North Grangetown. A green space has recently been developed close to the street as part of the area's regeneration programme.

Residents are concerned about noise levels and safety issues caused by inappropriate use of "mini motos" in their street. There are also concerns related to resident parking.



Before

After

Facts and background:

- Capital (build and materials) cost - £150,000 (£54,000) Cardiff resurfaced the carriageway, significantly upgraded pavement surfaces and replaced street lighting as well as implementing DIY Streets features. The total cost was £150,000 while the comparable cost with other DIY Streets projects (where resurfacing didn't take place) would be £54,000
- Type - Terrace Victorian housing
- No. of dwellings - 50 Properties
- Length of street - 141 Metres
- Project partnership between - Sustrans, Cardiff City Council and the residents of Somerset Street.
- Funded by – Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Cardiff City Council

Streets traffic issues:

- Speeding traffic
- Litter
- Traffic noise from mini motos
- Worries over high level of non-resident parking in the street

Solutions found:

- Three build-outs have been built in the street (one filled with plants and the other two with trees) to act as speed deterrents as traffic is forced to slow down to navigate around them.
- Mosaics have been placed around the tree bases to brighten up the street and give it a unique identity.
- A raised table has been laid down in the centre of the street to further reduce drivers' speeds.
- Trees and plants have been added to provide greenery and break up the grey tarmac.

Findings:

- 58% of residents strongly agreed or agreed that the amount of traffic has been reduced
- 82% of residents strongly agreed or agreed that traffic speeds had been reduced following

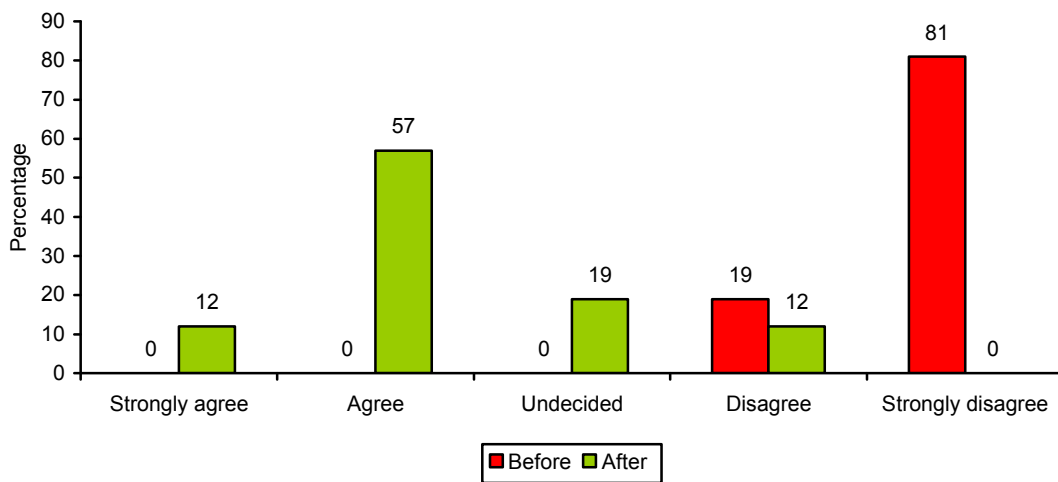
the street changes

- 42% strongly agreed or agreed there is less parking from non-residents

Interestingly, the quantitative monitoring of Somerset Street found very little actual difference in speeds and traffic volumes (which were both already very low in compared with other DIY Streets locations). However, coupled with the significant improvements in the findings related to children’s play below, the extent to which our behaviour is influenced by our perceptions of the external environment can quite clearly be seen.

Before the DIY Streets project, 28% of residents agreed that the street was pedestrian friendly. Following completion, this increased to 82%.

Like Clapton Terrace, we also asked residents if they felt their street was safe for children to play



While the pilot schemes did not explicitly set out to provide play facilities, it is clear from the results that DIY Streets (like home zones before them) help to deliver door-step play opportunities for children and young people. Addressing traffic speeds and volumes and reclaiming space are important first steps, and can be delivered by traditional means – as exemplified through WAG’s Safe Routes in Communities projects. However, DIY Streets does this and more – the approach has the potential to deliver much more ambitious, child-friendly places by drawing in urban and play design expertise, and by putting communities at the heart of the design process and supporting through a process to shift perceptions and physically adapt the environment.

4. Evidence from other Sustrans projects

4.1. Active Travel and Play

From across the developed world there is strong evidence that compared with previous generations, children spend less time playing outdoors and that they walk and cycle less. Children seek contact with their friends through play activity outdoors and to achieve this they need to be able to move around their local environment as widely and safely as possible from an early age. An illustrative study of children living on housing estates found that streets and pavements were the most frequently used locations for play, because this is where children can meet up in a spontaneous way, and also because a significant amount of play involves moving around the estate, on foot or by bicycle, either for its own sake or to call on friends (Source: Chartered Institute of Housing /Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997 Child's Play: Facilitating play on housing estates).

In response to this evidence, Sustrans began work in 2008 on its Active Travel and Play programme, to promote active outdoor play and active travel in children and their families as a health enhancing physical activity. A key output of this programme is *Routes to Play*, practical guidance to local authorities in England on how to ensure children's safe and independent access to play facilities. It makes the following recommendations:

- Local Transport Plans should prioritise walking, cycling and public transport access to play spaces as well as recognising residential streets and local routes as places where children should be able to play
- Local Transport Plans should link with local Play and Green Infrastructure Strategies
- Local Development Frameworks should incorporate formal and informal play spaces and routes to these through active travel
- Local Play Strategies and Green Infrastructure Strategies should take walking and cycling into account as the best way for children and young people to reach play spaces and opportunities independently and play freely in their local neighbourhoods.
- In the design of new play spaces and the management of existing ones, councils should involve children and young people in decision-making around transport and safe access.
- Transport and Planning departments and the police should collaborate with parks, open spaces and play services on practical solutions to improve active access to play sites.
- Parks departments should review cycling restrictions in parks
- Parks departments should provide cycle parking at play spaces
- Youth and play services teams should run cycling-related events within open spaces used for play
- Local authorities should implement authority-wide 20 mph default limits in all built-up areas.
- Transport planners and green space teams should work with colleagues in youth and play services and arts development to enhance the play potential of traffic-free routes through the installation of artworks, play equipment and natural play features

- Transport and leisure teams should show routes to play spaces on local walking and cycling maps they produce
- Take all opportunities to reinforce walking and cycling messages in printed and online publicity of play and leisure.

4.2. Bike It

Our practical projects located in schools and communities offer young people and families the chance to increase their skills and confidence for active travel and active play. Often people face specific barriers or are wary of taking up new behaviours, so being able to access community led activities makes all the difference overcoming the issues they face.

Bike It is a school based project to increase levels of cycling. The aim is to create a pro-cycling culture in the school that continues long after the Bike It officer has left.

The first year Bike It results in Wales showed an increase to 39% of all pupils at Bike It schools cycling at least once a week to school. This was up from the baseline of 13%. The results for the specific target age group 9 – 12 year olds are even more impressive; 43% reported cycling at least once a week (up from the baseline of 13%). Walking to school remained static at 40% - the change to cycling came from car use where 41% reported coming to school by car the day of the end of year survey, compared to 48% at the baseline survey.

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