



## Health

Increasing walking, wheeling and cycling has huge potential to improve our physical and mental health, but it won't just happen on its own – we have to create the conditions to make it happen.

### Active travel gets us moving

Exercise can help prevent or treat more than 12 different health conditions, including type II diabetes, heart disease, cancer, depression and dementia<sup>1</sup>. No wonder it's been described as a "miracle cure" by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges<sup>1</sup>. For older people, staying active can help maintain independence and mobility, and reduce the risk of falls.



In Scotland, one-third of adults and more than one-quarter of children don't get the recommended levels of physical activity<sup>2</sup>, costing the economy an estimated £91 million per year<sup>3</sup>. The proportion of people meeting physical activity guidelines is lower among women, disabled people, some ethnic minorities and people living in more deprived areas<sup>4,5</sup> - the same groups who currently feel least confident using active modes of transport<sup>6</sup>. The least active people stand to gain the most from moderate changes<sup>7</sup> - exactly the group most likely to make the switch to active travel if infrastructure improves<sup>8</sup>.

If the conditions are right, active travel can be one of the best forms of exercise: it's cheap, convenient, and can be incorporated into our daily journeys. Around half of all journeys in Scotland could easily be made by walking, wheeling or cycling, especially with the growing availability of e-assist<sup>9</sup>. Better integration with public transport - for instance, safe routes to transport hubs, cycle and wheelchair spaces on trains and buses, and 'park and bike' schemes - could increase this number further.

### Active travel cuts air pollution



In many Scottish towns and cities air pollution exceeds safety standards, with road traffic the biggest contributor. Particles and gases released by vehicles increase the risk of heart and lung disease, strokes and cancers; they can also cause premature birth and impair children's lung development<sup>10,11</sup>. Across the UK, it is estimated that 340,000 years of life are prematurely lost each year due to air pollution, with children, older people and those with other health conditions at greatest risk<sup>12</sup>. Several studies have suggested that poor air quality is associated with increased risk of death from Covid-19<sup>13</sup>. Even so, the benefits of being active outweigh the potential risks from exposure to air pollution. Building well-connected active travel networks can improve air quality as people choose walking, wheeling and cycling<sup>7, 14,15</sup>.

### Active travel helps our mental health

Physical activity is beneficial for a number of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, and also helps improve self-esteem and mental wellbeing<sup>1,16</sup>. Active travel is consistently identified as

the least stressful way to commute, and switching from driving to active modes appears to improve wellbeing<sup>16</sup>. Among children and young people, being active improves confidence and school performance<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, measures that enable walking, wheeling and cycling help create connected, cohesive communities<sup>7</sup>. Neighbourhoods that encourage active travel – with wide pavements, seating, lighting, greenery and protected cycle space – have higher levels of social interaction and community feeling, and people report feeling safer and less worried about crime<sup>17</sup>.



## Active travel can benefit everyone

Creating environments that support active travel can help tackle health inequalities. At present, people living in the most deprived communities in Scotland drive less but suffer a greater health burden from air pollution, noise and accidents than those in wealthier areas<sup>18</sup>. People living in the most deprived communities, particularly children, are up to five times more likely to be killed by traffic collisions than those in the least deprived areas<sup>14</sup>.

Increasing motor traffic over recent decades has made parents reluctant to let children play outdoors, limiting their opportunities for physical activity and social development<sup>19</sup>. Evidence suggests that neighbourhoods which are better for active travel help children benefit from active play<sup>20</sup>.

For many older and disabled people, the design of their local neighbourhoods has a major influence on their ability to participate in their communities and be physically active<sup>21</sup> - not least because they are less likely to have a car and typically spend more time in their immediate neighbourhoods<sup>22,23</sup>. Many disabled people find their local environment prevents or discourages them from walking, wheeling or cycling - for instance, uneven and cluttered pavements, cycle lanes that are too narrow for non-standard bikes, or sections that require them to dismount<sup>23</sup>. Yet many people use cycles as a mobility aid and one-third of disabled people who don't currently cycle would like to start<sup>24</sup>. Measures to reducing overall traffic volumes can also make neighbourhoods more accessible and free up space for those who have to use a car<sup>22,23</sup>.

## What needs to change?

At the moment, the way our towns and cities are designed puts many people off from using active travel to get around - especially women, older people, ethnic minorities, and disabled people: they just don't feel safe doing so<sup>6</sup>. This is despite the fact that many people want to walk, wheel, and cycle more and think that doing so would make their neighbourhoods nicer places to live<sup>25</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how important it is that everyone has easy access to high-quality outdoor space, and how freedom from motor traffic can lead to rapid increases in walking, wheeling, and cycling.

The overwhelming evidence suggests that we can dramatically increase active travel by making it easy, safe, and accessible to all<sup>20,26</sup>. To give everyone in Scotland an equal chance to reap the health benefits of better streets, we're asking all candidates for the Holyrood election to sign up to our three asks:



- **Accessibility:** Ensure that our streets, paths and footways are accessible to everyone, whether on foot or using any form of mobility aid; by putting accessibility at the heart of our street design, we will create places everyone can use and enjoy.
- **Infrastructure:** Create a long-term programme to rebuild our villages, towns and cities around walking, wheeling and cycling, with active travel infrastructure everyone can use - the initial goal should be that every child who wants to can walk, wheel or cycle to their school.
- **Investment:** Provide the sustained, long-term investment needed to start this transformation of Scotland into a country that enables active travel everywhere - starting from 10% of the transport budget and rising to 20% over the course of the parliament.

<sup>1</sup>Looking for footnotes? See <http://walkwheelcyclevote.scot/why/healthier/health-briefing-bibliography/> for all the documents and research cited here.