walk wheel cycle vote

Accessibility

As part of our campaign for inclusive streets, we are asking all candidates for the Holyrood election to sign up to three pledges to improve our streets, on accessibility, infrastructure and investment. This briefing outlines the importance of accessibility:

We're calling on candidates to 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.

What's the problem as things stand?

Too many people trying to get around their local neighbourhood on foot, by cycle or using a mobility aid find it difficult, discouraging or just plain dangerous. This is especially the case for disabled people, children and older adults, with inaccessible streets hindering their access to vital services and opportunities – from work, education and healthcare to shopping, recreation and meeting friends[1-3]. Thanks to decades of poor design, many people are missing out on opportunities for social connections, independence and physical activity.

The obstacles are legion:

- narrow and uneven pavements cluttered with advertising boards and temporary signs
- insufficient opportunities to cross roads safely, or to pause and rest
- mobility aids such as adapted bikes are expensive and can't currently be paid for using the mobility allowance provided through the Motability scheme
- the cycling and wheeling network is fragmented, unsafe and often unsuitable for people using non-standard cycles or with mobility problems, because routes are too narrow, have sharp turns or require people to dismount and walk or be able to lift their bike.

For people who are already too often excluded, inaccessible streets exert a heavy toll on their time, finances, independence and wellbeing[2,4].

Even when active travel is possible, it's not always pleasant - noise, traffic fumes, speeding cars and safety concerns blight too many streets and discourage us from lingering or enjoying the journey.

More than three-quarters of people over 65 can't cross the road in the time allowed at most pedestrian crossings; among older people with disabilities, the share may be as high as 98%[5,6]	One-third of people who use their cycle as a mobility aid have been unable to park or store a non-standard cycle somewhere because of inadequate facilities[7]	Older people who live in an environment where it is easy & enjoyable to go outdoors are more likely to achieve recommended levels of physical activity and to be satisfied with their lives[1]

How could things be different?

Imagine towns and cities where…

- Streets are enabling, rather than disabling, for people with any kind of disability – allowing them to get around as easily, safely, and independently as many non-disabled people take for granted[4,8].
- Choosing to walk, wheel, or cycle is the most appealing and convenient option for everyday journeys, rather than the preserve of a small minority[9].
- Children can safely enjoy the independence, freedom and developmental benefits of playing outdoors[10].
- Our streets and other places encourage social interaction, trust and a sense of community[11].

The good news is, we know a lot about how to create these kinds of places. What we need are policies and processes to make it happen.

Who would benefit?

Wherever we live and whatever our needs, we all use the streets: they're about as fundamental a public service as you can imagine. As the gateway to public life, they need to be accessible for everyone, not just the young, non-disabled, and those with access to a car.

'Universal design' refers to the well-established principle that focusing on usability for disabled people tends to result in an end product that's better for everyone. This applies as much to streets as it does to vegetable peelers or office chairs[12]: by paying attention to the needs of those for whom our current street design isn't working, such as children, disabled people and older people, we will make our places better for everyone.

That's partly because these groups make up a substantial proportion of the population. Almost one in five people in the UK have a disability[9], of which mobility impairment is the most common[13]: evidence suggests that transport is among their biggest concerns[14].

Moreover, with people over 75 now the fastest-growing age group in Scotland[15], making sure our streets are age-friendly is very much a majority issue. And what works for 80 year olds tends also to work for 8 year olds: when asked what they want from their neighbourhoods, both age groups consistently say less traffic; safe spaces to walk, cycle and wheel; and connections within communities that give them independence and freedom[16,17]. By incorporating these priorities into street design, we can reverse worrying trends in physical inactivity among children and social isolation for older people.

Better design and infrastructure also have the power to knock down barriers and challenge stereotypes: 31% of disabled people who don't currently cycle would like to start, while for some disabled people, cycling is easier than walking[18]. Whilst cars are important for some disabled people's mobility, it's important to recognise this isn't universal: in fact, disabled people are twice as likely NOT to have access to a car than non-disabled people and are more likely to rely on walking, wheeling, cycling and public transport[9]. We therefore need to preserve car access for those who need it, whilst working to make the alternatives better and more accessible for everyone. All the evidence shows that there's a huge unmet need for active travel that can be unlocked by more accessible streets[9,20,21].

What needs to change?

The barriers are design choices and social norms, not people's physical abilities. Although these choices and norms are often long-standing, they can be changed – as long as we act on our societal commitment (and legal duty) to equality. Instead of confining those on foot, cycling and using wheelchairs to the margins, we can rebalance our streets to ensure that there is enough space for everyone's needs.

Looking for footnotes? See http://walkwheelcyclevote.scot/how/accessibility-briefing-bibliography/ for all the documents and research cited here.