



Happiness

Joy, happiness, enjoyment, pleasure – all of these are words rarely seen in transport policy, which tends to focus more on minutes saved, collisions prevented and emissions avoided. But there's a wealth of evidence to show that these good feelings are closely related to how we choose to get about – and that we can design our places in a way that makes everyone feel better.

Raising happy, active children and young people

Many people remember that first joyous moment when riding a bike finally clicked – or racing around playing in their local streets or back lanes. Walking, scooting, wheeling, cycling, playing and exploring are crucial for children's development and happiness¹⁻³. Being active also boosts children's confidence, self-esteem, mood and ability to concentrate⁴⁻⁶.

Yet the growth in car usage over recent decades has drastically limited children's freedoms, with the threat from traffic the most common factor cited by parents for not letting their children play outdoors⁷. When children are asked their views on their local areas, they consistently want less traffic, more greenery and places that are safe for play, meeting friends and exploring¹. And, not surprisingly, adults are happier in places which are considered good for children to grow up, where there's less traffic and where it's easier to get around^{8,9}. Places which enable active travel are good for children's happiness, and that of the adults around them – it's a win-win.

Every street needs to be designed with children in mind – as play expert Tim Gill says, they're an important 'indicator species' whose presence tells us about the quality of the environment¹⁰. But we should also be open to repurposing those streets entirely to make space for people, as towns and cities in the US, Canada, Australia, and South Korea have done by creating parks and public spaces out of what used to be busy roads^{11,12}. For example, in Seoul, demolition of one of the city's most congested motorways made space for an 11km stretch of riverside park visited by an estimated 64,000 people every day¹³. Barcelona is planning something similar, converting one in three of its central streets into small parks that will give every resident access to green space within 200 metres of their home¹⁴. Scotland has some of the most car-dominated towns and cities in the UK¹⁵ – maybe it's time we reclaimed more space for fun.



Happy humans need good habitats

We tend to think of habitats as something important for birds, or otters, or dolphins, rather than for humans – but our environment is as crucial to whether we thrive and flourish as for other animals. Most of us live in towns and cities, so urban and suburban environments have enormous potential to promote happiness through physical activity, social connections and beautiful spaces.



It's now well-established that being physically active can improve our mood, and the good news is, we don't have to be athletes to get the benefits – even moderate activity for 10-30 minutes is enough^{16,17}. Active travel is a brilliant way to achieve this, since it's cheap, convenient, and can be incorporated into our everyday routines.

One of reasons why being active makes us happy is the possibility of achieving ‘flow’ – an immersive state of heightened awareness and enjoyment of movement or a task¹⁸. Safe and accessible design for walking, wheeling and cycling can give everyone a chance to experience this, whether on everyday journeys like going to the shops or when getting out and about for fun.

Speaking of mundane journeys, active travel is consistently found to be the most enjoyable and least stressful way to get to work¹⁹⁻²¹. For instance, a study of commuters in the UK found that walking and cycling were typically rated as ‘relaxing’, ‘exciting’ and ‘pleasant’ whilst driving was more likely to be rated as ‘unpleasant’ and ‘stressful’; research into transport choices over time has found that switching to active travel significantly increases journey satisfaction²²⁻²³.

As things stand, car-centric design and a lack of safe infrastructure means that few people get to experience the happiness benefits of active travel, or the practical ones. This is especially the case for disabled people, who encounter a multitude of barriers to walking, wheeling and cycling – whether narrow and uneven pavements; lack of safe road crossings; and bike lanes that aren’t sufficiently wide, continuous or connected^{24,25}. For instance, 31% of disabled people who don’t currently would like to, and of those who do, 82% do so for leisure^{26,27}. As Ken – a wheelchair user and handcyclist – wrote on our blog²⁸, “The sense of freedom is one of the most amazing feelings you can ever have, and when it’s taken from you it can be one of the most restrictive burdens you can experience. But, getting it back: that is truly stunning.”



Better places, happier people

More inclusive public spaces and better transport options tend to foster community as well as individual wellbeing²⁹. For instance, people living on low-traffic streets have two to three more friends and acquaintances than those from high-traffic streets, whilst every 10 minutes of commuting tends to cut community involvement by 10%³⁰. Street features that promote social cohesion include: public space that can be used for a variety of purposes, plentiful and accessible seating, greenery and public art, low noise levels, and safety measures like adequate lighting³¹ – in essence, pleasant places that encourage us to stop and linger.

Changing our places is also an opportunity to embed some beauty into everyday life – another important source of happiness. We’ll go great lengths to visit beautiful urban spaces on our holidays – think Paris, Prague, Amsterdam, Vienna – but what if we could bring some of those pedestrianised plazas, leafy avenues and bustling bike lanes closer to home? Science has confirmed the common-sense link between aesthetically-pleasing places and happiness, and shown this relationship holds even in urban areas – and even when it’s raining^{32,9}. Beautiful places encourage people to walk, wheel and cycle for transport as well as pleasure, and features like trees and planters can be among the most effective ways of delineating safe spaces for different modes of travel³³⁻³⁶.

Making happiness happen

To make sure our streets bring a bit of joy into our lives, as well as serving a practical purpose, we’re asking all candidates for the Holyrood election to sign up to three pledges:



- **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.

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