

# Campaigner briefing - How providing space for walking and cycling improves children's lives

## Introduction

This briefing is intended to equip you with arguments that are likely to be persuasive to politicians that might otherwise be uninterested or unsympathetic to pro-cycling policies.

It is based on the findings of a report called Move Free written by the think-tank and urban consultancy, Create Streets, published in March 2024. Cycling UK commissioned the report from Create Streets in order to explore how making it easy to get around towns and cities in as many ways as possible has a positive impact on our lives.

This briefing provides evidence and arguments on how providing space for walking and cycling improves children's lives.

## Key points from the Move Free report

- **Giving children their freedom back:** Restoring children's freedom to roam by moving away from car-centric developments, encourages physical activity, reduces rates of obesity and related health issues.
- **Developmental benefits:** Independent mobility fosters curiosity, exploration, and social interaction, essential for children's cognitive and emotional development.
- **Enhancing mental wellbeing:** Children's mental health is closely linked to their freedom of movement. Children who can explore independently develop a stronger sense of competence and autonomy, leading to better mental health outcomes.
- **Addressing inequality:** Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by restrictions on mobility, highlighting the need for inclusive urban planning strategies that prioritise active transportation and outdoor play.
- **Reducing traffic congestion:** Encouraging active transportation modes like walking and cycling to school not only benefits children and parents but also alleviates traffic congestion and pollution in urban areas.

## Background

As the popularity of the car has rocketed during the past 100 years, children's freedom to roam and explore has sharply reduced. In 1971, 80 per cent of seven and eight-year-old English children were making their own way to school. By 1990 this had fallen to 9 per cent. Urban planning with cars at the heart is trapping children in increasingly smaller areas at the expense of their happiness.

Cars have undoubtedly revolutionised transportation, offering comfort, ease, and freedom to their users. However, they also pose constraints, especially in urban areas, where they contribute to pollution, congestion, and diminished public space.

Children's physical activity levels have declined sharply over the last three generations, leading to increasing rates of obesity and poorer mental health. Research indicates that children who have the freedom to explore and play independently tend to be happier and more fulfilled.

Restoring children's freedom to move and play independently by creating streets and neighbourhoods that put active travel first is not only a matter of improving their quality of life but also a step towards creating healthier, more vibrant communities.

## Children's happiness

Children that play outdoors daily consistently report a significantly higher average happiness score than children that rarely play outdoors. The decline in mental health and wellbeing is particularly stark in the UK with only 64% of children reporting high life satisfaction, compared to 90% in the Netherlands, 86% in Mexico, and 84% in Switzerland.

Higher life satisfaction in children seems to correlate with those children that grow up in areas where they have the freedom to walk, cycle and play outdoors. Dutch children are far less car-bound than children in the UK and, as above, report significantly higher life satisfaction. Two-thirds of Dutch children cycle to schools, Dutch teenagers make almost 60% of their journeys by bike, and 80% of them use their bikes for journeys more than three days per week. This contrasts with just 2% of children in the UK who cycle to school.

## Success Stories

**Play Streets:** Play streets are temporary traffic-free zones, where children are free to play on streets that are normally trafficked. The 'Playing Out' project, spearheaded by Playing Out CIC, has facilitated over 1,600 play street days across various neighbourhoods, involving almost 50,000 children.

**School Streets:** School streets involve temporarily closing streets adjacent to schools during drop-off and pick-up times, creating safer and more pleasant environments for pedestrians and children who cycle to school. Trials of school streets have been conducted in various cities across the UK, including Bristol, Leeds, and Devon, with promising results - improving road safety and encouraging walking and cycling as an alternative to the car. A 2021 survey by Sustrans found that 51% of residents agree that school street closures would improve their local area compared to 20% who disagree.

## What you can campaign for locally

Whilst car-centric towns and cities are locking adults into travelling by car, they are also locking children in their homes. **Ask your council or local decision makers to:**

- Create places that give everyone the freedom to choose how they travel rather than places where people are forced to rely on a car.
- Create safe, pedestrian-friendly environments - essential for improving children's lives.
- Promote Play Streets and enable School Streets initiatives combined with creating safe cycling and walking routes to schools.

If you would like to read the full Move Free report, please [click here](#)