

Making the case for investment in active travel

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1. Executive summary

- 1.1. Active travel, defined as modes of travel that involve a level of physical activity, such as walking, wheeling (use of wheelchairs, mobility scooters, prams, pushchairs or buggies) and cycling, is key to promoting increased physical activity and is an effective way of incorporating more physical activity into everyday life.¹
- 1.2. Investment in active travel promotes increased physical activity at a population level. This reduces required spend on the management of chronic conditions, mental health and social care, reduced bed days and length of hospital stay and reduced negative health implications of air pollution. Well maintained roads, footways and cycle infrastructure are key, both in making active travel more attractive and accessible, and improving perceptions of safety. This offers additional benefits to the NHS, through a reduction in the number of active travel-related casualties, due to poorly maintained roads which lead to trips, slips, and falls and cyclists to fall off their cycles when they hit a pothole.
- 1.3. Investing in walking, wheeling and cycling offers an excellent return on investment, returning on average £5.62 for every £1 spent.²
- 1.4. As such, CIHT calls for HM Treasury to adopt a proactive approach to health and ensure that the funding for the highways and transport sector delivers improvements in road maintenance and enables the provision of dedicated active travel infrastructure as the quality of the transport infrastructure and the adequacy of transport services directly affect health.³ Modal shift to active travel from short motor vehicle trips could save £17 billion in health and social care costs over a 20-year period.⁴ Should funding be allocated to improving road maintenance and improving provision of dedicated active travel infrastructure, the cost saving benefits could be further magnified.

2. Background and context

- 2.1. Physical activity is crucial for both optimum physical and mental health. Being physically active reduces a person's risk of dementia by 30%, depression by 30%, heart disease by 40%, type 2 diabetes by 40% and osteoporosis by 50%.⁵ Physical activity helps prevent many types of cancer including breast, colon, endometrial, kidney, bladder, oesophageal, and stomach cancer.⁶

2.2. However, many adults are not sufficiently physically active.

- 2.3. Data from 2022-23 shows that 25.7% of adults (aged 16+) are classified as inactive, as they are physically active for less than 30 minutes per week.⁷

2.4. Levels of inactivity are not experienced equally, promoting health inequalities between

1 CIHT (2023) Driving vs Active Travel: Changing Our Cultural Perceptions. Available at: <https://www.ciht.org.uk/blogs/driving-vs-active-travel-changing-our-cultural-perceptions/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/active-travel-local-authority-toolkit/active-travel-local-authority-toolkit>

CIHT and Living Streets (2023) Safer and more inclusive walking and wheeling for everyday journeys. Available at: https://www.ciht.org.uk/media/ebe41ef7/policy-brief_walking-and-wheeling.pdf

2 Cycling UK (2024) Continuous underfunding of walking and cycling in England. Available at: [Continuous underfunding of walking and cycling in England | Cycling UK](https://cyclinguk.org/continuous-underfunding-of-walking-and-cycling-in-england)

3 The Health Foundation (2021) How transport offers a route to better health. Available at: [How transport offers a route to better health | The Health Foundation](https://www.health.org.uk/policy-and-analysis/transport-and-health/transport-offers-route-better-health)

4 Sustrans (2017) The role of active travel in improving mental health. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/4468/4468.pdf>

5 Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (2015) Exercise: The Miracle Cure and the Role of the Doctor in Promoting It. Available at: https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Exercise_the_Miracle_Cure_0215.pdf

6 Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (2015) Exercise: The Miracle Cure and the Role of the Doctor in Promoting It. Available at: https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Exercise_the_Miracle_Cure_0215.pdf

7 Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (2015) Exercise: The Miracle Cure and the Role of the Doctor in Promoting It. Available at: https://www.aomrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Exercise_the_Miracle_Cure_0215.pdf

people of different genders, socio-economic groups, ethnicities and between urban and rural areas.⁸

2.5. Encouraging more people to opt for active travel for short journeys serves as an effective and accessible way to enable more people to make physical activity a habitual aspect of their daily lives.

2.6. This aligns with several of the Government's mission to fundamentally reform the way that we think about health and social care, using active travel as an enabler to shift towards a proactive, preventative model of promoting healthier lifestyles.⁹

3. Objectives

3.1. This report seeks to highlight the benefits associated with a proactive approach to funding allocation, with greater investment in the provision of dedicated active travel infrastructure, such as roads, footways and cycleways, with a view to increasing rates of physical activity through increased levels of active travel. This reduces the level of resource needing to be invested in the management of chronic physical and mental health conditions.

4. Benefits

4.1. Reduced cost of chronic conditions and obesity

4.1.1. Obesity carries a societal cost of £98 billion per year.¹⁰

4.1.2. Sport and physical activity bring about a saving of £9.3 billion through prevention of disease and chronic health conditions (across 14 health outcomes such as depression and type 2 diabetes).¹¹

4.1.3. Reducing obesity by 10% could save the NHS £2 billion a year.¹²

4.1.4. This brings about an improved quality of life for more people.

4.1.5. Given the UK's population trends, the value of taking a preventative approach to chronic health conditions and multimorbidity will increase with time and plays a significant role in addressing health inequalities, with people living in the most deprived areas more than twice as likely to be admitted to hospital for obesity-related health problems.¹³

4.2. Reduced spend on social care

4.2.1. Ageing should not inevitably result in a loss of fitness and independence. Physical activity promotes greater fitness levels which enable people to retain their independence and reduces their need for social care.¹⁴ The value to society of even modest improvements in fitness could be several billion pounds a year, since the mean care needs of a person almost double between the age of 65 and 75, and triple between the age of 65 and 85.¹⁵

4.2.2. Studies and predictions have long shown that the UK's population is ageing, meaning

8 Sport England (2024) Active Lives Adult Survey November 2022-23 Report. Available at: https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/Active%20Lives%20Adult%20Survey%20November%202022-23%20Report.pdf?VersionId=veYJTP_2n55UdOmX-3PAXH7djr1GA24vs; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2024) Physical Activity. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/diet-and-exercise/physical-activity/latest/#main-facts-and-figures>; Cycling UK (2022) Are rural communities being left behind with active travel? Available at: [Are rural communities being left behind with active travel? | Cycling UK](https://cyclinguk.org/are-rural-communities-being-left-behind-with-active-travel)

9 Labour (2024) Labour's Manifesto. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/change/mission-driven-government/>

10 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2023) Moving from cure to prevention could save the NHS billions: A plan to protect Britain. Available at: [Moving From Cure to Prevention Could Save the NHS Billions: A Plan to Protect Britain](https://tbi.org.uk/moving-from-cure-to-prevention-could-save-the-nhs-billions-a-plan-to-protect-britain)

11 Sport England (2024) Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value. Available at: [Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value | Sport England](https://sportengland.org/sport-and-physical-activity-generates-over-100-billion-in-social-value)

12 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2023) Moving from cure to prevention could save the NHS billions: A plan to protect Britain. Available at: [Moving From Cure to Prevention Could Save the NHS Billions: A Plan to Protect Britain](https://tbi.org.uk/moving-from-cure-to-prevention-could-save-the-nhs-billions-a-plan-to-protect-britain)

13 The King's Fund (2021) New analysis reveals stark inequalities in obesity rates across England. Available at: [New analysis reveals stark inequalities in obesity rates across England | The King's Fund](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/news/new-analysis-reveals-stark-inequalities-obesity-rates-across-england)

14 McNally, S.A (2017) A focus on physical activity can help avoid unnecessary social care. Available at: <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/news-and-events/blog/a-focus-on-physical-activity-can-help-avoid-unnecessary-social-care/>

15 McNally, S.A (2017) A focus on physical activity can help avoid unnecessary social care. Available at: <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/news-and-events/blog/a-focus-on-physical-activity-can-help-avoid-unnecessary-social-care/>

that demand for social care will only increase. For example, in 50 years' time, there are likely to be an additional 8.6 million people aged 65 years and over, a population roughly the size of London.¹⁶

4.3. Reduced spend on mental health

- 4.3.1. Active lives prevent 1.3 million cases of depression and 57,000 cases of dementia (leading cause of death in the UK).¹⁷
- 4.3.2. Active lives bring about a saving of £780 million on reduced mental health service use and £540 million on reduced GP visits.¹⁸
- 4.3.3. Non-financial benefits include improved self-esteem, confidence, motivation and focus for individuals. Also it reduces anxiety, stress fatigue and loneliness.¹⁹

4.4. Reduced bed days and lengths of stay

- 4.4.1. Although there is no official estimate of the direct costs of delayed discharges (staff time spent on additional NHS care and overheads from an overnight stay), the King's Fund estimates that for 2022/23, the costs exceeded £1.7 billion.²⁰
- 4.4.2. Physically active patients have a reduced need for post-operative support, facilitating timely discharge.²¹
- 4.4.3. The health implications of longer hospital stays are reduced if people are more active, and people can return to their regular lives more quickly after treatment.
- 4.4.4. Reduced length of hospital stay in turn, releases resources to treat more people, shortening treatment waiting times.

4.5. Reduced health implications of air pollution

- 4.5.1. Air pollution is estimated to cause approximately 29,000 to 43,000 deaths a year in the UK.²² This harm is not experienced equally, with air pollution particularly impacting children and young people, as well as those living in deprived communities.²³
- 4.5.2. Doubling cycling and increasing walking would prevent 8,300 premature deaths and save £567 million per year through improved air quality.²⁴
- 4.5.3. Reduction in health inequalities helps to create a fairer society.²⁵

5. The importance of safe networks: Additional benefits for the NHS

5.1. Reduction of active-travel related casualties

- 5.1.1. In terms of road traffic collisions, pedestrians and cyclists are at greatest risk, with more than half of all global road traffic deaths occurring among vulnerable road users,

16 Sustrans (2017) The role of active travel in improving mental health. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/4468/4468.pdf>; Office National Statistics (2018) Living longer: how our population is changing and why it matters. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulation-andcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/livinglongerhowourpopulationischangingandwhyitmatters/2018-08-13>.

17 Sport England (2024) Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value. Available at: [Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value | Sport England](https://www.sportengland.org/sport-and-physical-activity-generates-over-100-billion-in-social-value)

18 Sport England (2024) Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value. Available at: [Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value | Sport England](https://www.sportengland.org/sport-and-physical-activity-generates-over-100-billion-in-social-value)

19 NHS (2024) Be active for your mental health. Available at: [Be active for your mental health - Every Mind Matters - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyourmind/mental-health/be-active-for-your-mental-health/)

20 Maguire, D. (2023) The hidden problems behind delayed discharges and their costs', The King's Fund. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/hidden-problems-delayed-discharges>

21 Kumar, S. and Brunning, T. (2024) The Power of Preparation for Surgery. Independently published.

22 UK Health Security Agency (2023) Health Effects of Climate Change (HECC) in the UK: 2023 report. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6570a68b7469300012488948/HECC-report-2023-chapter-4-outdoor-air-quality.pdf>

23 Sustrans (2017) The Role of Active Travel in Improving Health. Available at: https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/4467/improving_air_quality_walking_cycling.pdf

24 IPPR (2024) Stride and Ride. Available at: https://ippr.org/files.svcdn.com/production/Downloads/Stride_and_ride_Feb24_2024-02-05-162030_godi.pdf

25 Sustrans (2017) The Role of Active Travel in Improving Health. Available at: https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/4467/improving_air_quality_walking_cycling.pdf

including pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.²⁶

- 5.1.2. Well-maintained, safe networks reduce the risk of active travel related casualties. For example, 390 cyclists were killed or seriously injured between 2007-18 due to potholes.²⁷
- 5.1.3. Infrastructure must be safe and useable all year round, with maintenance funding in place for sweeping and gritting.²⁸
- 5.1.4. Reducing the number of casualties in turn reduces required spend on urgent and emergency care.

6. Risks of failing to invest in active travel

- 6.1. Given the lasting trend towards an ageing population and high levels of physical inactivity, social care and mental health costs will continue to put pressure on already strained health and social care services.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

- 7.1. Investing in active travel is a highly effective means of facilitating greater physical activity at population level.
- 7.2. This benefits the NHS through reduced required spend on management of chronic conditions, mental health and social care, reduced bed days and length of stay and reduced health implications of air pollution. Well maintained roads, footways and cycle infrastructure are key, both in making active travel more attractive and accessible, and improving perceptions of safety. This offers additional benefits to the NHS, through a reduction in the number of active travel-related casualties.
- 7.3. Investing £35 per person per year for a decade on active travel infrastructure saves £17 billion in health and social care costs over a 20-year period.²⁹
- 7.4. Investing in walking, wheeling and cycling offers an excellent return on investment, returning on average £5.62 for every £1 spent.³⁰
- 7.5. Based on the evidence surrounding the benefits of active travel, CIHT calls for HM Treasury to adopt a proactive approach to health and ensure that investment in the highways and transportation network delivers improvements in road maintenance and enables the provision of dedicated active travel infrastructure. Quality of active transport infrastructure can directly affect health. By proactively investing, the long-term potential savings in reactive healthcare will be significant.

26 WHO (2025) Road traffic injuries. Available at: [Road safety](#)

27 Cycling UK (2018) 390 cyclists killed or seriously injured since 2007 due to potholes. Available at: [390 cyclists killed or seriously injured since 2007 due to potholes | Cycling UK](#)

28 Cycling Embassy of Denmark (2019) Winter maintenance and cleaning of roads and cycle tracks. Available at: [Winter maintenance and cleaning of roads and cycle tracks](#)

29 IPPR (2024) Stride and Ride. Available at: https://ippr-org.files.svcdn.com/production/Downloads/Stride_and_ride_Feb24_2024-02-05-162030_godi.pdf

30 Cycling UK (2024) Continuous underfunding of walking and cycling in England. Available at: [Continuous underfunding of walking and cycling in England | Cycling UK](#)

About CIHT

CIHT provides strategic leadership and support to help our members develop, deliver, and maintain sustainable solutions for highways, transport infrastructure, and services that:

- Address the challenges of climate change
- Support the economy
- Help address societal inequalities
- Reduce environmental degradation
- Respond to a changing world

We bring members together to share, learn, and feel confident about addressing these challenges through the application of good practice, by embracing innovation and by acting with integrity. It is through this and the values that CIHT can demonstrate and deliver on thought leadership and shaping the highways and transportation sector for the public benefit.

Whether you are a student, apprentice, work in the private or public sectors or are a company director, CIHT has a place for you and a commitment to fulfilling your professional development needs throughout your career.

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