

Active Travel

What was the evidence need?

Active travel refers to everyday journeys made by walking, cycling or wheeling, such as travelling to work or school, visiting shops, or attending healthcare appointments. Creating safe and accessible opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling can help to embed physical activity into everyday life and support the prevention of ill health.

Rhondda Cynon Taf Health Determinants Research Collaboration (RCT HDRC) received an enquiry from the Council's transport planning service area about how to measure the health and wellbeing benefits of active travel infrastructure, and how interventions could be targeted in particular areas.

The project was one of three undertaken as part of RCT HDRC's input on Transform, the Council's senior management development programme. The project element of the Transform programme allows the candidate to work with colleagues outside of their service area, giving them alternative perspectives on working on a range of projects outside of their service area. It also provided them an opportunity to learn, refine and implement the skills required for evidence-informed decision making in a safe environment.

This evidence summary synthesises the findings of the Transform project, which aimed to answer three key research questions:

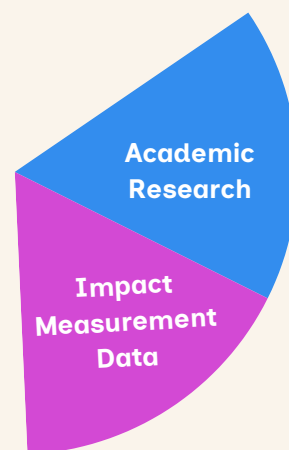
- What are the potential health and wellbeing impacts of active travel infrastructure?
- How have other areas measured the health and wellbeing impacts of active travel infrastructure?
- How could RCT Council measure the health and wellbeing benefits of active travel infrastructure in the future?

What did the evidence tell us?

Academic Research

Impact Measurement Data

Active travel has been linked to improved physical health through lower incidence of heart disease, cancer and all-cause mortality. It is also associated with a lower risk of major illnesses including stroke, type 2 diabetes and obesity. As well as physical health benefits, active travel usage is associated with reduced depression and fewer sick days, improving mental health and wellbeing. There are also wider benefits for communities including: cleaner air, fewer road accidents, stronger social connections, and reduced loneliness.

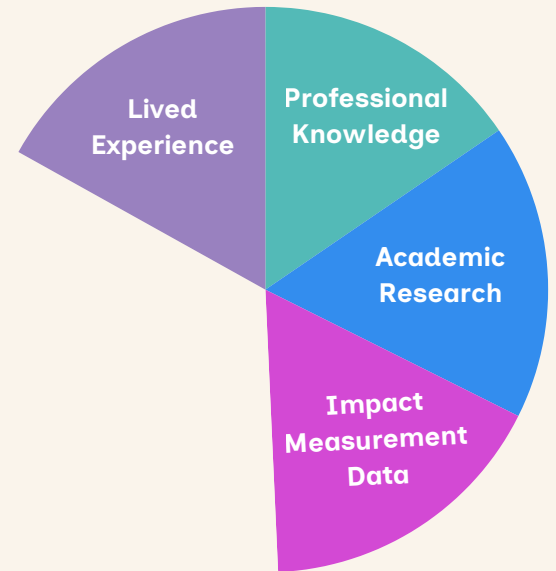


There are a number of different tools available to measure the benefits of active travel schemes. For example, the World Health Organisation use a Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT), while Transport for Wales use the Active Travel Monitoring Framework (ATMF). Both tools use a range of indicators, including air pollution and physical activity levels, to identify active travel benefits. RCT currently undertake several forms of monitoring that align well with national and professional guidance. Routine pre- and post-scheme traffic, pedestrian and cyclist counts are used to evidence uptake, and user surveys of Active Travel Routes are undertaken alongside a statutory requirement to report annually on usage and effectiveness

Lived Experience

Professional Knowledge

A survey conducted by the Transform delegates identified that half of respondents had not heard of the term active travel, and that 75% of respondents were not aware of RCT's active travel network. Whilst there was a lack of awareness, respondents recognised the benefits that come alongside active travel. Physical fitness, mental wellbeing and weight management were the most popular perceived benefits. Active travel levels are low across RCT, however, the survey identified strong support for walking and cycling. The most identified barriers to active travel were that the journey time was too long (27%), other modes of transport were more convenient (21%), and security and safety concerns (11%).



A lived experience-focused Public Health Wales project in Treherbert identified several key barriers that limit active travel and reduce the associated health and wellbeing benefits, including: a car-dominated road environment, limited accessibility for people with mobility issues, safety concerns, inconsistent maintenance and disconnected and unclear routes.

Discussions with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council highlighted that there is limited measurement of health and wellbeing outcomes beyond the active travel scheme itself as evaluation is shaped by the requirements and constraints of the funding process. They mainly rely on pre- and post-scheme footfall statistics to evidence increased use. They also highlighted the importance of local context (such as a new factory opening) alongside footfall numbers to frame route planning and travel demand.

Organisational Data

Population Data

While the Council currently measure the footfall of active travel schemes, there are limited internal data sources that directly evidence the health and wellbeing benefits of active travel at a local level. However, the Council do use air quality monitoring data, which can provide an indirect indicator of potential health benefits. Measuring health and wellbeing benefits, and determining causality in relation to the active travel infrastructure can be difficult.



Therefore, proxy data such as air quality can help provide indications into how active travel benefits health and wellbeing. Combining pre-existing datasets such as from Public Health Wales and Data Cymru into a dashboard, used alongside pre- and post-scheme monitoring of usage, safety and lived experience could help enable RCT to evidence the health and wellbeing impacts of active travel schemes more robustly.

What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence?

Active travel delivers significant health and wellbeing benefits, including improved physical health, better mental wellbeing and reduced risk of major illnesses. It also generates wider community benefits, such as improved air quality, stronger social connections and reduced loneliness. Whilst the perceived benefits are relatively well-known, residents lack awareness of active travel and RCT's active travel routes.

Despite this lack of awareness, there is strong public support for walking and cycling despite low participation levels, suggesting the potential for increased uptake. The main barriers to active travel are journey time, convenience of alternative transport and safety concerns.

Measuring the benefits of active travel infrastructure is complex, especially in relation to improvements on health and wellbeing. However, combining existing knowledge of the health and wellbeing benefits with publicly available data, and pre- and post-scheme monitoring (including lived experience evidence) could help develop a more comprehensive understanding of impact.

What does this mean for practice?

Active travel has the potential to deliver meaningful and sustained health and wellbeing benefits across RCT. Realising these benefits will require targeted investment, inclusive design, stronger awareness and a clear approach to evidencing impact.

The Transform delegates developed twelve recommendations for the service area, including:

- Focusing investment on continuous, well-designed routes that are safe, accessible and support everyday journeys.
- Improving mapping, signage and promotion so residents can easily identify and use routes, including integration with existing platforms such as Leisure services.
- Introducing simple, repeatable surveys and counts to assess changes in behaviour, safety and perception.
- Embedding lived experience and community voice within planning, delivery and monitoring processes
- Ensuring that findings from surveys and consultations actively inform scheme design and are repeated to evaluate impact