

# **The public health case for increasing cycling and walking in Southwark.**

**Southwark Cyclists  
The Benefits Cycling Can Offer  
Note for Call for Evidence: 'Health of the Borough'  
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## **1. NICE guidance on physical activity for adults:**

Adults should engage in moderate intensity aerobic physical activity for at least 150 minutes a week. Mental health, such as depression, improves after exercise but this improvement does not last long. NICE therefore recommends that exercise can be taken as 30 minutes on five or more days each week. Studies show that death from all causes, rates of cardio-vascular disease, depression and diabetes are reduced at these rates. The death rate for cardio vascular disease in Southwark is 10% above national average.

Higher rates of up to 300 minutes a week reduce rates of colon and breast cancer and obesity. Physical activity makes the obese fitter and reduces the complications of obesity. Child obesity rates are amongst the worst in London. Nearly 20,000 residents have diabetes.



“Coping Skills, mental health and well-being” is one of four key areas already identified by the committee. Nice emphasises the role of physical activity in preventing mental illnesses such as depression and dementia and its role in improving mental well-being such as mood, self-perception and sleep. Mental health needs are concentrated in the centre of the borough where levels of deprivation are highest. Psychiatric admissions are over three times higher for black people in Southwark than in the rest of the country.

Those who are least active – in Southwark nearly 50% of adults do no sport or active leisure activity – have the most to gain by increasing their physical activity. Those who are already active can still gain by increasing activity.

Southwark's targets include reducing the numbers of early deaths and preventable ill health from obesity, diabetes and heart disease; improving mental health advice and helping people to change unhealthy behaviours, such as lack of physical activity and manage their own health.

## **2. Cycling can make a major contribution to each of these targets.**

Cycling is a highly efficient way of exercising, easy on the joints, mixing periods of high energy use with pauses for breath. It produces measurable improvements in fitness over short period of time (all quotes from “Cycling and health – what's the evidence” Cycling England). Studies comparing those who cycled to work with those who did not found a 39% higher death rate in the non-cyclists. Dutch research has shown that the higher the distance cycled, the greater the health gain. Finnish research showed that the gain from cycling was three times greater than from walking. A UK study of non-cyclists who agreed to cycle four times a week found that the greatest gains came at the beginning but continued to mount. The more they cycled the fitter they became. The new cyclists typically lost weight and gained strength. They felt better, their self-confidence increased and they were better able to cope with stress. They felt less tired, found it easier to sleep and other medical problems declined. Studies have shown that cyclists have fitness equivalent to non-cyclists 5-10 years younger. A study of 9,000 civil servants found that those cycling at least 25 miles a week had half the coronary “events”, including death, of non-cyclists. Cycling seems to delay coronary heart disease.

Studies have found a dose/response relationship between cycling and breast cancer – more cycling, less breast cancer. A Chinese study found that regular cycling protects against colon cancer. Cycling helps people who are already obese to exercise. Most of the body's weight (70%) is taken by the saddle so that overweight people can exercise without further damaging joints.

Cycling has the same benefits for mental health as all exercise (see above). In addition it offers the user control and self-direction, personal contact with other travellers, and contact with green spaces (on Greenways and in parks)

### **3. Cycling is good for mind and body - but the benefits do not stop there**

Cycling benefits public health by reducing the pollution, noise, danger and streetscape degradation of motorised traffic. Motor vehicles are responsible for 40-60% of UK air pollution, which exacerbates heart and lung diseases. People who live or shop on or near heavily trafficked streets like the Old Kent Road, Peckham High Street and Walworth Road suffer most. Estimates suggest up to 24,000 people die and the same number again are taken to hospital each year because of air pollution caused by motor vehicles. Air quality is often worst in deprived areas where vehicles are older and dirtier.

An increase in the numbers of cyclists is a reduction in the number of polluting vehicles. Counter-intuitively, cyclists may experience lower levels of road pollution than car drivers because the car offers little protection from incoming fumes which tend to concentrate inside the vehicle.

Similarly an increase in cycling equates to a reduction in road noise. Traffic noise is likely to increase stress, diminish sleep and increase some psychiatric illnesses. Cycling does not contribute to this noise.

Higher levels of cycling (combined with lower traffic levels) are linked to increasing levels of non-traffic street activity. When the streets are quieter and less polluted, people find shopping more pleasant, the environment becomes one to enjoy. Street cafes bring cafe culture. Smaller shops prosper. Cyclists find it easier to stop and more pleasant to spend their money. People bring their children and feel confident of their safety. The urban environment becomes safer and more convivial. Passing cyclists offer natural surveillance, unlike car drivers whizzing through, they share the need for safe streets and are better able to report crime, spot anti-social behaviour or offer assistance.

The Department of Health recommends an hour of play a day for all young people but 40% of boys and 60% of girls do not manage this. Hostile street environments stop children cycling but, worse, they stop children exploring their neighbourhood and limit their ability to explore and play freely. Streets are, as a British Medical Journal said, "Linear car parks with a central race track". Parents keep their children safe at home, twiddling their thumbs.

### **4. The world needs more cyclists: but how do we get them?**

Unsurprisingly Nice recommends that walking and cycling become the norm for short journeys and councils, schools and employers encourage people to become more active. They suggest (amongst other things) borough-wide programmes to promote cycling for both transport and recreational purposes. These could include cycle hire schemes, car-free events or days, information, maps and route signing, activities and campaigns that emphasise the benefits of cycling, fun rides, and others. Plus school travel plans encouraging children to walk or cycle to school.

Nice recommends that pedestrians, cyclists and other road users which involve physical activity are given top priority when developing or maintaining streets. **NB: the Southwark Street-Scape Design Manual rules this out, classifying cyclists with motor vehicles.**

Nice suggests re-allocating space to support physically active modes of transport – widening pavements and introducing cycle lanes. The London cycling campaign would want these cycle lanes to be protected from traffic on roads where speeds exceed 20mph.

Nice suggests restrictions on motor vehicle access such as closing roads or narrowing them to reduce capacity and therefore speed. The LCC would want these streets to be permeable to cyclists but not to motor vehicles. This has been widely done in Hackney but is not common practice in Southwark.

Nice recommends introducing traffic calming schemes to restrict vehicle speeds. Southwark has declared itself to be a 20mph zone and some roads have been calmed to reflect this.

Nice recommends the creation of safe routes to school, traffic calming near schools and the creation or improvement of walking and cycling routes to schools.

In economically deprived areas people will struggle to find the £6,000 a year needed to run a car. Car ownership is falling in Southwark. In 2001 51.9% of residents did not have a car. By 2011 that percentage had risen to 58.4%. This is far above the London average of 41.5% and offers an opportunity to shift Southwark away from the car and towards healthy and environmentally friendly ways to travel and live.

All surveys show that many more people would like to cycle than actually do and the main reason they give is that they do not feel safe on the roads. The modal share of cycling in the UK is 2%. In Hackney it is 14.6% and still rising. This would be a target for Southwark to aim for.

A small project by Southwark Cyclist member and UCL Emeritus Professor Bruce Lynn gives some idea of the difficulties and opportunities. Called the Grange Project and running on the Grange Estate in Bermondsey it used leafleting plus the offer of free bike loan and cycle training to get people to try cycling or return to cycling. This approach reached a good cross-section of the local population including those in full-time employment and resulted in a statistically significant 9% increase in cycling with consequential health improvements.

\*\* Text written and edited by Sally Eva and then Andy Cawdell with input from Bruce Lynn and Jeremy Leach.

Southwark Cyclists ([www.southwarkcyclists.org.uk](http://www.southwarkcyclists.org.uk)) is the Southwark group of the London Cycling Campaign ([www.lcc.org.uk](http://www.lcc.org.uk))

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