

Impact case study: Using longitudinal research to inform and shape active travel policy

Summary

Active travel is an effective and affordable way for people to improve their health and wellbeing, while also cutting congestion and boosting air quality. Policymakers need evidence to understand people's attitudes towards active travel and the barriers to travelling actively so they can lead behaviour change for cycling and walking to be seen as a natural choice, especially for shorter journeys.

In direct response to this evidence need, CLOSER produced a policy briefing note on active travel in June 2023. Our evidence has helped inform public policy and parliamentary scrutiny, including by the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, the UK Chief Medical Officer, the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh Parliament.

The role of longitudinal research and evidence

Some findings identified in the briefing note apply across demographic groups. For example, the finding of beneficial effects on physical and mental health from active travel, particularly in relation to overweight and obesity. However, data from longitudinal population studies also allow for consideration of national and regional factors, enable comparisons across generations, and help us understand how patterns and habits change across the life course. As such, CLOSER's policy briefing note identified nuances that are often overlooked in discussions on active travel.

Providing actionable solutions

Understanding that policymakers' priorities lie in solutions, CLOSER's series of actionable policy recommendations for how best to increase active travel for different age groups consider how travel decisions are impacted by environmental factors. These include developing education programmes for younger people (such as cycling programmes), encouraging employers to incentivise active travel for staff, and addressing perceptions of neighbourhood safety that particularly affects older age groups.

Achieving national and regional influence

In June 2023, CLOSER sent the briefing to relevant Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) ahead of a Holyrood debate on Active Travel Transformation. Several MSPs responded positively, particularly on the "actionable recommendations for policy" (Monica Lennon MSP). Liam Kerr MSP, the Conservative Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Transport, referenced CLOSER's evidence in the debate.

In July 2023, CLOSER sent the note to members of the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee ahead of their oral evidence session on active travel. Chair of the Committee, Steve Brine MP, responded with thanks, in particular for the policy recommendations offered.

Through dissemination among CLOSER's network of policymakers, both central and devolved, parliamentary and governmental, the briefing continued to help inform policymaking. Professor Chris Whitty, the UK Government's Chief Medical Officer, referenced CLOSER's evidence in his [2023 Annual Report](#). The note was also cited in a [Senedd \(Welsh Parliament\) Research article](#) on active travel, published November 2023, which will be used as a trusted resource of evidence and insights by Members of the Senedd.

The briefing note also made an impact beyond policymaking circles. It now appears as a featured snippet for Google searches including "longitudinal" and "active travel." The UCL Institute of Education, where CLOSER is hosted, [published a guest blog](#) summarising the briefing note. Additionally, CLOSER was invited to present on the briefing at the UKRI-wide 'Virtual Mobility Meeting in October 2023, where we demonstrated the techniques behind our successful mobilisation strategy.

Longitudinal population studies collect a range of data from people across the UK throughout their lives. Among the rich and varied findings, data from these unique studies provides insights into the ways people travel, the determinants and barriers to active travel, and how these interact with environmental and policy changes.

CLOSER, as the UK's partnership of leading social and biomedical longitudinal population studies, works to increase the visibility, use and impact of longitudinal data and research. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), our partners comprise national and regional studies across the UK.

Recognising an increased focus on active travel among national and regional policymakers, CLOSER produced its [Active Travel Briefing Note](#) in June 2023 to mobilise data and research from eight CLOSER partner studies.

"If the Government wants to support active travel and behaviour change, it must address the issue that CLOSER set out in its submission: that urban residents were significantly more likely to engage in active travel than rural residents and that those groups should therefore be considered separately in relation to outcomes and policy decisions." Liam Kerr MSP

"The policy recommendations were particularly helpful and we will bear these in mind as we consider any output for this part of the inquiry." Steve Brine MP