

## **Response to the Transport Committee Inquiry into Active Travel October 2018**

### **Background**

At Bus Users UK, our mission is to bring people and communities together, through socially inclusive transport.

Bus Users is an approved Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Body for bus and coach passengers, and the nominated body for dealing with complaints under the European Passenger Rights Regulation 2013 / (The Rights of Passengers in Bus and Coach Transport (Exemptions and Enforcement) (Amendment) Regulations 2017). Bus Users UK Charitable Trust is a Registered Charity number 1178677 and a Company Limited by Guarantee Registration Number: 04635458

We have worked closely with the Department for Transport to advise on passenger rights, the passenger involvement aspects of the Bus Services Act 2017, the detail of the proposed Accessible Information Regulation and all other matters where input on behalf of passengers is needed.

We deal with complaints from bus and coach passengers and work alongside communities to try to make the case for continuing subsidy and service provision. We also hold regular events in rural and urban settings to enable residents to make local transport providers and policymakers to understand their needs and the impact of poor transport on people from all sections of the community.

The need for good public transport to be seen as a key ingredient of an active lifestyle is core to our rationale for responding to this call for evidence as the evidence shows how much more acceptable an increase in physical activity a switch to public transport is to people who most need an increase in exercise.

### **An Integrated approach**

In the UK, as in much of Europe, Active travel discussions and policy focus almost exclusively on walking and cycling as undoubtedly excellent ways to achieve an increase in exercise. However, this does not appeal to the majority of people who could benefit from a change in lifestyle as it's simply too radical a step.

Every January, we see a push to take out gym membership to those with sufficient income to afford that option and generally this is followed by a burst of activity and, within months, a tailing off to no visits at all for many people<sup>1</sup>. This results, not only in a colossal waste of money, but in a perception of failure and makes people feel worse than before. Rather than driving to a gym, people could be encouraged to catch a bus to the nearest park or attraction where they can take a walk in appealing surroundings or enjoy an activity of their own choosing. Energy expenditure can take many different forms and walking around a market or visiting a gallery can use up just as many calories as sweating over a rowing machine.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/brits-wasting-558m-unused-gym-9679158>

The UK strategy needs to recognise the contribution to active travel made by bus and other forms of public transport for people of all ages and levels of fitness. Making the switch to public transport is a much easier habit to build and keep for most people, even if it's only one day a week to start with.

With longstanding guidelines stating that bus stops should be no more than a 400m walk for most passengers, this provides a manageable distance for many people to aim at and should inspire confidence in those who are able-bodied but inactive.

A major study carried out in 2016<sup>2</sup> found that those who commute via public transportation have less fat and an overall lower BMI than those who drive a car. Ellen Flint, Ph.D., a researcher at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine who led the study, says it was the walks to and from your travel start, change and end points that keep people fitter. This study concluded that encouraging that incidental physical activity in the daily lives of the population could significantly help combat obesity levels and it suggests that there is a large untapped potential for policy makers to consider the health benefits achievable if one was to really try and promote and facilitate greater use of public and active forms of transport.

The BMJ also used the study to highlight that living in areas of good public transport can increase one's physical activity by 90 minutes a week<sup>3</sup>

A shift in habits is far more likely to become a normal part of life if it is pleasant (or not actively unpleasant) and that is more likely to be achieved if a change is gradual and easily achieved, rather than a major shock to the system.

This element should also be factored in to the encouragement of trying out other, more active exercise which may be more appealing and pleasurable by taking away the parts of the route to that activity seen as difficult or dangerous by promoting the use of public transport to get to the access point for that activity. Many people might try a country park walk or cycle around a family-friendly traffic-free route if they could safely access the start point without having to tackle a major road.

### **Support for those who want to increase activity**

Promotion of a healthier lifestyle needs to take more account of the real-life experience of individuals.

For people daunted by the idea of cycling or even walking on busy roads, especially in city centres and rural areas where pavements do not always exist, it is essential that the benefits of using public transport are well-communicated to the public in a health improvement manner, via GPs, weight-loss clinics and public health campaigns.

An active travel strategy also needs to recognise that the perception of time poverty experienced by many is a crucial factor in making such decisions so change needs to be simple and fit into an already busy schedule. and change the pervasive attitude inherent in much of the current messaging that appeals more to the young and affluent than to people for whom life is already a struggle.

There is a range of apps and exercise programmes available which are designed to assist those who need support in planning or tracking their efforts to become more active, including rewards-based , game-style apps which could usefully be adapted to appeal to those with a lifestyle involving no exercise at all, rather than mostly being aimed at the already reasonably fit, able-bodied and active

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fitnessmagazine.com/blogs/fitstop/2014/09/03/health/take-the-bus-to-lose-weight/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/content/353/bmj.i1890>

person. Prizes to be “earned” through such apps could include free ‘taster’ journey tickets from local public transport providers to encourage no-risk trials of local options.

Once you have persuaded people with other choices to take the bus, there are also options to encourage additional exercise while waiting for public transport, from the subtle to the overt for those not afraid to stand out from the crowd. <sup>4</sup>

For people with long commutes who really get the exercise bug, some cities have introduced buses which have a gym on board <sup>5</sup> although it’s safe to say that this is not an entry level option nor is it likely to be an easily accessible offer.

## **Conclusion**

All Active Travel strategies need to recognise that small graduated steps may be needed for those who have most need for a change in lifestyle if they are to succeed and that needs to follow the Australian example<sup>6</sup> of recognising the valuable role public transport has to play in promoting active travel. It relates to planning of land use in particular by recognising that “the propensity for active travel can be enhanced by the proximity of complementary land uses and facilities such as a public transport interchange located close to a regional shopping centre or university.” It also makes specific recommendations about alternative travel choices: “Where longer trips are necessary, substituting car travel with public transport can help to achieve recommended levels of physical activity as such trips usually involve walking to and from transport interchanges”.

Therefore an Active Travel strategy for the UK needs to recognise that public transport plays a key role in enabling the majority of people to improve their activity levels as an entry level activity that is accessible to most people with a local bus, tram or train service and therefore should be seen as a key bridge to a more active lifestyle.

Clearly, therefore, all planning decisions will need to take into account what opportunities exist in any new build or redevelopment project to enable people to choose to leave their vehicle at home, assuming they can afford or choose to own one.

The first step towards Active Travel for the majority of the population will be to catch a bus and that needs to be a central plank in the Active Travel strategy.

If you need further information, please contact us at:

Bus Users UK  
Victoria Charity Centre  
London SW1V 1RB

Tel 0300 111 0001  
enquiries@bususers.org

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<sup>4</sup> <https://fittravelling.com/8-easy-bus-stop-exercises/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/05/17/a-british-fitness-company-wants-you-to-work-out-while-you-commute.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://atap.gov.au/mode-specific-guidance/active-travel/2-key-characteristics-of-active-travel.aspx>