

Evaluation of the WoW scheme for Living Streets



Foreword by the Chief Medical Officer

Obesity, sedentary lifestyles, increasing congestion and the need to reduce carbon emissions are all familiar headline news. They may all be major issues but there are simple, innovative ways of making small changes to our lifestyles that can contribute to tackling them.

Instilling positive behaviour habits in children is fundamental for their development into healthy adults and reducing the risk of long-term health problems in later life. A healthy diet and regular physical activity at a moderate intensity are both key to this and it is our responsibility to provide encouragement and support for children to lead healthy, active lifestyles.

The current recommendation is that children should achieve at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every day. Whilst some of this will be met as part of the school day, children and their carers must have access to other physical activity opportunities within their communities if the recommendation is to be achieved.

For example, the journey to and from school is an ideal time for children and other family members to be active. Not only is it good for health, it also brings environmental and social benefits as well. However, over the last 20 years there has been a dramatic decline in the number of children walking or cycling to school even though the majority of families live within walking distance. Correspondingly, the number of children being driven to school has doubled meaning that, at peak times, in the region of 20% of cars on the roads are involved in the journey to school. Whilst we cannot hope to eliminate this, it is important that wherever possible active travel becomes the first choice for short journeys.

Encouraging children to travel actively not only helps with physical, social and emotional development and maintenance of a healthy weight, it also reduces congestion, lowers CO₂ and improves air quality, which in itself can reduce respiratory problems.

It is heartening, therefore, to see a scheme such as WoW bringing about a change and increasing the number of children and other family members walking to school; the scheme is simple to deliver and maintain, and imposes little in the way of burden on schools. For most of us, building physical activity into everyday life is achievable and can often be realised through making small lifestyle changes. WoW provides a practical expression of this and is an example of changing behaviours making a positive difference.



**SIR LIAM DONALDSON
CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation study examines the Walk Once a Week or Walk On Wednesday scheme which is managed by the charity Living Streets. Known colloquially as WoW, the scheme mainly targets primary school aged children to walk to school, rather than taking alternative methods of transport. The project is basically a reward system, where children who WoW regularly, receive a monthly badge as a prize or reward.

The scheme takes place in 1,895 schools in England, with a further 20 schools in Scotland and Wales now starting to participate.

The evaluation methodology involved speaking to key stakeholders and 30 School Travel Advisors, and also a 'hands up' and 'stand up' survey in 341 schools; in total we received data from 889 classes and 23,450 school children. The data collection and survey took place during the last half of the summer term in 2009.

Key findings in the evaluation include;

- We found that in the WoW schools surveyed, 59% of girls and 60% of boys as a percentage of the total school population walked into school on the day of the survey. In the National Travel Survey 2007 the walking population in 5-10 year olds was 51% which indicates a higher incidence of walking in WoW schools.
- The survey suggests that 19% of children surveyed reported that they started walking to school because of WoW.
- The survey suggests that 82% of children who walk to school participate in WoW.
- The evidence from teachers and classroom staff is that WoW is easy to administrate in the classroom, and that the children understand it and want to participate too.
- Our cost benefit analysis model of the WoW scheme demonstrates that WoW provides more benefits than costs, and produces a ratio of 0.32 where costs (£900,000) / benefit (£2.8 million).
- The WoW design competition attracts a wide participation with 27% (3,189) boys surveyed and 30% (3,510) of girls surveyed entering a drawing or painting. Scaled up across the 1,895 WoW schools this equates to approximately 128,000 pupils producing art for the badge competition, which surely makes this one of the largest art competitions in the UK.
- Approximately 23% of children surveyed walk with either mum or dad to school, which shows that walking reaches across to family members too.

Our findings in the evaluation show that WoW is an easy to administrate and fun scheme for teachers and children to use as an incentive to walk. Although in its purest form WoW is measured by its ability to mode shift children into walking, the programme also has wider benefits in that it acts as a reward for children who walk anyway, helps encourage parents and family members to walk too, provides some relief to congestion patterns around schools, saves CO₂ expended by car journeys and often provides a significant amount of exercise which can be counted into health targets.

There is a perception amongst teachers and some School Travel Advisors that WoW is an expensive programme, however we have calculated that for the average school around £320 would cover participation over a year, which we do not consider to be prohibitive, particularly in comparison with other active travel schemes.

WoW is primarily a London based scheme with around 85% of all badges being distributed to London schools. The potential to expand the programme outside of London is high, especially as the entry costs are low, no real training is required to join up and the benefits of participation outweigh the costs.

WoW now needs to build on the scheme's reputation and raise awareness of the relatively low entry costs of participating in WoW and of course the benefits as laid out in the cost/benefit analysis within the report text.

Strategically the programme fits well with what Local Authorities, Primary Care Trusts and Local Strategic Partnerships are attempting to achieve with their Health based targets such as NI 55 (Obesity in primary school age children in Reception) & NI 56 (Obesity in primary school age children in Year 6) and sustainable transport target NI 198 (Children travelling to school – mode of transport usually used). The WoW scheme can, in a cost beneficial way, help achieve these targets, and a marketing and awareness campaign will be needed to get the message across.

Looking at the scheme from the children's viewpoint, we note that 84% of girls and 83% of boys would prefer to travel by walking or bike than by car or bus. This is highly encouraging for those organisations promoting sustainable transport options and shows that projects such as WoW have a real role by enabling this potential demand. The 2007 National Travel Survey shows that 52% of children 5-10 years old either walk (51%) or cycle (1%), and so walking projects can target this differential.