

School Travel Research

Understanding the perspectives of car-driving parents/carers in Oxfordshire to inform future policy



St. Nicolas C of E Primary School, Abingdon before the School Street

Executive summary



This research builds upon some of the survey work done during the School Street pilot programme and aims to understand the reasons why parents/carers continue to commute to school by car in a post-pandemic environment despite active travel journeys increasing during Covid.

This research used a range of methods carried out with five target schools and some other schools to understand the perspectives of vehicle driving parents/carers and identify the barriers to active travel that they experience.

Schools were selected off the back of the School Street pilot and to cover a range of types and environments:

School	No. responses	Key finding
Bure Park primary	17 responses	Parents/carers used to live closer and walk but have now moved further away and drive.
Larkrise primary	11 responses	Cyclists with bad habits set bad examples for children.
St. Gregory's secondary	9 responses	Drop-off is enroute to work so it is easier to use the car.
St. Nicolas primary	17 responses	Difficult to travel actively in winter.
Windmill primary	27 responses	More consistent active travel routes near the school are wanted.
Other schools	14 responses	Families walk or cycle more in the summer.

Online focus groups, written responses, online surveys and surveys conducted in person on the site of the five targeted school resulted in 95 total responses. The responses were coded into four overall themes, which were further broken down into more specific themes to answer the research aim and objectives:

Overall theme	Theme breakdown
Driving positives	convenience, ease, time saving, no option, greater sense of safety, enjoyment
Driving negatives	parking, driver attitudes, stressful, danger to others, congestion, unhealthy, fuel expense, environmental impact
Active travel and sustainable transport barriers	weather/ seasonality, inefficient public transport, age, inadequate infrastructure, health/ wellbeing, limited access to cycle training/ a cycle, family routine, low sense of safety
Mode shift enabling factors	better active travel infrastructure, better sustainable transport infrastructure, lifestyle change, active travel/ sustainable transport initiatives

These key findings formulated recommendations to inform future research, policy, infrastructure implementation and behaviour change initiatives. There is a need to focus on aligning work, school and public transport timings to accommodate people's lifestyles and family routines. Bus timings, stops, reliability and routes should be reviewed to ensure they serve the needs and demands of communities. School admissions policies need to consider the factors of distance and travel more. A campaign to portray the health benefits of active travel through myth busting statements could be needed in future as well as training school staff directly on these benefits in terms of the school commute. Working towards ensuring access to active travel equipment and training is also essential.

Recommendations



Finding	Policy response
Time constraints on parents - particularly those going on to work	Work with workplaces and businesses in the area on active travel promotion to encourage flexibility or hybrid working. Focus on both office based 9-5 type roles which can be hard to get to on time with the timing of school drop offs and look at organisations with shift working patterns.
	Encourage schools to implement a broader pick and drop off time as many schools trialled during the pandemic. Rather than specific times for year groups to arrive within a wider drop off time, suggest that a 20 minute drop off window could be to allow for flexibility. May also have the knock on benefit of reducing the peak traffic flow and parking issues.
	Review bus fares and reliability- engage with workplaces to promote bus travel for the work commute and combine with the flexible working times to make this a feasible and attractive option for working parents. Ensure that bus routes serve the community by connecting residential areas and school catchments with the school its self.
	Work with schools to be able to offer more wraparound care at a low cost (or free to children who receive free school meals) to enable parents to get to work on time whilst walking, cycling or taking public transport.
School admissions policies	Look at admissions policies - if there is no other option than to put a child in a school further away than their closest one because there is a lack of places, then these children should be identified and supported in terms of how they get to school and encouraging active travel from when they start.
	Ensure that distance to school and travel options are promoted to parents when they are considering schools for their children. This could be additional information in admissions packs or by encouraging schools to be upfront with parents about their expectations around active travel to school during school tours and via their parent communications. This sets the precedent and standard from the start.

Recommendations



Finding	Policy response
Lack of knowledge around active travel	Offer a training event for school staff to increase teachers' understanding about the benefits of active travel to school. Allocate resource to supporting schools to create simple and effective School Travel Action Plans and incentivise schools to complete them and work towards their targets.
	Produce resources and training materials for teachers to use in the classroom to pass on the benefits of active travel to school. Additionally, provide information for parents who are the decision makers when it comes to how students travel to school.
	Myth-busting - if people's reasoning was that they have multi-trips to make with lots of stops so they think it is easier in the car, but is it easier in the car - develop a tool to show people the different ways they can make multiple spots on the way easily via other means
	Ensure that students and their families have access to opportunities to upskill and build confidence in walking and cycling. Through cycle skills training, bike maintenance training and route planning.
Financial implications of public transport	Provide low cost bus travel for school journey and/or those travelling to work.
Health	Perception can be that it's easier to take the car when you have to get the family out of the house, so suggest a campaign to show the integration of exercise into daily life for the whole family through active travel. This can also tie in with concerns about time and saving time through not having squeeze exercise into busy lives.

Learning log



Key issues/limitations	Solution/learning
Research being directed predominantly at parents/ carers only and not considering the opinions of children	When carrying out similar research around school travel, put more value towards children's opinions and directly involve them in the data collection period, rather than allowing parents to speak on behalf of their children, as their opinions may differ.
Conducting in person surveys during drop-off in the morning	There was a higher frequency of responses when conducting in person surveys on the site of the targeted schools during pick-up time, because there were more likely to be a number of parents who arrived early and be parked up sitting and waiting, allowing time for longer and more responses. During drop-off, parents/guardians were often in a rush to make other stops or did not fully stop their vehicles to drop-off meaning it was less safe to approach and conduct the survey. In future research, conducting in person engagement for school travel should be prioritised in the afternoon, but as it is key to gain responses at both times of day to generate variety and cover most factors, when conducting surveys in the morning, the survey should be condensed to one overarching question targeting the most information possible in a short time frame.
Language barrier	Some parents/ guardians could not participate in the research due to language barriers and therefore being unable to answer the questions. To improve communication, the target school area demographics could be briefly analysed and then have the survey translated in the top 3 languages that represent the population of that area. This way, focus groups would also be more inclusive, by offering parents/ guardians the option of translation. Another improvement could be, printing and using a map of the school site or the wider area, to allow participants to point at their school commute route rather than having to voice it.
Question phrasing (use of the word barriers) and use of advanced terminology, which could not be understood easily by all lay people	There was more often than not confusion around what the word barriers was referring to in the question, What do you see as the key barriers to walking and cycling or public transport? Many participants, thought that it was physical barriers that were being referred to such as metal chicanes etc. To improve on this, key terminology should be clarified either before asking the question when in person, or at the top of the survey if written or done online.
Conducting the research in the Winter months	To cover all aspects of parent/ guardian perspectives on school travel and the barriers they face to using active travel modes, the same questions should be asked of parents at different points during the year. When focusing on the winter months, many responses were too focused on it being Winter that was the only reasoning behind them driving to and from school.