

# Active travel in mid-life

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Insights into the  
everyday experience  
of 50-70 year olds

October 2021

In partnership with:



# About us

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## **Centre for Ageing Better**

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

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## **Sustrans**

Sustrans' vision is a society where the way we travel creates healthier places and happier lives for everyone. Our mission is to make it easier for people to walk and cycle.

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## **CFE Research**

Established in 1997, CFE is an independent, not-for-profit social research company. We work across the fields of education, wellbeing and the economy to deliver insight, research and evaluation to government departments, public sector agencies, education providers and voluntary and community sector organisations.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The researchers extend their thanks to the research participants who gave up their time to be interviewed and recorded their experiences of active travel using the mobile app.

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# Executive Summary

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## Overview

This study collected primary evidence on attitudes to active travel and the influence of the physical environment on active travel among people aged 50 to 70, through in-depth discussions combined with mobile ethnography. This was undertaken in response to gaps identified in the existing evidence base on the attitudes to active travel among people aged 50 to 70 and on the role of the built environment in facilitating or impeding active travel in this group. Fifty participants were purposively selected to ensure a mix of gender, age group, rural/urban location, socio-economic status and working stats (including retired). Of the depth interview participants, 24 were invited to take part in the mobile ethnography phase which involved recording information about their daily lives using a smartphone app. Of the 24 invited, 17 completed tasks in the mobile app, recording collectively just over 100 journeys. The key findings of the research are as follows:

- There was a large range of physical capabilities within our sample of 50-70 year old participants. This means that policy makers and service providers should adopt an individualised approach when promoting active travel to this cohort.
  - At the same time, many long-term conditions and disabilities (such as visual impairment, osteoarthritis, diabetes) do not prevent people from being active travellers.
- A key motivator for active travel among this age group is a desire to improve or maintain levels of physical health and fitness. However, some people who keep physically active in other ways (for example, by doing sports) see no reason to travel actively.
- The overwhelming preference of participants was for walking over cycling. Many perceive that cycling requires a greater level of physical fitness and that there are more barriers to cycling than walking. However, some people who find walking difficult due to long-term conditions or disabilities can find cycling to be more accessible.
- Family traditions of being active and sporty help to maintain an active travel habit.

- The environmental benefits of active travel do not appear to be a strong motivation among this age group as a whole.
- One of the biggest barriers to active travel for participants is lack of opportunity – that is, they live too far from shops, services and the workplace for active travel to be a realistic option. This is a particular issue for those living in rural areas. But it is also the case that the amenities that people can reach should meet their needs and preferences – some participants described choosing to drive further afield because shops within walking distance were too expensive. Thus proximity to amenities is a necessary condition of engaging in active travel, but not a sufficient one.
- In some communities, active travel may be seen as a lower status form of travel and such communities lack suitable role models to counter that perception.
- While many people who cycle own old or basic, low-cost bikes, for people from lower socioeconomic groups the cost of purchasing or replacing a bike is not always affordable.
- Enjoyment, fun and engagement with the natural environment were all frequently mentioned as motivations for walking or cycling.
- Women were more likely to be less confident in their cycling abilities, either because it had been a considerable length of time since they last cycled or they had never cycled.
- There is a lack of understanding about what e-bikes are, how they work and their potential benefits. For some, using an e-bike could be seen as ‘cheating’ or evidence of ‘laziness’.
- Life-course changes in active travel habits and preferences follow a broadly common pattern, with walking and cycling more common in young adulthood. Purchasing a car is by far the most common factor to instigate a drop in active travel, while retirement and a reduction in childcare and other family responsibilities are key factors that enable active travel by increasing people’s free time.
- Fear of, and worry about, traffic danger are particular barriers to cycling but are less often mentioned in relation to walking, except in rural areas without pavements.
- Well-maintained, dedicated foot and cycle paths are a key factor in encouraging active travel. This is particularly the case when it comes to enabling people to cycle. The provision of good-quality, adequately segregated and maintained cycle paths is the single biggest enabler of cycling in people in this age group (especially women) - as is the case in other age groups too.

- The change in active lifestyles and active travel habits brought about by lockdown provides policy makers with an opportunity to push at an open door. Most of the people we engaged with felt that their activity levels have increased, but this does not necessarily mean an increase in active travel. For some, changes to working patterns, including time saved by not commuting and quieter roads, have made walking and cycling more attractive. But for others, those same changes to working patterns mean no or reduced opportunities for active commuting. Policies must reflect the precise changes in the nature and patterns of active travel that have developed.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Regular physical activity is key to a healthy lifestyle. The UK Chief Medical Officer<sup>1</sup> and the World Health Organization make strong and consistent recommendations for regular physical activity of at least moderate intensity for people of all ages. The evidence for the health benefits is strong: regular physical activity is proven to help prevent and manage non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several cancers. It also helps prevent hypertension, maintain healthy body weight and can improve mental health, quality of life and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

Active travel (walking and cycling for transport such as to work, a shop or in meeting other local travel needs) is one of the easiest ways to build routine physical activity into daily life. The Centre for Ageing Better wants to understand how people in mid-life (aged from 50 to 70 years) can be supported to take up active travel, or to maintain or increase their levels of active travel, as a first preference for everyday journeys.

Ageing Better commissioned Sustrans and CFE Research to undertake a research project encompassing two evidence reviews and primary qualitative research. The evidence reviews focused on two key areas for people aged 50-70: their attitudes to active travel and the role of the built environment in influencing active travel. The evidence reviews were published in a combined report in August 2021. Some of the key findings of that report are summarised in Box 1.

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1 Chief Medical Officers. UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019

2 World Health Organization. Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030: more active people for a healthier world. Geneva 2018.



### **Box 1: Key findings from reviews of existing evidence on active travel among people aged 50-70**

One of the key ‘addressable’ barriers to people in mid-life taking up active travel for the first time or engaging in more active travel is perceptions of a lack of safety. There is strong evidence that active travel is higher where supportive infrastructure allows travel along continuous routes, whether on foot or by bike, with low perceived or real danger posed by motorised traffic or other risks and obstructions.

A key barrier to active travel among people in mid-life is the distance to be travelled. There is a strong and consistent positive association between neighbourhood walkability (where services can be accessed locally and close to people’s homes) and the likelihood of walking for transport.

A key barrier to people in mid-life cycling is the lack of cycling infrastructure, such as segregated cycle paths. Evidence from our reviews of built environment intervention studies demonstrates that creating infrastructure to support cycling – predominantly new bike paths or bike lanes – leads to increases in cycling for transport. Other barriers to cycling are a lack of confidence and our prevailing car culture.

The aesthetics of an area have been identified as an attribute of a place that is associated with walking and cycling, and this can be related to the enabler of active travel – identified in our review on attitudes – of enjoyment of the outdoors and being in the community. Other motivating factors are the physical and mental health benefits and the feeling of being independent and in control. In general, the evidence reviews make clear that attitudes to active travel are not independent of the environment in which it occurs, but are often shaped by it; for example the fear of motorised traffic can be related to a lack of supportive infrastructure.

While the evidence reviews brought together all available evidence relevant to the role of the built environment in, and attitudes to, active travel among people aged 50-70, they demonstrated the paucity of evidence specific to this age group. Research relevant to this age group had to be extracted from research on broader age groups, frequently described as ‘older people’. It is clear that research is needed that is specifically focused on this age group, which would allow an exploration of issues, such as the impact of retirement, that are directly relevant to this age cohort. Moreover, the Centre for Ageing Better is interested in the 50-70 year age cohort as interventions in this age cohort can help set up the conditions for a good later life.

The reviews of existing evidence also found little on the differential attitudes of, or differential impacts of the environment on, specific population groups, including minority ethnic communities and disabled people aged 50-70. Also, no analysis looking at attitudes to active travel segmented by socio-economic status was

found, nor was any study that specifically covered rural/urban differences for this age group.

These evidence gaps helped to shape the approach to gathering primary qualitative evidence, the findings of which are set out in this report.

**Chapter 2** covers the approach and methods in more detail, including the profile of the participants from whom evidence was collected.

In Chapters 3 to 7 we set out the findings of our primary evidence collection in detail as follows:

- **Chapter 3:** we consider the active travel preferences of the participants in our research project.
- **Chapter 4:** we use a model covering Capability, Opportunity and Motivation to help identify the particular influences on the active travel behaviour of our participants.
- **Chapter 5:** we cover the impact that the pandemic and lockdown have had on the active travel practice and attitudes of our participants.
- **Chapter 6:** we consider changes in active travel habits over the life-course.
- **Chapter 7:** we cover the role of the built environment on active travel among those aged 50-70.
- **Chapter 8** returns to the original research questions – those posed for both the evidence reviews and this primary research project – and answers them using the findings of this research. We also provide an overview of which findings from this primary research were not identified previously in our review of the existing evidence base and which support the existing evidence base.
- **Finally, in Chapter 9** we distil the key insights raised by this project into what we believe are the key implications for policy makers interested in increasing levels of active travel among people in mid-life in their jurisdictions.

# Chapter 2:

# Aims and Methods

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## Study aims

The study aimed to collect primary evidence on attitudes to active travel and the influence of the physical environment among people aged 50-70 by conducting in-depth discussions with people in mid-life combined with mobile ethnography.

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## Research Questions

The research questions for the project as a whole (both the evidence reviews and primary qualitative research) were as follows:

1. What are the overarching preferences of adults in mid-life (aged 50-70) for active travel and their attitudes towards, access to and past experiences of active travel?
  - What motivates them to undertake active travel and what prevents them?
  - What would motivate and/or enable them to use or trial new forms of active travel such as e-bikes?
  - How do behaviours and preferences differ for working and non-working people?
  - How and when is active travel combined with public transport?  
Are there barriers to this?
  - What is the link between unmet transport needs and active travel?
  - How do people's active travel habits change over the life-course and why?
  - Are there trigger points that precipitate starting or stopping active travel and how do these differ between people?
  - Do preferences, habits and motivations differ for different age groups? Is the biggest variation by age or by other factors within the same age cohort?

2. What role does the built environment play in encouraging or discouraging active travel for those aged 50-70?

### **Approach**

The approach to collecting primary qualitative evidence combined in-depth interviews with mobile ethnography to gain rich insights into people's everyday experiences of active travel. Qualitative fieldwork took place between March and May 2021. (This was a period of partial lockdown in which people were allowed to leave home for recreation and exercise outdoors with their household or support bubble and during which people were encouraged to work from home.)

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### **Scope**

By active travel, we mean walking or cycling on commonplace journeys that get us from place to place. This could include going to the shops, getting to work, running errands or visiting friends and family, but excludes walking or cycling purely for leisure or fitness.

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### **Sampling**

Sampling criteria were informed by the existing evidence review. Fifty participants were purposively selected from across the UK and included target quotas to ensure a mix of gender, age group, rural/urban locations, socioeconomic status and both retired and working people. In this way, the sample achieved good representation of key groups of interest.

Since the aim was to understand the experiences and motivations of those who use active travel, our sample focused on three groups:

- those who currently use active travel, either regularly or occasionally
- those who have previously been active travellers
- those who expressed an interest in undertaking active travel

People from minority ethnic backgrounds and disabled people were over-sampled. The existing evidence review had identified that these groups were relatively under-researched.

This research is qualitative; as the sample was purposively selected and is not representative of the wider population, caution should be taken in generalising the findings beyond the research participants. Details of the sample are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Characteristics of participant sample**

<b>Overall</b>	<b>50</b>
Contemplating active travel	13
Occasional/former active traveller	24
Active Traveller	13
Mainly urban	18
Suburban/semi-rural	21
Mainly rural	11
50-59	26
60-70	24
Female	26
Male	24
White British	32
Ethnic minority	18
Not disabled / no long-term conditions	36
Disabled or has long-term condition	14
Working/seeking work	32
Retired	18
Higher managerial/professional occupations	7
Intermediate occupations	24
Routine and manual occupations	19

## Depth interviews

All participants took part in a semi-structured depth interview lasting up to an hour. These were mainly undertaken by telephone, although one participant opted for a video call. Interviews were audio recorded with participant's permission and transcribed in full for analysis. Participants were paid an incentive of £30 to thank them for their time.

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## Mobile ethnography

Mobile ethnography involves participants recording information about their daily lives using a smartphone app. This can involve taking photos, making audio/video diary entries as well as providing written responses to open questions. Being a remote method, the approach was particularly helpful in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns as it required no in-person engagement with researchers.

CFE developed a bespoke set of questions and tasks for participants. These were hosted on a smartphone platform provided by CrowdLab. An introductory task asked participants to show or say what active travel means to them. The main task took the form of a travel diary, completed over two weeks. Participants were asked to answer a mix of closed and open questions before and after the journeys they took. There was also the option for participants to provide further information on what would encourage them to actively travel more. The participants were free to decide how many journeys they recorded.

Participants who did not own or did not wish to use a smartphone were offered an alternative method to ensure they could still participate. This comprised a paper version of the tasks/questions plus a disposable camera to take photographs. None of the participants chose this option.

Twenty-four of the depth interview participants were invited to take part in the mobile ethnography phase. Participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives. We also selected participants who, based on their depth interviews, were likely to be undertaking active travel journeys over the fieldwork period.

Participants were paid £15 on completing the introductory task and recording a single journey. A further £15 was paid to those who recorded information on at least three journeys.

Of the 24 invited, 17 completed tasks in the mobile app, recording collectively just over 100 journeys.

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## Analysis

We used the COM-B model<sup>3</sup> behavioural framework to guide the qualitative research. This helps to identify the particular influences on a behaviour (covering Capability, Opportunity and Motivation) and matches these to types of intervention needed to create change.

An analytical framework was developed based on the research questions and the COM-B model. This was used to inform the development of the depth interview topic guide and to guide our data analysis and write-up. Depth interview transcripts were closely read and coded to this framework, which was reviewed and adjusted following the coding of an initial sample of transcripts from the depth interviews. The framework also incorporated demographic details to allow responses to be analysed by participant characteristic.

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<sup>3</sup> Michie, S. van Stralen, M. M. and West, R. (2011) The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions *Implementation Science* 6, 42 <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>

# Chapter 3: Research participant preferences for active travel

## Walking versus cycling

Overall, participant preference is for walking rather than cycling, although a few combine both methods. Among those contemplating active travel or who are only occasional active travellers, walking is generally viewed as more appealing and accessible. This preference is reflected in the journeys recorded by participants using the mobile app - of the 57 active travel journeys recorded, 53 involved walking.

Preferences for walking over cycling most frequently relate to the perceived need for greater physical ability and fitness levels for cycling, lack of cycling ability (either because they have never learnt or have not cycled for several decades), lack of access to a working bike and safety concerns (busy roads, lack of dedicated cycle paths).

One of the recognised benefits of cycling over walking is the speed and distance that can be covered. A few participants were considering or had considered cycling for longer journeys, such as commuting to work, but faced greater barriers than for walking. Barriers to cycling are explored in more detail below.

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## Frequency of active travel

Regular active travellers report using active travel at least two or three times a week. Some of those who described themselves at the sampling stage as occasional active travellers or as contemplating active travel turned out, on questioning, to be more frequent active travellers, sometimes walking short distances to local shops or bus stops.

Retired interviewees were less likely to say they rarely or never undertake active travel, but there were some participants in both retired and working categories who actively travel almost every day.



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## Types of journey undertaken by active travel

Interviewees most frequently referred to using active travel to go shopping. This is supported by the app data – 33 of the 57 active travel journeys recorded were primarily for shopping.

Other journeys people take by active travel include visiting cafes, friends or relatives, the gym, post office or post box, polling station (local elections took place during fieldwork), to get to the bus stop, to attend a medical appointment, get a haircut or to collect a takeaway.

Far fewer participants walk to get to and from work. This is often because the distance to the workplace is much further and often involves using roads that are less appealing or just not possible to walk or cycle on, such as country lanes, dual carriageways or motorways. The COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the number of journeys people make to work, with some working from home during this time.

One participant accounted for almost all the work-related active travel journeys recorded in the app as their use of active travel to get to work is due to often having no alternative (see Case study 1).

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## Journey distance

Journey distance and travel time is a key determinant of travel mode choice. For those participants who undertake at least some active travel, 1.5 miles or 20-30 minutes was often the maximum they would consider walking. People are more likely to choose to walk very short journeys (five to ten minutes).

The average (mean) total return time for journeys made by walking alone and recorded on the app was 45 minutes. This is skewed by a few long walks – the most common return journey time for walking was 20 minutes. Those who walk regularly for leisure may have a different perspective of what is a reasonable walking distance compared to those who walk less.

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**“I do walk to the shops because they’re quite local. To me, they’re local - 1, 1.5 miles is nothing.”** Female, 60-70

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Cycling allows travel over a longer distance more rapidly, though as we have seen, it is less frequently used by participants for active travel. The average return time for the few bike journeys recorded on the mobile app was 37 minutes.

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## Deciding whether to use active travel

In Chapter 4 we explore in detail the factors that influence whether participants use active travel at all. Here, we briefly consider the reasons why regular or occasional active travellers choose to make a particular journey actively or by car or other means. The three main factors appear to be distance, what they may need to carry and the weather.

Distance to destination is the main determinant of whether someone chooses to use active travel as a method of transport for a particular journey. In many cases people chose car or public transport because their destination is just too far away.

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**“It was too far to walk, approximately 8 miles [participant was taking puppy to the vets for a monthly check up].”** Male, 60-70

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Needing to carry items is also an important determinant. Weekly ‘big shops’ are conducted by car or taxi; carrying many items when walking or riding a bike is not feasible. The shopping trips that people describe using active travel for are generally ‘top-up’ shops to buy a few items that were either forgotten on a big shop or which have run out, or to make one-off purchases like greetings cards, plants for the garden or sweet treats for grandchildren. The image below gives an idea of the amount of shopping participants are willing to carry when walking to the shops.

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**“Going to the shops to pick up a few things and some treats.”** Female, 60-70

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Needing to transport tools and equipment for work or other purposes also makes active travel less feasible.

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**“Whether I’m going to be carrying lots of stuff, for example, for work, I need to carry my laptop because that’s what I use, whether it’s here or at the university. So, it is the weight and do I need a bag, or just use my backpack?”** Female, 50-59

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**“The journey is 16 miles return. It will be a long day with hard work [participant was visiting son to install a shed]. Also, have to carry tools and equipment. Not practical to go on bike or walk.”** Female, 50-59

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Many active travellers admitted they were ‘fair weather’ walkers or cyclists. Poor weather was commonly given as a reason why active travellers would get in the car, even for short journeys.

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**“If it’s raining, if it’s horrible weather, I’ll get in the car.”** Female, 50-59

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Those who travelled actively also often mentioned good weather as an incentive to walk or cycle. Where people have the time, a sunny day can motivate them to get outside.

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**“Decided as it is another nice day we will make the most of the weather, so we cycled 5 miles to spend an hour or two with some friends.”** Male, 60-70

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**“It was an amazingly sunny day so I was feeling good and happy. As the post office is only a few minutes down the road, it was lovely to walk there and back.”**  
Female, 60-70

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Other reasons to take the car or public transport on occasions include if the participant is feeling unwell or tired, or if the route to a particular destination is arduous or involves a busy or dangerous stretch of road.

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**“The distance is beyond a cycle ride and requires travel along major trunk roads before narrower country lanes that are dangerous for cycling because of potholes and poor verges as well as drivers who think country lanes are ideal for speeding along regardless of other road users.”** Male, 60-70

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## Combining active travel with public and private transport

The main way participants combine active travel with public transport is linking walking with bus travel. Several participants walk very short distances to a bus stop. A few walk extended distances to catch a bus – either because there is no other option or occasionally as an intentional way of adding in extra exercise or time spent outdoors. A few also use the ability to hop on and off buses to extend active travel, for example, by getting off part way to walk a section of the journey.

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**“I start with walking and I get to a place and I say, “Okay, you know what? Let me use the bus from here.” Get the bus. Get off again and then I start walking again for 15, 20 minutes.”** Male, 60-70

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It can be useful to have the option to get the bus part-way through a walking journey if it is a long one, the participant becomes tired, or if they are returning from a shopping trip with something too heavy to carry. In these ways having frequent and reliable buses that run on convenient routes can be an enabler in choosing to walk.

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**“So, say I walked to the destination, depending where it is, say I walked to Costa Coffee, and I can’t be bothered to walk back or something, I would use the bus in this instance.”** Female, 50-59

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Unreliable bus services can lead to people inadvertently using active travel - for example, one participant described walking home when the bus did not turn up.

Locations with plentiful and well-integrated public transport systems make active travel more feasible. London residents in particular were likely to use public transport. No real barriers to combining travel modes were reported, probably because walkers rather than cyclists spoke of combining modes.

Many participants talked about their dissatisfaction with public transport, often viewing it as inconvenient, unreliable, expensive, unsafe or otherwise disagreeable. Using the car, in contrast, was a more appealing option. In a small number of cases where participants are motivated and enjoy walking or cycling, frustration with poor public transport services means they choose active travel instead.

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**“ [I] don’t like just sitting around waiting for buses, so I would rather walk than wait for a bus... particularly here, buses are so infrequent that I just don’t see any point, I would much rather just walk. If I’m waiting for a bus, if I have to wait more than a couple of minutes, I’ll probably walk in the direction of the next bus stop and if the bus hasn’t come I’ll walk to the next bus stop, and I’ll just keep on walking. And then if the bus happens to come, I’ll get on it. But otherwise, I can’t be bothered.”** Male, 50-59

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However, inconvenience of public transport can also put people off from trying to combine its use with active travel. One participant avoided integrating modes due to the perceived high cost of public transport.

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**“ No, I wouldn’t [integrate cycling with public transport]. Where I live, I think the bus fare is about £4 into town, so too much money. If I was paying £4, I would get my money’s worth and go [all the way by bus] into town.”** Female, 50-59

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Only one participant very occasionally integrated cycling with rail travel. It was not possible for him to combine cycling with bus journeys as this would require a folding bike which were deemed too expensive for the participant.

There were several examples of participants combining active travel (walking in particular) with driving. These participants drive to a park and ride hub or other free parking space closer to their destination and then walk the remainder. For the participants who do this, it is a way to reduce some of the stress and cost of town centre parking and gain an opportunity for a pleasant walk.

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**“ Where I live there’s only two bridges into the town as the town is split by a river. On my side of the river is a park with a carpark. I often park there then walk the footpath only bridge into the town. It’s easier than looking for parking in town, plus you get a little exercise at the same time.”** Female, 50-59

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# Chapter 4: Capability, opportunity and motivations

This chapter explores the factors that influence participants' use of active travel in detail. It uses the COM-B framework to explore the physical, psychological and social features that help shape behaviours. A summary of the key factors is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of factors influencing active travel behaviour for people aged 50 to 70**

	Capability		Opportunity		Motivation	
	Physical Physical skills, strength or stamina	Psychological Knowledge, understanding, confidence	Physical Opportunity afforded by the environment, involving time, resources and locations	Social Opportunity afforded by interpersonal influences, social cues and cultural norms	Reflective Processes involving self-conscious intentions and beliefs	Automatic Processes involving emotional reactions, desires, impulses, inhibitions
<b>Factors influencing active travel generally</b>	Physical ability necessary to walk or cycle  Health conditions that prevent or restrict levels of active travel  Fatigue/tiredness	Understanding of the importance of physical activity  Understanding of the physical and mental health benefits of walking and cycling  Confidence to cycle	Shops, services and workplaces within walking or cycling distance  Time to travel actively – may take longer  Local terrain is such that active travel is physically manageable	Influence (negative and positive) from family  Active travel being a social norm in the community	Intention to keep fit, healthy and to lose or manage weight, particularly as people age  Mental health and other psychological benefits  Wanting to avoid the annoyances of driving  Intention to save money  Concern about effects of air pollution  Concern to reduce carbon footprint / use of motor vehicles	Habit and routine  Social pleasure as a result of active travel  Enjoyment of natural environment and outdoors  Goals and friendly competition  Fear of traffic danger and driver aggression  Unpleasantness of active travel in poor weather
<b>Factors particularly influencing cycling</b>	Physical skill of being able to ride a bike  Fitness levels	Knowledge of e-bikes and other non-standard bikes and their benefits  Confidence to ride a bike	Availability of well-maintained, traffic free cycle routes  Ownership or access to a suitable bike – cost can be a barrier, particularly in relation to e-bikes  Appropriate, secure storage for a bike at home and at travel destination	Social stigma and embarrassment – in particular of using e-bikes and non-standard bikes		Fear - of traffic danger, unsafe areas, dark or isolated places  Bad experiences with other road users

## Physical capability

Having the physical ability necessary for walking or cycling is arguably a pre-requisite for active travel. Certainly, being able to walk or cycle comfortably is an enabler. Several research participants, particularly active travellers, acknowledge they are in good health with few physical problems that might prevent them from active travel. Some active travellers keep fit through means other than active travel.

While a few participants have health conditions or disabilities that mean active travel is largely outside of their capabilities, many participants, in both the younger and older age categories, have long-term conditions or disabilities (such as visual impairment, osteoarthritis, diabetes) that do not prevent them from being active travellers. Conditions such as those affecting joints and limbs may limit the distance, frequency or type of active travel, but do not necessarily prevent it altogether. For example, some talked of only being able to manage short walks or ones avoiding hilly terrain. Active travel is also often avoided on days when people feel tired, in pain or are recovering from illness, but for some participants, active travel – and walking and cycling more generally – are important ways in which they manage their conditions.

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**“I have an annual test because I have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and my lung capacity is now effectively very high. Much higher than it would be if I didn’t do the walking ...[It] has been very positive from a health perspective not just relying on medication.”** Male, 50-59

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There is a clear perception that walking is more accessible than cycling for those with lower levels of physical fitness or ability. Our sample includes one interesting exception to this, demonstrating that disability need not be a barrier to cycling. K is in the 60-70 age group. A condition affecting his legs means he tends to use a mobility scooter, but he also cycles some short functional journeys as well as some for leisure. Walking very far is too painful for him, but cycling is possible and the gentle exercise helps.

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**“I can walk, but only about half a mile now before the pain sets in. I find it more convenient to actually cycle - it’s the way my legs are... The weirdest thing is, if I’m cycling it must be a different position, I don’t seem to have any problems. It just works for me.”** Male, 60-70

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Fatigue and tiredness can be a physical barrier to active travel, and not just related to ageing or long-term conditions. For younger participants who are still working in physically demanding jobs, the prospect of active travel is often less than appealing.

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**“ I would say tiredness [is the main reason I don’t use active travel], how I feel after a work shift”** Male, 50-59

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Low levels of fitness and perceptions about what is required for active travel can also prevent people increasing or taking up different forms of active travel. Participants describe being unfit or overweight as a result of ageing generally or as a result of a lengthy illness, the restrictions of lockdown and shielding or simply being out of practice when it comes to physical activity. The preference for walking as a more accessible form of active travel often appears to be related to a perception that a higher level of fitness is required to cycle, particularly as a form of transport and/or if the surrounding terrain is not flat. One participant described finding cycling ‘hard work’ and felt she needed to improve her fitness levels on an exercise bike before considering cycling for active travel. However, those who use active travel regularly acknowledge that their ability and the range of journeys they can tackle improves over time as their fitness levels improve.

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**“ The more you do it the easier it gets, and the more you enjoy it, to be honest with you.”** Male, 60-70

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As well as having the physical ability, there is the additional need to have the physical skill to cycle. Some participants are unable to ride a bike, having never learnt or having only minimal experience a long time ago. Reasons for this include growing up in an environment not conducive to learning to cycle, such as a big city. Some of those who were unable to cycle felt they were too old, or that it was too late to learn or re-start.

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**“ I don’t think I would [start cycling] now to be honest. I think I’m probably past that. The amount of practice I would have to do to get to a level of proficiency where I would be confident going out on the roads.”** Male, 60-70

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## Psychological capability

Psychological capability relates to the knowledge or psychological strength needed for a behaviour. Knowledge barriers were not raised by participants, perhaps because relatively little knowledge is required for active travel. There is the need, particularly for cyclists, to understand the highway code and to have road-safety awareness, but these issues were not mentioned as particular factors that affected people's ability or motivation to travel actively.

Lack of confidence can be a barrier, particularly when it comes to cycling. While few participants explicitly referred to lack of confidence in their cycling ability (though some who had not cycled for several years said they felt nervous about cycling), many were fearful of cycling on busy roads and of driver aggression (see below). This suggests lack of cycling confidence is an issue. A few participants also expressed nervousness about returning to busy places after shielding/ isolating due to the pandemic.

Although this was not sampled explicitly, almost all participants said that physical activity was important or very important to them – even if they are limited in what they currently do. Participants understand the importance of physical activity for health and mental wellbeing, particularly as they age. This understanding is an important pre-requisite for some aspects of motivation:

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**“ [Keeping physically active is] becoming more important because I am getting to the age now where I’m aware I will get health problems if I don’t.”**  
Female, 50-59

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Several participants also spoke about their understanding of the benefits of walking and cycling as forms of exercise that are good for the body and mind and are particularly accessible.

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**“ If you want to live a very healthy and long life, you need to walk. It’s not about jogging. Jogging can mess up your knees... But walking and cycling, oh my God. They are two fantastic ones.”** Male, 60-70

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## Physical opportunity

Physical opportunity relates to having the opportunity to perform a behaviour and includes issues relating to time, resource and location.

The biggest physical opportunity barrier to active travel for participants is that shops, services and the workplace are just too far away. Conversely, those who use active travel the most have lots of places nearby that they can walk or cycle to. This is often the case for people living in large cities or close to town centres, but some participants living in more suburban areas also described having good access to a range of facilities.

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**“I live in a fairly suburban area, so lots of things are close by. It’s not like I live out in the sticks and things are further away.”** Male 60-70

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**“I live in a residential area where there are things about – doctor’s surgery, shops, laundrette, post office and all sorts in the next road – so quite handy.”**  
Female, 50-59

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Those living in more rural areas generally have fewer destinations where active travel is a possibility; participants need to travel further afield for large stores and greater variety, which usually means using a car. However, if there is a small shop nearby participants are often willing to walk or cycle to it. Indeed, if facilities are very close to home, walking can become the default as it is just not worth getting the car out (or even cycling) for such a short journey.

However, amenities also need to be affordable and attractive. Some participants described choosing to drive further afield because shops within walking distance are more expensive or they prefer a particular coffee shop to the one locally.

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**“The only supermarket they’ve got is a [store name] and I personally don’t want to use a mortgage every time we do my shopping. So, we have to travel 10 to 12 miles to get to a supermarket from here.”** Male, 50-59

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Workplaces tend to be further away from home for many people, so commuting by active travel methods was either not feasible or highly unattractive.

For those without easy access to a car and/or public transport, active travel may be less of a choice and more the only option in some circumstances. This was particularly the case for one of our participants (see Case study 1 below).

### Case study 1: Active travel as the only option

M is an active traveller in her 50s. She lives in a rural village and this plays an important role in determining her active travel choices. She enjoys walking, both for leisure and travel, as it keeps her physically and mentally fit. Walking also plays an important role in keeping her connected to other people. When M first moved to the area, she joined a walking club in order to meet people. As she does not drive, using active travel is essential for her independence.

**“Being here, I’m totally isolated because I don’t drive and if I stay here, I have to count on my husband to take me here and there. I have to take myself, walking to the town which is 5 miles away.”**

As well as walking to the shops in the local town, M also walks to catch the bus from town to her job as a shop assistant. Sometimes her husband is able to give her a lift in the car or she takes a taxi. This saves time and is often welcome after her shift, but her husband is not always available to offer a lift. The village bus service is infrequent and inconvenient, and M would rather walk than wait for up to an hour. On some days there is no bus at all.

**“The local bus which comes from my village is not very reliable. I’d rather walk than wait for the bus. Also, for example, the bus service finishes at 3:00pm.”**

M is interested in cycling as an alternative, but she has never learnt to ride a bike and her husband is not supportive of the idea due to concerns over safety.

**“I wanted to learn now, but my husband rejects that because he thinks I will die; someone will kill me in the road.”**

Although the walk to the town to catch the bus is time-consuming and can be tiring and boring, M also sees benefits in walking and recognises how it can help lift her mood.

**“You see an animal, you see something. It makes you change your views. Something happens to make you happier.”**

Related to proximity to travel destinations, having sufficient time to travel actively appears to be an important factor. Many of the active travellers in our sample described having greater opportunity to travel actively now that they are older. This is particularly the case for people who are retired. Yet many of those still in work who have grown-up families recognise they have more free time and with it a greater opportunity to travel actively. Women in particular talked about no longer having the responsibility of young children to look after and a reduced need to get to different destinations rapidly.

There is a clear perception that travelling actively can take longer, and for some of those who are still working there would be a need to factor in additional time. Participants point out this would mean shifting daily routines substantially.

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**“I would have to get up early and be very organised to walk to work and I’m not always the most organised in the morning.”** Female, 50-59

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Some participants talked about the ‘convenience’ of driving places – this generally appears to mean ability to get to places quickly, although some journeys recorded in the app demonstrate that driving can be less predictable in terms of timing due to unexpected delays caused by accidents and roadworks. Furthermore, a walking route is occasionally more direct.

The local terrain can present a physical barrier to active travel, particularly where cycling is concerned, and will often determine which journeys participants consider using active travel for. Having to negotiate steep or frequent hills means cycling is more strenuous, so is less appealing and/or perceived as unfeasible for some. Some participants, including active travellers, described specific journeys that they might otherwise cycle were it not for steep or continued uphill sections. Challenging terrain is a particular barrier for those who are concerned about being fit enough to cycle. Several of those who regularly use active travel methods acknowledged that they are lucky to live in areas with relatively flat surrounding terrain, which makes active travel an easier option. A few enjoy the additional exercise of walking up hills.

The built environment plays an important role in providing physical opportunities or barriers to active travel, particularly for cycling for transport. Factors relating to the built environment are explored in detail in Chapter 7.

Little if any equipment or other resources are needed for walking – making it particularly accessible. However, cycling requires access to a bike, and several participants do not have one. For some, this was because they could not ride or did not want to. For others, lack of a bike was more of a barrier. While many participants who cycle talked of owning old or basic low-cost bikes, for a few participants from lower socio-economic groups the cost of purchasing or replacing a bike is not affordable. Some who had not cycled for some time were reluctant to spend money on a bike without being sure it would get good use.

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**“If you paid a lot of money for a bike and then you lost interest in it then you’d look really stupid.”** Female, 60-70

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The opportunity to hire or try out bikes at a low cost may be a way to encourage those with an interest in cycling to test the activity without having to purchase their own bike, particularly where there is also good cycling infrastructure. One participant who has not cycled for over 20 years admitted to being tempted by a local low-cost hire scheme.

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**“It’s so cheap; it’s about £3.50 for the day. And I think I would be inclined to try it because we haven’t cycled for years and we’ve got such fabulous cycling paths that we would be encouraged to maybe try it just for once and see how we get on.”** Female, 60-70

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A few participants had bikes but did not use them because they were ‘packed away’ in a garage or needed repair or maintenance work to make them roadworthy. One participant illustrated that with the necessary motivation and encouragement this need not be a barrier.

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**“I’ve just applied for one of the government vouchers where you can get your bike done up. I have got a bike in the garage that I haven’t ridden for a long, long time, so that’s on my list of things to do, is contact somebody to MOT it almost and check your brakes and your tyres and so on.”** Female, 50-59

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Finding a bike that is right for the participant can make all the difference. One participant described discovering, almost by accident, that the simplicity and size of a folding bike worked well for her.

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**“I used to have a mountain bike but I’m only 4’11”... I did really struggle with this mountain bike and we went to [sports store] to buy new bikes for all of us and then I saw this [folding bike] and... I got on it and I rode it around the shop and I said, “I really, really like this,” because I can’t do mountain bikes with gears and stuff. I said, “It’s really comfortable. It really suits my height and everything.”** Female, 50-59

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For some, the lack of space at home to store a bike is an important barrier. For example, one participant who expressed an interest in cycling lives in a flat with no real dedicated bike storage. Residents are told they can keep bikes in the bin store, but this is not appealing.

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**“Yes, [having somewhere to store a bike] would certainly make a difference. It would have to be secure, and preferably not in the bin area. It’s not the nicest place, it’s pretty smelly in there.”** Male, 60-70

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As well as a lack of space to store a bike at home, a few people were unhappy at the availability of places to park a bike safely at their destination. Either there is no dedicated storage or that which is available has insufficient space for demand. For example, one participant described how colleagues leave bikes in the hall at work, but as this is also a public space she was concerned about security. This appears to be more of a frustration that might reduce the frequency and type of journey that people make by bike rather than a key barrier to travelling by bike at all.

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## **Social opportunity**

Friends and family can influence active travel habits. Some participants spoke of being successfully encouraged by family members to be more active and adopt a healthy lifestyle, particularly following an illness. Active travellers often walk or cycle with their spouses or partners. This adds to their enjoyment and motivation, allowing couples to spend time together and to chat. Conversely, one participant explained she does not use active travel because her husband’s health condition means he must travel by car. Case study 1 also demonstrates that a family member’s negative attitudes can be a barrier to taking up active travel. Family traditions of being active and sporty help to maintain an active travel habit. A few participants were motivated to walk to places with their children or grandchildren not just out of the desire to spend time with them but to encourage them to get out and be active too.

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**“I like getting my kids out. They are both on the autism spectrum and don’t go out without me, so it’s energising to combine doing what I need to do with getting them out. Makes me feel like a good mum.”** Female, 50-59

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Most participants reported seeing people using a range of travel modes in their local area – this includes people walking and cycling, particularly since the pandemic. But in many areas they also see a ‘car culture’, where travelling even a short distance by car is viewed as normal. Areas where walking, and to a lesser extent cycling, were viewed as very common methods of travel tended to be areas where people live in close proximity to lots of shops and facilities. Participants in some dense urban areas - London in particular - view walking or public transport as the norm due to well-connected infrastructure that encourages and facilitates these modes of transport. One participant who lives in a new town with lots of

purpose-built infrastructure for walking and cycling also commented that as a result it does not feel unusual to undertake active travel. Another living in a coastal location perceived that many people move there for the outdoor lifestyle and it is therefore common to see lots of walking and cycling.

Active travellers with long-standing habits were not influenced by attitudes in areas where walking and cycling were not viewed as the norm. However, for those without this background, a lack of role models or a perception that active travel choices may make them a potential target for ridicule can be a barrier. There is a perception among some that ageing itself is a barrier to cycling, even among some who regularly walk long distances, with one participant describing herself as being ‘too old to cycle’. This is related to a perception that cycling requires high levels of fitness and is therefore less appropriate for older people, or that learning or re-starting cycling is more difficult later in life.

Case study 2 below illustrates how the prevalence of cycling and walking within a particular community might influence perceptions of what is normal and acceptable.

### **Case study 2: The influence of gender, age and ethnicity on active travel**

E is an occasional active traveller in the 50-59 age group. She has had a relatively adventurous and active life, but feels this is not the norm for Black people. As a Black woman she feels that there is a cultural stigma around active travel in Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. She went on to explain how perceptions of active travel as being a lower status method of travel could stop some people from BAME backgrounds cycling and walking more.

**“I think that Black people tend to put a lot of value in cars. I think they see them as a status symbol... riding a bike is not a status symbol. If you see a Black person walking, I know other Black people think this, because I’ve seen and heard them say it, they’ll say something like, “Oh, why are they walking? Haven’t they got a car? Can’t they afford one?” Whereas a White person I don’t think would think that way. I think it’s because Black people in this country are the lowest socioeconomic rung, generally, they value possessions.”**

E also feels that there is a lack of Black role models who travel actively or even undertake walking and cycling for leisure. This also has a gendered dimension.

**“Thinking about it in the context of age, race is even more important because you do not see 50- and 60-year-old people on bikes unless they’re men. My mother has never been active in any shape or form... I rarely see Black people on bikes, apart from men. I might occasionally see a Black woman. Tell me when the last time was that you saw a Black person on a bike?”**



These insights suggest that it is important to consider how race, age, gender, socio-economic status, identity and culture intersect to influence how people in this age group, and particularly women, perceive active travel and therefore the likelihood of undertaking it themselves.

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## Reflective motivation

Reflective motivation incorporates self-conscious intentions, plans and beliefs about what is good and bad.

A prime motivation for many participants, both current active travellers and those wanting to start or do more active travel, is the desire to improve or maintain their levels of physical health and fitness. As people age, and in some cases develop health conditions, the importance of being active can become more of a concern - if not always easier to address.

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**“I think when you’re younger, you’re more active, so you’re happy walking around. And then you get to a point where sometimes you can’t be bothered. And then you think about your health, and, “Oh, maybe I should do a bit of walking.”** Female, 50-59

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A few participants described becoming more motivated to get active to improve their health following the experience of a serious illness themselves or through a close family member.

For some, the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of paying attention to their physical health. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

Active travel is, of course, only one way to remain active. A few participants who walk or cycle for leisure, or do other active pursuits or sports, see no need to use active travel to keep fit.

Related to the desire to remain fit, several participants talked about wanting to get active in order to lose or maintain weight. Again, this was often related to the effects of ageing and of the pandemic.

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**“The other reason at the moment why walking is important to me is because I have put on quite a bit of weight since working from home because I’m just not getting the regular exercise, getting out and about as much as I used to. I am trying to incorporate walking a bit more into my daily routine than I was a few months ago. It’s become more important to me for that reason.”** Female, 50-59

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Participants who were current or former active travellers, as well as those who walked or cycled purely for pleasure, also recognise and are motivated by the psychological and mental health benefits of physical activity.

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**“A few days I don’t change my clothes and I don’t go near the door, and then I have to push myself to go out and then I go for a walk, and that lifts me up a bit. It’s like you change your skin a bit.”** Female, 50-59

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Participants often talked about how they found that walking in particular relaxed them and improved their mental wellbeing. Walking offers an opportunity to clear their head and is seen as meditative, allowing an opportunity to process things that might be troubling them.

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**“I’ve always used walking to regulate whatever’s going on, relationship break-ups or anything like that, it’s all combated with walking, for me.”** Female, 50-59

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The ability to let the thoughts wander and engage with the natural environment partly explains the preference of many for walking over cycling. As one participant put it:

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**“ [When you’re cycling] you’re concentrating because you’re going at speed and you’re thinking about turning or hitting someone or whether you might fall off. It’s just not relaxing for me, whereas when you’re walking you can breathe and you can look at everything and hear the birds tweeting, and if you step on a leaf, you can hear it crunching.”** Female, 50-59

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As well as factors that pull people toward active travel, there are aspects of travelling by car that can push some to travel actively. Following journeys by car, participants using the mobile app sometimes described their mood as ‘frustrated’ as a result of delays caused by heavy traffic, accidents and road works. This was not the case for the active travel journeys recorded. So, for some, seeking to avoid the annoyances of driving – factors including congestion charges and the inconvenience and cost of parking – can incentivise active travel. One participant who drives professionally likes to walk and cycle as much as possible when not driving for work. The participant below contrasts the different experiences of driving to her parents and then walking from there to the shops.

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**“It was a lovely day. I was listening to my podcast and the walk to the mall was easy and non-problematic. I was happy that I had not wasted money parking. I was happy not worrying about whether my car would be damaged inadvertently in a car park. The journey back by car from where my car was parked by my mother’s wall was a tad stressful as there was so much traffic.”**

Female, 50-59

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The cost of driving, parking and public transport in particular can also motivate people to use active travel methods when possible. One participant described how a planned change in workplace location meant she was considering whether commuting by bike might be an option rather than driving due to the cost of parking at the new location. Reducing costs and saving money can be a particular concern for those in lower-paid employment or in single-income households.

Air pollution can be a deterrent to active travel for those concerned about the health impact of exhaust fumes if a journey involved walking or cycling along a main road, particularly if they had a respiratory condition such as asthma. In fact, one participant was looking to move out of London due to his respiratory condition.

In contrast, a few participants mentioned the broader environmental benefits of active travel as additional motivation. Increased visibility of climate change and air pollution in recent years mean people are more aware of these issues and their relation to car use.

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**“... because people talk a lot about carbon footprints and the amount of damage that’s being done to the planet and the environment, it does make me think twice”** Female, 50-59

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**“You can turn around and say consideration for the environment nowadays because since going out in the countryside it probably makes you more aware of that. Especially with the wildlife.”** Male, 50-59

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However, this was generally a secondary consideration to the health and wellbeing benefits. And a few participants were actually sceptical of the environmental arguments and did not see them as a reason to change their travel habits.

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## Automatic motivation

Automatic motivation encompasses processes that involve emotional reactions, impulses and inhibitions.

Habits appear to play an important role in determining travel choices. Among regular active travellers the decision to walk or cycle is often not a conscious choice but part of an everyday routine.

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**“I think it’s because we’ve got into a routine, and if we do want something from the shop, it’s just a natural flow.”** Female, 50-59

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For more infrequent active travellers and those who want to do more active travel it takes a conscious effort to break the automatic response to travel by car. As a result, good intentions are easily thwarted by imperfect conditions (weather, feeling tired) and what some admitted were excuses. For example, one participant said he did not walk to work as his work shoes were not suitable, then admitted that he could store a change of shoes in his work locker. Some did not have much of an explanation for not considering travelling actively for journeys, reflecting a deeply rooted habit to default to driving.

The ability to break or form habits is related to the ease and convenience of active travel versus other methods. Where destinations are very close, walking becomes an automatic response, and where driving and parking is inconvenient people consider other options.

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**“The village shop isn’t that far away, we always walk there, I’d never do anything else, I’d be very lazy if I didn’t walk to the village shop, it’s not that far away.”** Male, 50-59

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**“If I’ve got to find somewhere further away that’s free, then I may as well walk, because parking’s quite expensive here because it’s a tourist place.”**  
Female, 50-59

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Many occasional or regular active travellers highlighted the social value of walking or cycling to places rather than taking the car. They described the pleasure of bumping into people, having a chat on the street, getting to know their neighbours or just seeing other people go about their business. This social aspect is particularly important for those who live alone in helping to reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation.

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**“It’s about meeting people and stopping for a chat and stuff as well, and then you get back on and start to cycle again. It’s the amount of people, friends and people you’ve bumped into along the way which makes it more fun as well.”**

Male, 50-59

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**“When you’re out and about and you see other people it makes me feel that you’re not lonely, even though you don’t speak to anybody.”** Female, 60-70

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Enjoyment, fun, and engagement with the natural environment were all frequently mentioned as motivations for walking or cycling more – whether purely for leisure and fitness purposes or as part of active travel. Active travellers often mentioned the desire to ‘get some fresh air’ as a motivation to take a short walk, even if just to the corner shop.

Many participants describe themselves as walkers and have a keen interest in walking for leisure, whether that involves longer rambles in the countryside, walking their dogs or exploring scenic places (such as beaches and the coastline) or other places of interest (including historic houses and gardens). A smaller proportion are leisure cyclists. Being a regular leisure walker can make it attractive and easy for participants to also use walking as a mode of transport. However, being a leisure walker does not always equate to being an active traveller. Some who are leisure walkers/cyclists prefer not to use active travel for functional journeys. For these participants, walking or cycling is purely about the pleasure of the experience, including seeing wildlife or attractive scenery. Walking or cycling for a functional purpose is thus much less appealing.

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**“I’ll only walk where there’s a nice atmosphere, like the seafront.”** Female, 50-59

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Several participants are lucky enough to live in coastal or countryside locations with stunning views and impressive scenery, making active travel all the more appealing. However, those living in suburban settings with access to green spaces and corridors also highlighted how this can also motivate them to travel actively, illustrated by some of the images participants shared with us.

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**“This is 30 seconds behind my home. It’s a little path through some trees running alongside a farm that takes you through to a convenience store in the housing estate where I live. It’s very easy to choose to walk when the path is this pretty.”** Female, 50-59

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Attractive and varied urban and built-up areas can also help encourage active travel. Having something interesting to look at makes the journey on foot more appealing, even if it's only other people's gardens. Several participants describe discovering new things in their neighbourhood while walking to places as an important part of what they enjoy about active travel.

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**“ ... Sometimes it's nice to walk. You can find different places in the area because there were some places that I didn't even know existed in [London district]. I'm like, “Oh, wow.” So, it's good for that as well.”** Female, 50-59

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**“ It's opened my eyes to my neighbourhood, I've learnt so much about my local neighbourhood that I never knew before – it's beautiful around here.”**  
Female, 60-70

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For some, part of the appeal of travelling on foot or bike is that ability to stop, take a detour and explore places of interest – something that is much harder to do when travelling by car or public transport. For those without the pressure of time, a functional journey can be combined with leisure and increase the level of activity.

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**“ I mean my nearest supermarket is only ten minutes away... but it won't take me ten minutes to get there because I'll walk through a park and walk through a sort of river area. So, I'll probably spend about three quarters of an hour going for a walk first and then doing the shopping and then walking back from shopping. So there's lots of exercise.”** Male, 50-59

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With the exception of those who have no alternatives but to use active travel, a desire for physical activity might start participants travelling actively, but enjoyment keeps them doing it.

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**“I think that you’ve got to enjoy it and incorporate it into your daily thing, rather than making it, “I’ve got to go for a cycle now”. Male, 50-59**

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**“This is the view from the top of my street. It overlooks a farm and as such changes a lot throughout the seasons. I love this view and feel lucky to live somewhere that is not too built up. I feel I am only aware of this because I walk. You have time to take in your surroundings as opposed to driving.”  
Female, 50-59**

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Some of those who travel actively for health reasons find having a goal can provide additional motivation. Several use wearable technology such as Fitbits to track daily steps or distances covered. Making everyday journeys under their own steam helps them towards their target, and we found examples among participants of how a target or goal can help to change travel habits (see Case study 3 below). Getting others involved in working towards goals introduces an element of friendly competition that further helps motivate people to maintain their habits.

### Case study 3: A target as motivation to travel actively

J is an active traveller aged 50-59. For the past four years she has been doing the Walk 1000 miles challenge. In her quest to meet this goal, J finds herself making a conscious effort to walk short journeys on foot in order to ‘get the miles in’. She did not make the goal in the first year, but has succeeded every year since.

J began the challenge on the spur of the moment while staying at a holiday park with friends.

**“Center Parcs, we went for a new year and it was “Walk your first mile, New Year’s Day, come and join us for a walk”. So we went along with us hangovers. And we did this first mile and then we said, “Let’s do this. Let’s try to get 1,000 miles”.’**

While J enjoyed leisure cycling and short dog walks in the past, having a young family to care for made it difficult to find the time for regular active travel. Although she is still in full-time work, her sons are grown up and she now has more time for walking.

J is now walking more than ever, including to local shops and to visit her parents who have been shielding. Progress to her goal has been helped by a lunchtime walking group set up at her workplace during lockdown. Competition between her friends in trying to achieve the target mileage motivates her to choose active travel options where possible

**“ It does motivate you. When you’re thinking “I can’t be bothered” it spurs you on.’**

At the time of our interview with J she had just celebrated passing the 300-mile mark for 2021.

Fear of, and worry about, traffic danger is a particular barrier to cycling, but was mentioned less often in relation to walking except in rural areas without pavements (see Chapter 7 on the role of the environment). Many interviewees – particularly women – would rather walk than cycle because of safety concerns. Women were also more likely to lack confidence in their cycling abilities, either because it has been a considerable length of time since they last cycled, or because they have never cycled. This was true of both the 50-59 and 60-70 age brackets.

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**“ I do like cycling, but I’m scared to death of going on the roads.”** Female, 50-59

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**“The only thing I worry about is the traffic on the road. The cars are a bit – yes. They’re not that nice sometimes.”** Female, 50-59

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Many men also have road safety concerns, although these tended to relate to specific contexts such as poor road quality or cycling at night.

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**“... When you drive at night, you tend to think there’s nobody around, so you can drive at whatever speed you want. And that scares me because if you don’t see a cyclist, and I think you get a lot of accidents taking place at that sort of hour.”** Male, 60-70

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Fear and concerns about the behaviour and reactions of other road users is a particular barrier when it comes to cycling. One cyclist expressed concern about the dangers to and from pedestrians when walking on or crossing cycle paths; pedestrians wearing headphones or being preoccupied by their phones means they often do not hear the bicycle bell as they are less aware of their surroundings. Several participants were worried about receiving aggressive or hostile responses from drivers if they were to cycle. A few admitted they sometimes got annoyed at cyclists when they were driving.

These factors add to and reinforce perceptions of cycling as dangerous and stressful. For those people for whom having a fun, enjoyable and relaxing experience is a key motivation for engaging in active travel, fear and worry are important reasons why cycling is a far less attractive option.

Feeling safe in their local community helps people to make active travel choices. Several participants described parts of the town or city which they considered unsafe, mainly as a result of high levels of crime or anti-social behaviour. However, these were not generally a barrier to active travel as most were able to simply avoid them, particularly after dark.

Feelings of fear and trepidation can be as a result of the built environment, for example dark or isolated places.

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**“Some [places] are scary because it’s only you going past there. You are thinking, “This is place is quite isolated”.** Male, 60-70

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Again, this did not appear to be a major factor preventing people from active travel, but it could be a greater barrier for those who are less motivated or interested in active travel. Safety can be a perceived benefit of taking the car.

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**“There’s nobody about sometimes and I feel vulnerable. I think that’s one of the advantages of a car, isn’t it? You always feel safe locked in a car.”**

Female, 50-59

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The unappealing prospect of walking or cycling in bad weather was regularly mentioned as a barrier to using active travel modes more frequently. It is not just a matter of getting wet in the rain, but cold was also mentioned by several as being off-putting. Wet, icy or snowy pavements can also be seen as dangerous, particularly for those who have health conditions or disabilities that make balance and/or mobility difficult.

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**“... With my legs, if it’s cold, icy and snowy, I can’t really try walking anywhere, because I’d be a danger to myself.”** Male, 60-70

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The inclination to get in the car if the weather is bad can mean active cycling is a seasonal activity and does not become a regular habit. One interviewee, who had considered getting a bike, reflected that while it might get some use in summer it could become ‘an annoyance’ in winter.

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## **Perceptions of e-bikes and non-standard bikes**

Access to a bike is an obvious requirement for cycling as an active travel option. However, access to an adapted, non-standard or electric bike (e-bike) can help open up cycling to a wider audience and overcome some of the barriers described by the research participants.

Several participants expressed interest in e-bikes, sometimes as a result of seeing friends or colleagues use them to tackle more challenging routes. These participants recognised that e-bikes can be helpful in enabling longer or more strenuous rides and were worth consideration.

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**“In the future, yes [I’d consider an e-bike] because are they like what you’d call a hybrid car where you pedal and then when you get tired you can put them on electric? Especially if you’ve gone so far one way and then you’ve thought, “Crikey, I’ve got to bike all that way back.”** Male, 50-59

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Being able to commute to work without getting too sweaty was also seen as a benefit of e-bikes. One participant considered that they might be an option if their long-term condition worsened and they became less able to cycle in future.

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**“There are some hills round here, and it would have to be an electric bike, yes, for the hills, if my legs got any worse.”** Male, 60-70

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However, very few people had made any serious enquiries into purchasing an e-bike, with cost a major barrier. Many assumed they were expensive, and indeed those who had researched them had concluded that the cost was prohibitive. The increased cost also made concerns over secure storage more acute.

In many cases people had not considered e-bikes as they would not overcome their main concerns with cycling, such as ability, lack of interest/enjoyment and concerns over traffic and road safety, or they were simply happy using a standard bike. Others were not aware that they were an option.

A good deal of evidence around of a lack of understanding about what e-bikes are, how they work and their potential benefits emerged. For some, they almost came with a stigma; using an e-bike would be seen as ‘cheating’ or evidence of ‘laziness’. Those who were keen on active travel or cycling as a means to maintain or improve fitness often described e-bikes as ‘pointless’, thinking that the assistance provided means no exertion is involved and that there is therefore no fitness benefit. A few thought e-bikes offered less control, and one participant thought e-bikes were essentially scaled-down motorbikes.

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**“If I was cycling I’d want the benefits of the peddling, the exercise and the calorie burning.”** Female, 50-59

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**“So as far as we’re concerned, using an electric bike just comes down to laziness. We don’t need to, if you phoned me up in ten years’ time I might say, “Yes I’ve got the electric bike”. I might need it by then, I don’t know, I hope not.”** Male, 50-70

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E-bikes may not be for everyone. One participant had tried one but found it did not suit her.

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**“I had a go on an electric bike, I didn’t like it. I thought that would make me be able to go for longer, but I just didn’t feel in control, so I would just go for shorter rides rather than get an electric.”** Female, 50-59

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So the ability to test ride an e-bike at low cost is an important element in promoting greater understanding of what they have to offer.

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**“I don’t know anybody who’s got an electric bike that I could borrow to try it out. That would be the ideal thing. Female, 60-70**

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Other non-standard bikes, such as recumbent bikes and tricycles, can make cycling more accessible to disabled people and those with long-term conditions by offering greater stability or distributing weight load. However, awareness of these options was low. People are unsure how feasible alternative options would be for them. As non-standard bikes are not a common sight, there appears to be some social stigma; some said they would feel ‘self-conscious’ or ‘embarrassed’ using one, or referred to users in unflattering terms: ‘I thought, no, he looks a right prat on that’. The few people who had some awareness of adapted bikes raised concerns about their storage and, in relation to recumbent bikes, their reduced visibility as a result of being low to the ground. For some, an adapted bike would address only one of their barriers; other concerns such as ability, traffic danger and lack of dedicated cycle paths, would remain even with a suitable bike.

# Chapter 5:

## Impact of COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated periods of lockdown since March 2020 have had a mixed impact on physical activity levels across the country, as reflected in the experiences of our sample. Most felt that their activity levels had increased generally, but an increase in active travel did not necessarily follow. Some felt the pandemic lockdowns had increased their opportunity for active travel; for others there had been no change, and for some it had reduced their active travel.

For some of those who normally commute by car or public transport, changes to working patterns had a positive impact on active travel. The time saved could be used to undertake more physical activity and, combined with quieter roads, this made walking and cycling for travel more appealing. However, for some, avoiding public transport meant less walking to bus stops and so had the effect of reducing participation in active travel. Working from home offers greater flexibility in daily schedules, again creating more opportunities for active travel. Experiences during lockdown have introduced some participants to its benefits, with several reporting they intended to keep up new habits.

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**“ Since lockdown, we do walk more because there’s more time - you don’t have to rush from one place. Say, if I was going to pick my son up from uni, if I needed anything from the shop, I’d jump in the van, go to the shop and then go and get him. Well, that doesn’t happen now. I walk just to keep fit and making a quick list of a few bits and bobs we need from the shop. So, I think lockdown has helped in that because you’re not rushing so much.”** Female, 50-59

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Some reported they did not want to shop in large supermarkets due to the risk of catching COVID-19, so had been walking to local shops instead. However, the opposite was also reported as the government discouraged people from doing ‘little and often’ shops to limit social contact.

Those concerned about catching COVID-19, either generally or because they were in a high-risk group, were most likely to report a reduction in active travel as they had been leaving home less. This was more common in the older age group. There was a particular concern about the safety of public transport, which also increased car use for some. One person was given a parking permit because of the risk associated with public transport, so drove to work during this period when she would normally have taken the bus and walked.

In some cases, lockdowns have impacted active travel merely by reducing the number of travel opportunities. Having no commute, not being able to visit friends or family and cafes being closed all removed journeys from people's lives. While this could (and largely was) replaced by walking for leisure, it negatively affected active travel habits.

One positive impact the pandemic appears to have had for this group is in emphasising the importance of physical activity for good health. This can be a catalyst for change.

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**“I noticed I was gaining weight in the first period of the lockdown, I actually started a programme of walking and increasing my step count. It started about June or July, where beforehand I used to walk, but not so much, it was only for specific things, but then I started to actually look at it as not just a form of exercise, but also a form of transport now.”** Male, 50-59

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Those who intended to increase their daily activity levels when they retire may have brought these plans forward as lockdowns gave them the opportunity to be more active sooner than expected. One participant is bringing forward plans to move to the coast to be able to walk more.

Not being able to take part in usual competitive team sports or go to the gym has encouraged people to walk more as an alternative. One person had bought a bike to be more active while others spoke about how they had saved money on petrol or public transport as a result of using more active travel. These positive changes represent opportunities for embedding an ongoing daily habit.

# Chapter 6: Changes in habits over the life-course

Life-course changes in active travel habits and preferences followed a broadly common pattern for participants. Most talked about walking and/or cycling for travel a lot when they were younger (in childhood, as students and when first working as young adults) but this then decreased as they proceeded into adulthood. As they approached or reached retirement age, their active travel increased again – more likely via walking than cycling. Very few returned to cycling in later life if they had spent a long period not cycling as an adult – the additional barriers faced by those wishing to cycle rather than walk are likely influential in this. Most recalled that active travel as a child/young adult was undertaken out of necessity, but became more of a choice in later life.

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**“I would say I do it [active travel] more now that I’ve got the time to do it. When you’re younger, you walk a lot more because you don’t have a car and you’ve got no choice. So maybe it’s evened itself out, from walking a lot as a young person with no car, to walking now out of choice.”** Female, 50-59

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However, within this broad life-course pattern are different trigger factors that can cause increases or decreases in active travel. Life is a unique journey for each individual and there are many changes that can impact the amount of active travel people undertake as part of their daily lives.

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## Trigger points during the life-course for increasing active travel

Many participants talked about having had very active childhoods. Walking and cycling were often for leisure, but a lack of alternative travel options in some cases meant that essential journeys were taken more actively too. College and university years in particular appear to have been a time of frequent active travel – there was a need to travel independently, car ownership was unlikely, travel distances were short and people had less disposable income for public transport. If they did not yet own a car then this continued into their early working lives. At this point, people saw active travel more as a necessity than a choice to incorporate activity into

their daily lives - hence it became easy to leave active travel behind once it was no longer a necessity.

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**“When I came out of college, I didn’t drive or have driving lessons so I was cycling to my place of work, and this was right up until mid-late twenties really. I used to cycle everywhere... it was pretty much just the only way for me to get from A to B. I didn’t really use it as a form of exercise – that was running and football to me.”** Male, 50-59

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Moving to live in a new location more conducive to active travel was a trigger for some. Once people owned cars, the environment needed to be such that it could override both the desire and the necessity to use them. This could be either because the environment was more amenable to walking and cycling – better infrastructure, more pleasant surroundings, having amenities close by – or that it was less convenient for car travel – for example because of parking costs and congestion. Two participants explained how for them, London met both these criteria.

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**“When I lived in London, I either walked or used public transport... it was much easier to walk to places than it was to drive, and in a lot of cases, it was much easier to walk than get on a bus, or the Underground.”** Male, 50-59

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Moving to a more rural location can be an enabler of active travel for some as it can make walking or cycling more pleasant, even if amenities or other destinations are generally not as close as in a city. For this type of move to encourage active travel it appears to need to coincide with having more time, so was more common in those who had retired. For people of working age who feel time-pressured in their lives, moving to a more rural location does not appear to have the same impact.

While for most, having a young family meant a reduction in active travel, one female reported that having a very young child provided her with the opportunity to walk more journeys.

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**“... When I had small children, I did more walking. I would walk more places with a pushchair and that sort of thing.”** Female, 60-70

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Other family triggers include children leaving home – as this is associated with having more time – and flexibility around travel choices, and for one person divorce was a trigger to make other changes in her life, so she started walking for travel to improve her health.



Several people reported that health scares were a trigger for them to incorporate more exercise into their daily lives. This could be prompted by people close to them (for example, one participant started walking more after his father had a heart attack) but was more commonly in response to issues around their own health (see Case study 4). More general concerns about remaining healthy later in life also play a role in encouraging active travel as a relatively easy way – assuming the local environment is right – to incorporate physical activity into everyday life.

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**“I think I’ve reached the point in my life where I’ve walked for the purpose of travel because I want to, not necessarily because I have to.”** Male, 60-70

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**“As I’ve become older, I really do value walking and being more active and incorporating that exercise into my daily life. I want to be fitter really. But I do know my limits.”** Female, 50-59

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There was often a change in attitude towards exercise as people move through life. Walking in particular may be perceived by some as more accessible than other sports or activities as people age. Several mentioned that when they were younger, exercise had to be something that was high intensity and had an important social element, such as team sports. There was the acknowledgement that with age, more intense recreational exercise becomes less appealing and the idea of walking for exercise is, for some, a good alternative.

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**“I’ve been told a few times that I over exercise. I can burn 1,500 calories in an hour down the gym and kill myself. But then I realised a 3-hour walk would burn the same amount. But it won’t be so painful, so that’s what I’ve probably learned and it’s nice being outside and that sort of stuff. My attitude towards walking has fundamentally changed.”** Male, 50-59

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However, changed attitudes to walking do not appear to translate to cycling in the same way: no participants discussed taking up cycling as an alternative to team sports or going to the gym.

#### Case study 4: Serious illness as a motivation to active travel

S is 52 and a keen active traveller who walks and cycles. He discussed how having a heart attack aged 48 was a ‘shock to the system’ that made him take physical activity more seriously. During his working life, his job in banking was demanding and took up a lot of his time. On reflection, he feels he could have been active more during this time, but also recognises that once he was in the habit of being inactive it was hard to break.

**“Work, it’s funny in a way, how it does have such an impact on these things, and breaking that cycle [is hard], whereas probably going out for a walk, even though I was tired, would have been the right thing to do, and hindsight’s easy... In the years leading up to when I was ill, [exercise] really dropped off. When I was working, it was all about time and chasing the clock.”**

Following his heart attack, S gave up work and has since made a conscious effort to incorporate physical activity into his daily life. He now enjoys walking and cycling for leisure but will also use journeys as an opportunity to be active every day.

**“What I try to do is live a certain type of lifestyle without thinking too hard about the lifestyle, if that makes sense. If there’s an opportunity to walk, I walk to the shops, but before I was taking the car to the shops. It’s just doing it without thinking about it too much. All them little journeys every day go by walking. It’s quite easy, I get into the routine, you don’t think about it and that’s a good way to be, I think. It took me a while to work it all out, mind.”**

S acknowledges that making this change may not have been so easy if he lived in a different environment. He lives in a coastal town only four miles from a city and with good walking and cycling infrastructure. Being able to enjoy walking and cycling has helped active travel to become a habit rather than something he had to force himself to do.

**“The key one is the conscious decision after coming out of hospital, you’re thinking, “I’ve got to do something here,” but it’s doing it so that you enjoy it, rather than doing it because you think you have to do it. I think we’re fortunate here; we live in a lovely part of the world, and I’m able to do it without the distraction of traffic, cycling, for instance, walking on the prom. I think that would have been a lot harder in a different environment to where we live.”**

His active travel diary made several references to how pleasant his walking and cycling journeys are, the importance of the environment and how the experience makes him feel.

“This is the view of [area] on the way home. It’s always so inspirational. Many people talk of mindfulness, what I love about a bike ride along the front is how it completely relaxed me. Complete escapism. I’m very fortunate to live in a beautiful part of the world.’



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## The influence of retirement

Participants who had retired all felt that their active travel levels had increased. Those approaching this milestone largely anticipated that this would be the same for them, although some thought that without the commute they would travel less and therefore have less opportunity for active travel.

The flexibility retirement brings in terms of time for travel is seen as crucial to this increase in activity. It does not matter so much that journeys might take longer. Walking to the shops or other day-to-day journeys are seen as ‘something to do’, so there is no need to rush them. Retirement can also be an opportunity to reflect on health and make positive changes to daily lives.

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**“Retirement. I decided I needed to have a complete change of lifestyle. I had actually been quite ill about four years before retiring, and I made some changes, and started going to the gym, but I really got much more active when I had the time when I retired.”** Female, 60-70

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And as for other life events that prompt active travel, the increase in active travel after retirement is almost entirely related to walking. Very few reported that they had taken up cycling, and if they had, this was for leisure rather than travel.

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## Trigger points during the life-course for decreasing active travel

Purchasing a car is by far the most common factor that instigates a decline in people's active travel. This is particularly the case if car ownership is associated with a job that is demanding, involves long hours or requires a lot of travel. Most people found that once they had purchased a car and became reliant on the convenience of travelling this way it became a habit that was difficult to break.

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**“I moved into a bedsit which was where I used the bus and walking to travel... I got my driving license pretty quickly, passed the test, that was a good thing, but I couldn't afford to buy a car. It was two years before I bought a car, and then once I bought a car, that put paid to me walking, I was in the car all the time.”** Male, 60-70

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The speed at which journeys can be done by car appears to be the most influential factor in moving away from active travel and into car use. Those who had previously lived and worked in city centres were more likely to become reliant on car travel only when they moved away from the convenience of a city centre location and alternative transport options.

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**“I used to walk everywhere because I lived in the central part of Birmingham. I'd walk five minutes into town, catch a train or bus anywhere out. That was easy for me. [Then] I lived further and further away. The further away, I decided I needed to get a car.”** Male, 50-59

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Having a family appears to reduce perceived opportunities for active travel, and alongside employment makes the need for a car more pressing. At this stage in their lives, people feel the most time-pressured and are therefore less willing to spend time travelling. They may also be less likely to live in a city centre, so the car becomes essential. Journeys need to be as convenient as possible in terms of time, but it is also necessary to be able to transport family members. For many participants, the car became the default for the myriad journeys that accompany family life. Many discussed doing lots of physical activity with their children, so this was not a particularly inactive period of their lives, but it did involve very little active travel. A few participants reflected that once that period of their lives was over and they did not have dependents to consider there was more opportunity to consider what type of exercise they wanted to do to stay healthy, and active travel was one option.

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**“We’ve always been rushing around getting boys ready for school and it’s just been a bit chaotic so I’ve never had time like I’ve got now.”** Female, 50-59

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**“[Family trips] might be to a beach, it might be to a park, and there was always some walking involved when you got there, more running around for them. As they got older, I’ve done less of that, but now I’m starting to think I should be doing more for my own benefit.”** Female, 50-59

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The settled working period of participants’ lives was also associated with lots of social events and other time demands, which, they felt, needed the convenience of a car to manage. It may also be easier at this point to get exercise through other means, such as playing team sports or going to the gym. A reduction in levels of active travel in this life stage was not considered an issue.

While illness was a catalyst for some to do more active travel, for others it led to a general decline in physical activity, particularly if accompanied by a perception that a loss of fitness is part of the ageing process.

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**“When you’re younger, you think, “Oh, I’ll never get to that state. I’ll make sure that I won’t get to that state.” The next thing you turn around and you’re going, “You are in that state.” Not a state, but not as fit as you’d like to be. So, therefore, I wouldn’t be able to do what I used to do and I don’t think many of us at my age would be able to say that they could.”** Female, 60-70

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The catch-22 situation of being ill, doing less activity and then feeling too unfit or overweight to be active is very real for some people. People also mentioned that the health of others could stop them travelling actively as they aged, for example parents becoming elderly or ill and requiring a car to either visit them or drive them to appointments.

Despite reporting that they cycled as a child or young adult, many did not generally cycle for travel during their working lives. This may be particularly relevant to the 50-70 age cohort, who reported that cycling was less likely to be regarded as a commuting option in the past and that infrastructure and employers did not encourage it. One participant described how this lack of a cycling culture when he was younger partly explains his current attitude to cycling.

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**“When I was growing up, there wasn’t the cycling culture that there is these days. Yes, kids did ride their bikes, but it was always off road, you didn’t mix with traffic... I think unless you’ve got a culture growing up cycling on a regular basis, it’s not something you tend to start in later life unless you’ve got a specific motivation to do it... Things have changed a little bit these days; I think there is much more consideration given to cyclists now than there was in the sixties and seventies.” Male, 60-70**

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It is clear that many participants would be unlikely to start cycling again in their 50s or 60s after a long break, or at least would be very nervous at the prospect.

# Chapter 7: The role of the environment on active travel among those aged 50-70

As explored in earlier sections, proximity to shops, workplaces and other services and amenities is the main feature of the built environment that enables active travel. Participants living in densely populated urban and suburban areas are more likely to have easy access to these facilities.

However, there are other aspects of the built environment that also encourage or deter active travel. Many participants say a ‘pleasing’ environment encourages more active travel, and this is perhaps not surprising given the role of enjoyment in many people’s decisions to travel actively. Green spaces, parks, river walks and nature all contribute to a pleasant active travel experience. This is considered very important to both men and women and across both age groups (50-59 and 60-70). Participants living in suburban, semi-rural or rural areas were more likely to talk about the impact of scenic surroundings. However, participants living in very built-up and city environments also perceived benefits in access to parks and natural environments.

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**“It’s a bit of a housing estate, but we’re quite fortunate because there’s a lot of green and park space around where I live as well.”** Female, 50-59

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Routes along rivers, canals and through parks have the added benefit of allowing people to avoid environments that often discourage active travel, such as busy roads, traffic noise and pollution.

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**“If I’m walking into the town centre, I can walk along by the river to avoid the traffic noise.”** Male, 60-70

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**“A beautiful day. A peaceful walk away from traffic and people. There is a cycle lane part of the journey which I could use if I chose that method of transport. A lovely walk with lots of nature and see my parents at the end of it.”** Female, 50-59

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The research showed that well-maintained dedicated footpaths and cycle paths are key in encouraging active travel. This is particularly the case when it comes to enabling people to cycle. Good pavements, crossing places such as zebra crossings and routes away from traffic were all seen to be important factors in helping ensure a pleasant walking journey. A few participants commented on the poor maintenance of pavements and footpaths, remarking on them being uneven, worn and overgrown. However, this does not appear to be a major barrier. For participants living in, or needing to travel through, rural areas, the lack of a pavement altogether can be more of a factor. The particular risks on country roads – agricultural traffic, higher speeds, narrower roads and reduced visibility on winding lanes – means that participants are reluctant to walk where there is no pavement.

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**“Environment is not ideal for walking - many fast roads without footpaths. For walking, it hinders it greatly because you would like to do more routes, but there’s no footpath so you’d be walking in the road and that’s just too scary. Then, if you have to walk across a field, you’d be soaking wet sometimes. The main one is, I would walk more but there’s no footpath, pavement.”** Female, 50-59

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Having to walk on grass verges is not appealing either in wet weather.

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**“To [walk to] the other village it can be a bit tricky because there is no footpath, so you have to walk on the grass verge... When it’s wet, yes, because your feet get wet so I will then either go in the car or go to the other village.”**  
Female, 60-70

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When it comes to cycling as an active travel method, a lack of cycle lanes or traffic-free cycle paths is a significant barrier. This is the case in urban, rural and suburban areas, though the specific concerns might be slightly different. Narrow roads and agricultural traffic are particular issues in more rural areas.

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**“I’ve got this bike and I know I’d make more use of it, but the roads, as I say, you get a lot of lorries down here, agricultural lorries and tractors and things like that so it’s not too clever on the roads.”** Male, 50-59

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Even among those who regularly cycle, some said they would cycle less if they did not have access to cycle lanes or paths. Where there are lots of cycle paths people feel safer and more confident (Case study 5).

Quiet roads and cycle lanes can be helpful for some, but for less confident cyclists, and women in particular, cycle lanes offer scant encouragement. They are often perceived as providing insufficient protection from traffic. Fully segregated or off-road routes are more likely to appeal as a safe and enjoyable way to cycle.

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**“... even on the cycle lanes around here, you don’t tend to feel that safe because a car could have come into it, because there’s nothing stopping them apart from a white line drawn on the road.”** Female, 50-59

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Participants considering cycling often need to know that they can complete all their journey using cycle lanes, traffic-free paths and/or quiet roads before they would consider cycling a particular route. If paths only cover part of the way and journeys require cycling on busy roads, people are less inclined to cycle.

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**“There are cycle lanes on the main road, so that’s why I’m thinking that I could possibly cycle down to work if we did move. But getting off at the village and things like that, I don’t know; it’s just too busy.”** Female, 50-59

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**“This is from the footbridge showing the bridge used by the traffic. Having specific walking and cycling paths makes it easier and safer to choose this option.”** Female, 50-59

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Quality and maintenance of roads and cycle paths is of greater importance in supporting cycling than pavements are for walking. Participants who would be prepared to walk on poorly maintained pavements would not consider cycling in similar conditions. Quality of paths may also limit the time of day, year or conditions in which people are willing to use them.

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**“... The cycle paths round here – they call them cycle paths, but some of them have got big ruts in them where tractors have gone down them. They’re not the safest – you wouldn’t do it in the dark, put it that way. You’d end up in a heap or in a hedge or anywhere.”** Male, 50-59

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A few participants pointed to more accessible cycling infrastructure incorporating wider roads and fully segregated or off-road cycle paths in other European countries, such as Spain and Germany, that they had experienced while on holiday or during time living abroad.

While cycle paths may be a necessary condition to encourage cycling, by themselves they are not always sufficient to get people to take the decision to cycle. Some people live close to excellent cycling infrastructure but choose not to or face additional barriers explored elsewhere.

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**“Cycling is very popular down here because we’re on the coast we’ve got a coastal path that runs right through the edge of the town, which is designed with cyclists in mind. I think it’s part of the National Cycle Network and it’s designed to make cycling easy to access for those that want it. I’d like to do it, but past it these days, but I know it’s very well used.”** Male, 60-70

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### **Case study 5: The convenience of the car versus the fear of cycling**

A is in the 50-59 age bracket and lives on the edge of a town, 1.5 miles from his place of work, and with a convenience store 10-15 minutes’ walk away. He is a keen runner and places significant value on being physically active, however he very rarely walks - and never cycles - for travel.

Many of his daily destinations are within walking or cycling distance, but he feels that he has become accustomed to the convenience of taking the car, even for journeys of less than a mile, as this is the fastest option. A shares a car with his wife, so they often travel to work together in it. However he would like to fit more walking into his daily life.

**“I feel as I’ve got older, I’ve taken on more responsibilities, life’s got busier, so therefore it’s more convenient to do journeys by car, but yes, I wish I could do more exercise, I wish I could do a bit more walking and things... I like keeping fit. I would like to get more active with a bit more walking.”**

Cycling, on the other hand, was a more unattractive option, despite owning a bike that he has not used for a while. The local infrastructure and concerns about safety on the roads puts him off cycling.

**“I feel afraid of cycling these days, it’s like the roads around here are terrible – potholes, that sort of thing. There’s a lot more aggression from drivers as well these days, and you just feel a lot more unsafe. There are cycle paths around, but you rarely get cycle paths go the whole distance from A to B where you want to go to.”**

# Chapter 8: How these findings add to the evidence base on active travel in mid-life

This primary research built on reviews of the existing evidence base for this age group (published [here](#) in August 2021). The evidence reviews focused on two key areas: the attitudes of people aged 50-70 to active travel and the role of the built environment in influencing active travel among this group.

The primary research has added a significant level of detail and nuance to the findings from the evidence reviews. It has provided a rich and varied insight into the views of participants aged 50-70 in the UK regarding active travel. It is the first study of its kind and the largest exploration to date of attitudes to active travel focused on people in mid-life. For this reason, it is an important addition to this literature.

In this section we return to the research questions posed by Ageing Better at the outset of this project and attempt to answer them using the findings of the primary research. An overview of the ways in which the findings of the primary research complement or add to the findings from the evidence reviews is then provided.

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## Summary of the findings of our primary research against the research questions

**What are the overarching preferences of adults in mid-life (aged 50-70) for active travel? Considering their attitudes towards, access to and past experiences of active travel, what motivates them and prevents them from undertaking it?**

Given the diverse sample of participants interviewed, it was not surprising that we found a range of attitudes towards, access to and past experience of active travel. Across the group, walking is preferred to cycling, regardless of age; women are more likely than men to be less confident cyclists and are also more likely to say that unsafe roads are the main reason for not cycling. The COM-B analytical framework was used to identify specific factors that both motivate and prevent people in this age cohort from undertaking active travel. These can be found in Chapter 4 and are summarised in Chapter 9.

### **What would motivate and/or enable adults in mid-life to use or trial new forms of active travel such as e-bikes?**

The primary research yielded few insights regarding trialling new forms of active travel, except for e-bikes. Few people had considered e-bikes as they would not overcome their main concerns with cycling which included ability, lack of interest/enjoyment and concerns over traffic and road safety. There were also issues around a lack of understanding as to what e-bikes are – some thought they were just like motorcycles and others that they provide no physical exercise, so and would constitute “cheating”. The cost of e-bikes is also a barrier.

### **How do behaviours and preferences differ for working and non-working people?**

Our evidence did not distinguish many differences between the behaviours and preferences of working and non-working people. However, while many participants who cycle talked of owning old or basic, low-cost bikes, a few participants from lower socio-economic groups found it unaffordable to purchase or replace a bike. Some who had not cycled for a long period of time were reluctant to spend money on a bike without being sure it would get good use.

Having time was an important factor in enabling people to engage in active travel. We therefore found that retirement was a pivotal event, and a life stage during which active travel increases. This was more likely to involve walking than cycling, however; very few returned to cycling in later life if they spent a long period not cycling as an adult.

### **How and when is active travel combined with public transport? Are there barriers to this?**

Our primary research supported existing evidence on this issue. The main way people combined active travel with public transport is in linking walking with bus travel. Several people walk very short distances to a bus stop, a few walk extended distances to catch a bus – either because there is no other option or occasionally as an intentional way of gaining extra exercise or time outdoors – while some hop on and off buses to extend active travel, for example, by getting off part-way through a journey to walk a section of it. However, the inconvenience of public transport can also put people off trying to combine it with active travel. In addition, one participant avoided integrating modes due to the perceived high cost of public transport. There were several examples of participants combining active travel (walking in particular) with driving: they drive to a park and ride hub or other free parking space closer to their destination and then walk the remainder. For those participants who do this, it is a way to reduce some of the stress and cost of town centre parking while enjoying a pleasant walk.

### **How do people's active travel habits change over the life-course and why?**

Our primary research brought new insights into the relationships between active travel and stage of life. The evidence from our participants was that life-course changes in active travel habits and preferences follow a broadly common pattern. Participants did a lot of walking and/or cycling for travel when they were younger (in childhood, as students and as young adults when first working) which then decreased as they proceeded into adulthood. However, levels of active travel increased again in retirement when people gained more free time.

### **Are there trigger points that precipitate starting or stopping active travel, and how do they differ between people?**

Purchasing a car is by far the most common factor to instigate a drop in active travel. Moving to live in a location more conducive to active travel was a trigger for some participants to take it up. For most, having a young family meant a reduction in active travel, but this was not always the case – and one woman reported that having a very young child was actually an opportunity to walk more. Other family triggers include children leaving home, as this is associated with having more time and flexibility around travel choices (especially for women), and, for one participant, divorce was a trigger to reassess her life and make other changes that resulted in more active travel to improve her health. And, as noted above, active travel levels increased generally following retirement.

### **Do preferences, habits and motivations differ for different age groups? Is the biggest variation by age or by other factors within the same age cohort?**

Within the 50-70-year age cohort the largest differentiating characteristic is not so much age as whether people are retired. Retirees all felt that their active travel levels had increased, while those approaching this milestone also anticipated that their active travel would increase too, although some thought that without their commute to work they would travel less overall and therefore have less opportunity for active travel.

### **What role does the built environment play in encouraging or discouraging active travel for those aged 50-70?**

Our primary evidence reflected that collected by others. The provision of good quality, adequately segregated and maintained cycle paths is the single biggest enabler of cycling in people in this age group (especially women), as it is in other age groups.

## **Findings from the primary research that reinforce the findings in the literature review.**

The primary research reinforced many of the main findings from the literature review, notably

- There is a widespread recognition among this age group of the importance of physical activity for health and well-being.
- Enjoyment of the outdoors is a major motivation for active travel.
- One of the biggest enablers of active travel is proximity to shops, services and workplaces.
- A key barrier to active travel is distance to amenities, especially in rural locations
- Habits play an important role in determining travel choices.
- Bad weather is a deterrent to both walking and cycling.
- Fear and worry about traffic danger is a particular barrier to cycling.
- Changes in personal circumstances could be a driver to changing travel behaviours and adopting active travel.
- Well-maintained, dedicated footpaths and cycle paths are a key factor in encouraging active travel.
- Environmental reasons (that is, concerns about climate change) were not a significant motivation for engaging in active travel among this age group, despite a recognition that active travel can play in role in reducing emissions.
- Life-course changes in active travel habits and preferences follow a broadly common pattern (highest levels in young adulthood, declining with the formation of families, then increasing again with the decline of familial responsibilities and retirement).

## **Findings from the evidence reviews that were not found in primary research**

- The independence that active travel provides was identified as a motivating factor in our evidence review on attitudes, but was not apparent in our primary research.
- E-bikes were reported to have facilitated active travel among the 50-70-year age group in the evidence reviews, but in our primary research we found participants to have little knowledge of e-bikes.
- Declining health or disability were not seen to be barriers to active travel in our primary research as emphatically as in the existing evidence base.
- An overarching observation is that the existing evidence base contains little evidence on any specific barriers or motivations to active travel and cycling amongst BAME participants; our primary research intentionally over-sampled people from the BAME community to try to address this gap.

Overall, except for the theme of independence, there was nothing in the existing evidence base that we did not identify in our research in a cohort of people aged 50-70.

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## **Findings from the primary research that were not found in the evidence reviews.**

- There is a large range of physical capabilities and capacities for active travel among the 50-70 year age group, so an individualised view of the appropriateness of active travel as a means of increasing levels of physical activity should be taken.
- Having sufficient time to travel actively is an important enabling factor. This can often come with retirement.
- At the same time, responsibilities to others can stop people travelling actively as they age, for example through requiring a car to visit elderly parents or to drive them to appointments
- Positive attitudes to active travel among other family members can be important in influencing behaviour and instilling positive attitudes to active travel.
- Among some groups, active travel may be perceived as being a lower status method of travel and hence be associated with cultural stigma.



How these findings add to the evidence base on active travel in mid-life

- Few people understand what e-bikes or non-standard bikes are, how they work or their potential.
- Daily physical activity levels may have increased during lockdown, but this did not necessarily mean an increase in active travel.
- With age, more intense exercise becomes less appealing and the idea of walking for exercise is, for some, a good alternative. However, this does not appear to translate to cycling.
- Purchasing a car is by far the most common factor in the life-course that instigates a drop in active travel.
- The particular risks on country roads – agricultural traffic, higher speeds, narrower roads and reduced visibility on winding lanes – mean that people in this age group are reluctant to walk where there is no pavement.
- For less confident cyclists (who are more likely to be women than men), cycle lanes offer scant encouragement as they are often perceived as providing insufficient protection. Only fully segregated or off-road routes are likely to appeal as a safe and enjoyable way to cycle.
- The quality and maintenance of roads and cycle paths is of greater importance in supporting cycling than poor pavements are in supporting walking.

# Chapter 9:

## Key insights and implications for policy

This research has provided new and varied insights into the attitudes of participants aged 50-70 towards active travel and of the influence of the physical environment on their active travel habits. Since the sample of participants was purposively selected it cannot be assumed to be representative of the wider population. We therefore need to exercise caution in generalising the findings and in claiming they would be generally applicable across the population of 50-70 year olds in the UK. Nevertheless, they do provide insights into some of the key issues policy makers will need to consider in encouraging those aged 50-70 to choose active travel more as a means of building regular physical activity into their lives, fostering more healthy and active later lives. These are summarised below.

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### **The COM-B (Capability, Opportunity and Motivation) analytical framework is a powerful tool for understanding the influences on active travel behaviour among people in mid-life**

The study has shown that COM-B is a useful framework for understanding the physical, psychological and social features that help shape the behaviour of people aged 50-70 in respect of active travel. The framework considers the influences on behaviour of capability (physical and psychological); opportunity (physical and social) and motivation (reflective and automatic). These are summarised below.

#### **Capability**

There is a large range of physical capabilities within this age group, so an individualised view of both the appropriateness of active travel as a means of increasing levels of physical activity and the level and type of active travel suitable should be taken. It is the case, however, that many people, at either end of the age cohort, have long-term conditions or disabilities (such as visual impairment, osteoarthritis and diabetes) that do not prevent them from being active travellers. Conditions that affect joints and limbs may limit the distance, frequency or type of active travel possible, but do not necessarily prevent it altogether. Low levels of fitness and perceptions about what is required for

active travel can prevent people doing more or taking up different forms of active travel. The preference for many for walking as a more accessible form of active travel appears to be related in some cases to a perception that a higher level of fitness is needed to cycle.

Nearly all our 50-70 year old participants told us that physical activity was important or very important to them – even if they were limited in what they currently did. They understood the importance of physical activity for health and mental wellbeing, particularly as they aged. This understanding is an important prerequisite for some aspects of motivation. Several people already understood the benefits of walking in particular, but also cycling, as forms of exercise that are good for the body and mind and which are particularly accessible.

### **Opportunity**

The biggest physical opportunity barrier to active travel for participants is their proximity to shops, services and the workplace. Without places that people want or need to travel to within reasonable walking or cycling distance, active travel is not realistic. For those who do not use active travel methods but would like to, the main barrier is often that shops and other facilities are just too far away. Those who use active travel most have lots of places nearby that they can walk or cycle to. This is often the case for people living in large cities or close to town centres, but some in more suburban areas also described having good access to a range of facilities. Those living in more rural areas generally have fewer destinations that make active travel viable – participants need to travel further afield for large stores and greater variety, which usually means using a car. It is also the case that those amenities that are reachable need to be affordable and attractive. Some participants described choosing to drive further afield because shops within walking distance are more expensive or they prefer a particular coffee shop to the one locally. Hence proximity is a necessary but insufficient condition if an entire journey is to be completely on foot or by bike. It is also possible for people to engage in active travel even if services are some distance away if they can combine walking with reliable bus travel.

Related to proximity to travel destinations is having sufficient time to travel actively. Many of the active travellers in our sample described having more opportunities to travel actively now they were at a later stage of the life-course. This is particularly the case for people who were retired. Yet even those still in work with grown-up families recognised they had more free time, and so more opportunities to travel actively. Women in particular talked about no longer having the responsibility of young children to look after and less need to get to different destinations quickly.

The local terrain can present a physical barrier to active travel and will often determine which journeys participants consider using it for. Having to negotiate steep or frequent hills means cycling, in particular, is more strenuous and perceived by some as less appealing or simply not feasible.

While many people who cycle owned old or basic, low-cost bikes, for people from lower socio-economic groups the cost of purchasing or replacing a bike is not affordable. Some people who had not cycled for some time may be reluctant to spend money on a bike without being sure it would get good use. The opportunity to hire or try out cycles at a low cost may encourage those with an interest in cycling to try it without needing to purchase their own bike, particularly where there is also good cycling infrastructure. One participant who has not cycled for over 20 years admitted to being tempted by a local low-cost hire scheme. As well as a lack of space to store a bike at home, the lack of availability of places to safely park a bike at their destination is a barrier to taking up cycling to work.

Positive attitudes of other family members to physical activity can influence the taking up of active travel. Family traditions of being active and sporty help to maintain an active travel habit. Some participants may be motivated to walk with their children or grandchildren not just to spend time with them, but to encourage them to get out and be active too. In areas where walking and cycling were not viewed as the norm, this did not stop active travellers with long-standing habits. However, for those without an active travel background, a lack of role models can be a barrier along with a perception that active travel choices could make them a potential target for ridicule. There is a perception among some that ageing itself is a barrier to cycling, even among some who regularly walk long distances. This is related to perceptions that cycling is something that requires high levels of fitness and is therefore less appropriate for older people, or that learning or re-starting cycling is more difficult later in life. We found evidence that for some people, active travel may be perceived as being a lower-status method of travel and hence may carry a cultural stigma (this was the case for one BAME participant).

### **Motivation**

A prime motivation for many participants, both current active travellers and those wanting to start or do more, is the desire to improve or maintain their levels of physical health and fitness. As people age, and in some cases develop health conditions, the importance of being active can become more of a concern, if one that is not always easier to address. Participants who were current or former active travellers, as well as those who walked or cycled purely for pleasure, also recognised and are motivated by the psychological and mental health benefits of physical activity.

Seeking to avoid the annoyances of driving can, for some, help to incentivise use of active travel. This includes avoiding congestion charges and the inconvenience and cost of finding parking.

Air pollution can be a deterrent to active travel for some who are concerned about the health impact of exhaust fumes, particularly if they have a respiratory condition such as asthma and a journey involves walking or cycling along a main road.

For a few people the environmental benefits of active travel were a motivation to use active travel methods. However, this was generally a secondary consideration to its primary health and wellbeing benefits. Some people in this age group may be sceptical about environmental arguments and did not see this as a reason to change their travel habits.

Habits appear to play an important role in determining travel choices. Among regular active travellers, the decision to walk or cycle is often not something they consciously think about but is part of their everyday routines. For those who are more infrequent active travellers and/or who want to do more of it, a conscious effort was required to break the automatic response of getting in the car. As a result, good intentions are easily thwarted by imperfect conditions (weather, feeling tired) and what some admitted were “excuses”.

Enjoyment, fun and engagement with the natural environment were all frequently mentioned as motivations for walking or cycling – whether purely for leisure or fitness or as part of active travel. Active travellers often mentioned the desire to ‘get some fresh air’ as a motivation to take a short walk, even if just to a local shop. With the exception of those who have no alternatives but to use active travel, a desire for physical activity might start people travelling actively, but enjoyment keeps them doing it.

Fear of and worry about traffic danger is a particular barrier to cycling, but was less often mentioned in relation to walking except in rural areas without pavements. Women were more likely than men to say that unsafe roads are the main reason for not cycling. Women were also more likely to be less confident in their cycling abilities, either because they have never cycled or because it has been a considerable length of time since they had.

The unappealing prospect of walking or cycling in bad weather was regularly mentioned as a barrier to using active travel modes more frequently. The inclination to get in the car if the weather is bad can mean active cycling is a seasonal activity and does not become a regular habit.

### **Implications for policy**

- Behaviour change interventions aimed at 50-70-year age group need to be targeted and granular. People in this age group do not all have the same capabilities, opportunities and motivations.
- The main differentiating characteristic in the 50-70 year age group is between those still working and those who have retired. Policies to encourage active travel in this age group should address the need to prepare people still working for the changes in behaviour they may wish to make – and can make – once they are retired.

- Messaging on active travel in people aged 50-70 should not exclude those with limited mobility. While there are a range of health conditions that limit mobility, they do not all rule out active travel and, in some cases, the physical activity gained through active travel can help to control symptoms and further deterioration. Cycling may be a more convenient form of travel for some disabilities compared to walking or public transport.
- Policy makers need to consider how race, age, gender and socio-economic status intersect to influence how people in this age group – particularly women – perceive active travel and hence their likelihood of participating in it.
- Identifying active travel role models or champions in the 50-70 year age group would help tackle any perception that active travel represents a lower socio-economic status choice or that it is not suitable at a given age.
- Acknowledging the role that people in this age group play in childcare would mean encouraging grandparents to see active travel as an opportunity to be active together with their grandchildren.
- Policy makers need to acknowledge that car-centric behaviours are usually formed much earlier than mid-life and so policies that target people at earlier stages are necessary to forming long-term or life-long active travel habits.
- Frequent and reliable buses that run on convenient routes can be an enabler to choosing to walk.
- Schemes that provide the opportunity to rent subsidised bikes or e-bikes would help those for whom the cost of purchase is prohibitive, given the speculative nature of whether they can feel comfortable with taking up cycling at this age.

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### **There are challenges if e-bikes and non-standard bikes are to fulfil their potential in opening up active travel cycling to those in mid-life**

Access to an adapted, non-standard or e-bike may help in opening up cycling to a wider audience as it could overcome some of the barriers to taking up cycling described by the research participants.

We found that participants recognised that e-bikes may be helpful for longer or more strenuous routes. Being able to commute to work without getting sweaty was also seen as a benefit. However, very few people had made any serious enquiries into purchasing an e-bike.

Cost is a major barrier when it comes to e-bikes. Many participants assumed they were expensive, and indeed those who had done some cursory research concluded the cost was prohibitive in most cases. The increased cost also made concerns with secure storage more acute.

In many cases people had not considered e-bikes as it was felt they would not overcome their main concerns with cycling, which included ability, lack of interest/enjoyment and concerns over traffic and road safety, or they were simply happy to use a standard bike. Others were not aware that they were an option. We found lots of evidence of a lack of understanding about what e-bikes are, how they work and their potential benefits. For some, they almost came with a stigma; using an e-bike would be seen as 'cheating' or evidence of 'laziness'. Those who were keen on active travel or cycling as a means to maintain or improve fitness often described e-bikes as 'pointless', thinking that the assistance provided meant no exertion is involved, eliminating fitness benefit. A few thought e-bikes offered less control and one participant thought e-bikes were essentially scaled-down motorbikes.

Other non-standard bikes, such as recumbent bikes and tricycles, can make cycling more accessible to disabled people and those with long-term conditions, for example, by offering greater stability or distributing load. However, awareness of these options was low. People are unsure how feasible alternative options would be for them. Those who had any awareness of adapted bikes raised concerns about their storage and, in relation to recumbent bikes, their reduced visibility as a result of being low to the ground. An adapted bike for some would only address one of their barriers; others such as ability, traffic danger and lack of dedicated cycle paths remain.

### **Implications for policy**

- Policy makers need to make clear advice and guidance available on the health and other benefits of e-bikes and other adapted bikes if the current lack of understanding of the contribution e-bikes and adapted bikes might make to a healthy lifestyle is to be tackled among this age group.
- Schemes that provide the opportunity to rent e-bikes would help combat the lack of understanding surrounding them and promote greater understanding of what they are, how they work and what they have to offer.
- Adequate facilities for locking up bikes at destinations including work are essential in encouraging active cycling - this is especially important for e-bikes given their high cost.

## **Lockdown has had a mixed impact on active travel but presents opportunities for the development of new active travel habits**

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated periods of lockdown since March 2020 have had a mixed impact on physical activity levels across the country. Most participants felt that their activity levels generally had increased, but this does not necessarily mean an increase in active travel. Some felt that the periods of lockdown had increased their opportunity for active travel, whereas for others there was no change and some had even reduced their active travel. Changes to working patterns have had a positive impact on active travel for those who normally commute by car or public transport. For some, the time saved has been used to do more physical activity and, combined with quieter roads, walking and cycling for travel became more appealing. Moreover, working from home has offered some flexibility in daily schedules, again creating more opportunities for active travel.

Those who intended to increase their daily activity levels when they retire may have brought these plans forward as lockdowns have given them the opportunity to be more active sooner than expected. A reduction in competitive team sports or temporary gym closures has encouraged people to walk more as an alternative. Some people had saved money on petrol or public transport as a result of using more active travel. These positive changes represent opportunities for embedding an ongoing daily habit and, as we have seen, habit is an important aspect of active travel participation.

### **Implications for policy**

- The change in active lifestyles and active travel habits brought about by lockdown provides policy makers with an opportunity to push at an open door. However, changes in commuting patterns, home-working and work-life balance vary, meaning that policies must reflect the precise changes in the nature and patterns of active travel that have developed.

### **Active travel habits change markedly over the life-course and there are several life event triggers can change those habits**

The evidence from our participants was that life-course changes in active travel habits and preferences follow a broadly common pattern. High levels of walking and/or cycling for travel when younger (in childhood, as students, as young adults when first working) decreased further into adulthood. As they then reached or approached retirement age, active travel increased again, although this was more likely to be on foot than bike. Very few returned to cycling in later life if they had spent a long period not cycling as an adult.

Moving to live in a location more conducive to active travel was a trigger for some. Once people owned cars, the environment needed to be such that it could override both the desire and the necessity to travel by car. This could be either



because the environment was more amenable to walking and cycling – with good infrastructure, pleasant surroundings and amenities close by – or because it was inconvenient for car travel – for example because of congestion and parking costs. Moving to a more rural location can enable active travel as it can make walking or cycling more pleasant. In these locations, amenities or other destinations are generally not as close as in a city centre. For this type of move to encourage active travel it appears to need to coincide with having more time, so was more common in those who had retired.

While having a young family generally meant a reduction in active travel, this was not always the case and one woman told us that having a very young child was for her the opportunity to walk more journeys. Other family triggers include children leaving home, as this is associated with having more time and flexibility around travel choices and for one person divorce was a trigger to make other changes in her life, leading to walking for travel more to improve her health. Several people reported that health scares were a trigger for them to incorporate more exercise into their daily lives.

Several participants mentioned that at a younger age exercise had to be something that was high intensity, and had an important social element. There was an acknowledgement that with age, more intense exercise becomes less appealing and the idea of walking for exercise is, for some, a good alternative. However, changed attitudes to walking do not appear to translate to cycling in the same way – no participants discussed taking up cycling as an alternative to team sports or going to the gym.

People who had retired all felt that their active travel levels had increased. Those approaching this milestone largely anticipated that they would increase their levels of active travel once they were retired, though some thought they would have less opportunity for it once they had no commute. Any increase in active travel after retirement is almost entirely related to walking. Very few people had taken up cycling, and if they had, this was for leisure rather than travel.

Purchasing a car is by far the most common factor that instigates a drop in people's active travel. This is particularly the case if car ownership is associated with a job that is demanding, involves long hours or requires a lot of travel. Most people found that once they purchased a car and became reliant on its convenience, it became a habit that was difficult to break. Having a family appears to reduce perceived opportunities for active travel and, alongside employment, makes the need for a car more pressing. Raising a family is seen as the most time-pressured life-stage, where people are less willing to spend time travelling. They may also be less likely to live in a city centre, so the car becomes essential.

The catch-22 situation of being ill, doing less activity and then feeling too unfit or overweight to be active is very real for some. Participants also reported that the health of others could stop them travelling actively as they aged, for example

parents becoming elderly or ill so that they required a car to either visit them or drive them to appointments.

### **Implications for policy**

- Behaviour change interventions for this age group should emphasise the advantages of walking and cycling and that even though these are less intensive forms of exercise they nevertheless bring major health benefits.
- Policy makers may need to pay particular attention to the practical issues that need to be addressed to encourage people in this age group to take up cycling rather than walking and the trade-offs (if any) between the health benefits and safety risks (if any) of the former compared to the latter.
- Policy makers need to capitalise on the interest in walking for leisure among this age group to encourage extension to walking for purposeful travel.

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## **The nature of the built environment is an important enablers of active travel among those in mid-life**

Shops and services in close proximity enable more active travel and people living in densely populated urban and suburban areas are more likely to have easy access to such facilities.

Green spaces, parks, river walks and nature all contribute to a pleasant active travel experience. This is considered very important to both men and women and across both age groups. People living in suburban, semi-rural or rural areas were more likely to talk about the impact of scenic surroundings. However, people living in very built-up and city environments also perceived benefits in access to parks and natural environments.

Well-maintained, dedicated footpaths and cycle paths are a key factor in encouraging active travel. This is particularly the case when it comes to enabling people to cycle. Good pavements, crossing places (such as zebra crossings) and routes away from traffic are all important factors in helping ensure a pleasant walking journey. The particular risks on country roads – agricultural traffic, higher speeds, narrower roads and reduced visibility on winding lanes – means that participants are reluctant to walk where there are no pavements.

Even among those who regularly cycle, they would cycle less if they did not have access to cycle lanes or paths. Where there are lots of cycle paths people feel safer and more confident. Quiet roads and cycle lanes can be helpful for some, but for less confident cyclists and women in particular, cycle lanes offer scant encouragement. They are often perceived as providing insufficient protection from traffic. Fully segregated or off-road routes are more likely to appeal as a safe

and enjoyable way to cycle. People considering cycling often need to know that they can complete all their journey using cycle lanes, traffic-free paths and/or quiet roads before they would consider cycling a particular route. If paths only cover part of the way and journeys require cycling on busy roads, people are less inclined to cycle.

Quality and maintenance of roads and cycle paths are of greater importance in supporting cycling than quality and maintenance of pavements are for walking. People who would be prepared to walk on poorly maintained pavements would not consider cycling in similar conditions. Quality of paths may also limit the time of day and year or conditions in which people are willing to use them. While cycle paths may be a necessary condition to encourage cycling, alone they are not always sufficient to get people to take the decision to cycle. Some people live close to excellent cycling infrastructure but choose not to or face additional barriers explored elsewhere.

### **Implications for policy**

- Targeting of policies to encourage more active travel among people in mid-life needs to reflect the different practical realities, opportunities, barriers and risks of living in urban, suburban or rural locations.
- The provision of good-quality, adequately segregated and maintained cycle paths is the single biggest enabler of cycling in people in this age group (especially women) as it is in other age groups.

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**Let's make ageing better.**



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