



# Walking Bus Pilot – Case Study

## Context

The Walking Bus Pilot contributes to delivering the place, planet, and prosperity areas of work, three of the core themes of the WHO Phase VII (2020 – 2025) framework of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. Belfast Healthy Cities Healthy Transport programme seeks to reduce car dependency, promote walking for everyone, and support communities to influence improvements to the walking environment.<sup>1</sup> The Pilot also links to strategic place-making initiatives by the Department for Infrastructure to improve road safety, including the introduction of 20mph zones around schools.

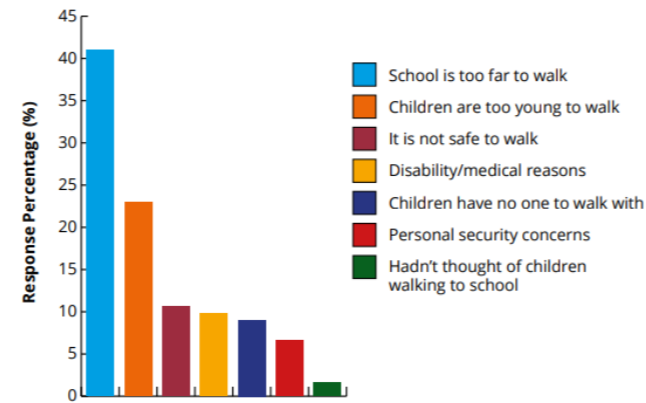


Belfast Healthy Cities Phase VII Themes

## Rationale

The Care Zone area in north Belfast is affected by significant deprivation with 4 out of 9 of the super output areas ranked in the top 25 most deprived in Northern Ireland. Locations in the area indicate high levels of air pollution that breach or approach the legal annual mean limit of nitrogen dioxide, 40 µg/m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>2</sup> There is also a high level of car dependency, with primary schools in the area reporting the majority of pupils travel to school by car.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for not walking to school included the school was too far to walk (41%), the children were too young to walk (23%), it is not safe to walk (11%), and due to a disability/medical reasons (10%).<sup>3</sup>



Active travel survey response to question 'What is the reason for not walking to and from school?'

## Description

During August 2021 and June 2022, a partnership involving Belfast Healthy Cities; Expert Advisors to the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG), for Architecture and the Built Environment for Northern Ireland; the Care Zone Project team; the Care Zone Community Champions; Youth Education health and advice (YEHA); and, three primary schools jointly developed and trialled walking buses during 'Walk to School' week in May 2022.



## Aim

The aim of the Walking Bus Pilot were to:

- increase walking;
- reduce car dependency;
- improve air quality; and, reduce congestion in local areas.

## What is a walking bus?

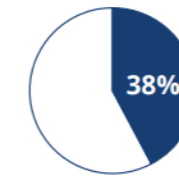
A walking bus is a group of children walking to school, supervised by an adult at the front and at the back, acting as the 'conductor' and 'driver'. The start of the route is normally located less than a mile from the school and is a suitable drop-off area for car users.

By providing a supervised short walk, children who don't normally walk to school due to issues of living too far from the school, being too young, or feeling the walking environment is unsafe, have an opportunity to regularly take part in healthy and active travel. It can also provide additional support and encouragement for children who already walk to school.

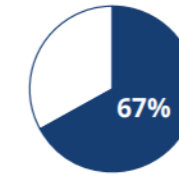


## Achievements

Three primary schools took part in the Pilot. Approximately 300 pupils provided feedback on the Pilot. 113 pupils (38%) highlighted the walking buses helped them to walk to school and 200 pupils (67%) wanted the walking buses to continue. Teachers and parents identified the key benefits of the Pilot as support for children to walk, increased exercise, and creation of good habits, socialising with and making new friends, more alert and ready for class, arriving to school on time, improved attendance, and reduced congestion near the school. Two of the schools continued to provide walking buses until the end of the academic year.



113 pupils... said the walking buses helped them walk to school.



200 pupils... wanted the walking buses to continue.

Number and percentage of pupils highlighting the walking buses helped them to walk to school or wanted the walking buses to continue.

Teachers successfully sought support from political leaders for additional crossings to improve road safety along the route, and the Care Zone Community Champions undertook a walk assessment to identify further improvements to the local walking environment.



## Conclusion and Next Steps

The Pilot successfully brought together stakeholders at the strategic and community levels to work in partnership to support children to integrate walking as a daily habit, to influence improvements to their local walking environment and to support residents with reduced traffic congestion in their neighbourhoods.

Following the success of the Pilot in promoting behavioural change, Belfast Healthy Cities and the partners involved, seek to continue to support the schools to independently provide regular walking buses with good uptake from pupils; to work with politicians and the Department for Infrastructure to make infrastructural changes to increase the safety of children walking to school; and, expand walking buses to more primary schools across Belfast.

1. Belfast Healthy Cities (2020) **Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan**. Available at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/publications>

2. Care Zone (2019) Care Zone **Health Profile**. Available at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/care-zone>

3. Belfast Healthy Cities (2021) **Care Zone Road Safety project, Department for Infrastructure: Active Travel Survey – results**. Available at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/care-zone-areas-road-safety-project>

4. Belfast Healthy Cities (2022) **Walking Bus Pilot Report 2022**. <https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>



# Walking Bus Pilot – How to Guide

## Step 1

Identify key stakeholders needed to support the development and uptake of walking buses. This should include:

- A lead coordinator;
- School principals and teachers;
- Organisations or individuals able to provide technical support to develop appropriate start locations and routes for walking buses; and,
- Local organisation and residents providing additional support.



## Step 2

Undertake an active travel survey to understand existing travel patterns to and from school. An example is available at:

<https://belfasthealthycities.com/care-zone-areas-road-safety-project>

## Step 3

Collect and map information on the school catchment area and location of pupils.

## Step 4

Identify suitable start locations for the walking buses. These should be:

- A short walk from the school (approximately 1 mile or less than);
- Linked to where the majority of pupils live;
- A convenient place with easy access for cars to drop pupils off, such as a wide road or car park; and,
- Safe for pupils, such as a wide pavement, green space or car park.

## Step 5

Identify safe walking routes from the start locations to the schools. These should avoid busy roads and dangerous crossings where possible.



## Step 6

Organise resources to start the walking buses. This should consist of:

- A map to include the timings of start location, timing of pick up points, and the route of the walking buses to share with parents;
- At least two teachers or parents to lead and support each walking bus route;
- High visibility jackets for pupils and adults taking part in the walking buses; and,
- Incentives for pupils to encourage uptake, such as stickers or certificates.

## Step 7

Develop and share promotional material and activities to support the walking buses. This can include:

- Introducing the concept of walking buses to teachers, parents and guardians.
- Creating posters to advertise the walking buses. These can be printed around the school and shared via the school's newsletter and social media; and,
- Organising classroom activities for pupils linked to the walking buses, active travel, and road safety.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and a Walking Bus Poster are available at:

<https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>



## Step 8

Develop feedback forms for the walking buses to measure uptake and understand the views of pupils, parents, teachers, and local residents. Templates are available at:

<https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>

## Step 9

Begin providing walking buses for pupils. This should include:

- Having activities along the route to generate excitement from children;
- Regularly promoting uptake of the walking buses via the school's social media and website; and,
- Inviting local media outlets and political leaders to join the walking buses and raise awareness.

## Step 10

Share and collect feedback on the uptake and views of the walking buses from pupils, parents, teachers, and local residents. Templates are available at:

<https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>

## Step 11

Undertake a walk assessment survey of the walking buses routes to highlight additional opportunities for improvement. A walk assessment survey is available at

<https://belfasthealthycities.com/walkability>

## Step 12

Consider and refine the start locations and walking buses routes, taking into account the results from the feedback forms and walk assessment survey.

## Step 13

Maintain regular walking buses. Depending on issues such as teacher or parent capacity or weather, walking buses could be organised one day a week, for example walking Wednesdays, with the aim of increasing the number of days to five days weekly. This may require additional encouragement and support from stakeholders.

## Step 14

Continue to seek support from political leaders, government departments, such as Department for Infrastructure and Department for Communities, and Belfast City Council to increase pavement cleanliness, road safety and to improve the overall walking environment along the walking buses routes.