

Advancing Active Travel through Collaboration Conference

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Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, is a virtual centre operating across six Universities in the North East of England and North Cumbria (<https://fuse.ac.uk>). Its overall aim is to improve health and wellbeing and to reduce health inequalities by not just conducting public health research but by translating this into feasible policy and practice recommendations and actions. Close connections with our public health partners facilitate this. When an opportunity arose for Fuse's Physical Activity Group (<https://fuse.ac.uk/events/physicalactivityworkshops>) to work with the Transport and Health Science Group (THSG - <https://www.transportandhealth.org.uk/>) to host an event as part of the 8th Journal of Transport and Health International Conference, we were excited to make this happen. It was particularly significant to hold the event in June 2025 at the Darlington Campus of Teesside University in the year of the 200th anniversary of the first journey on the Stockton and Darlington Railway. The collaboration was natural: we were aware that THSG has a similar ethos to Fuse, having developed from an academic study group in the late 1980s into a charitable organisation of practitioners and researchers; and – as regular readers of the Journal of Transport and Health may know – THSG also maintains a key focus on evidence for policy and advocacy (in this case for “a healthier and sustainable transport system”). Further complementing the work of both groups and our third joint host of the event, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Research Support Service Specialist Centre for Public Health delivered by Newcastle University and Partners provides researchers and practitioners with free support to conduct high quality research to inform policy and practice with the aim of improving public health and reducing health inequalities (<https://www.nihr.ac.uk/support-and-services/research-support-service/public-health-specialist-centre>).

Community-based approaches were at the heart of our active travel conference. They work! It is clear that “If you build it, they will come” is not an effective strategy to serve and empower communities. We need to consider the wider barriers that might prevent underserved populations accessing opportunities through true community engagement and involvement in the development process. An example of this is the Local Delivery Pilot programme; this represented a massive shift in the approach of Sport England whereby 12 places benefitted from intensive support and investment to adopt a co-produced place-based approach to tackling stubborn inequalities in physical activity. This work is now bearing fruit – for instance, the Join Us: Move Play (JU:MP) programme in Bradford involved community

co-design and co-production in relation to various aims, including to increase active transport opportunities, to create safer play spaces and to develop a physical activity culture in schools and faith settings (Barber et al., 2025). This whole-system approach hit the news recently (Osu, 2025) for increasing children's moderate-to-vigorous physical activity by 5.8 minutes on weekdays and reducing sedentary time by 21.5 minutes on weekend days, resulting in an overall increase in physical activity of almost 58 minutes per week. Considering a more transport-focused intervention, the six Cycling Demonstration Towns (2005–2011) and 12 Cycling Cities and Towns (2008–2011) in England demonstrated the potential for place-based approaches to increase the levels of cycling and walking and decrease car use for commuting to work (Goodman et al., 2013). In contrast, a workplace-based feasibility study based in south Wales and south-west England, Walk to Work, has demonstrated that active travel interventions focusing on individual behaviour change are unlikely to be effective in increasing physical activity without wider systemic change (Audrey et al., 2019).

Collaboration, in the form of bringing public health and transport colleagues together to achieve shared goals, was a central theme throughout the conference. Suggested examples of how this could be achieved included via placements or more formal roles such as those now appointed in several English Local Authorities that look to create bridges between public health and transport and town planning (Chang et al., 2022; Davis and Annett, 2013).

The work presented at our conference also drew on ecological models (e.g. Salmon et al., 2020), acknowledging the various levels of influence on active travel. Presentations spanned the full reach of such models, from the individual level (including Emma Allan's practice perspective on social prescribing (Allan, 2025)) to the policy level (including one of our three keynote presentations from Professor Peter Jones OBE on bringing together transport and public health communities (Jones, 2025). The keynote presentations from Professor Adrian Davis (2025) and Dr Stephen Watkins (2025) further captured the spirit of the conference in relation to advancing active travel through reflecting on what has gone before and future developments in the field, and by drawing attention to unconscious bias as a potential barrier in this area. No small thanks goes to our linchpin, Scott Lloyd, for making many of the arrangements in bringing together speakers from across the breadth of research and practice in this important area of work. One of our delegates very kindly deemed the conference: “an inspiring and thought-provoking day” and we very much hope you enjoy reading the abstracts provided in this supplement.

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