

# Recommendations for Active Travel Communication

*This short note was developed in  
collaboration with the ESRI's  
Behavioural Research Unit*



# Evidence-based Principles of Communication for Active Travel Initiatives

This document suggests some implications for communication based on behavioural evidence about misperceptions and biases in opinion formation about active travel schemes. The material should not be read as implying unquestioning support for active travel initiatives; sometimes communities and individuals may have legitimate reasons for opposing changes. However, there is evidence that proposed schemes, and their impacts suffer from systematic misperceptions and, furthermore, that active travel schemes tend to be more popular after implementation than before. This short note was developed in collaboration with the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit and is based on evidence contained in their review of relevant international literature (Timmons, Andersson, McGowan & Lunn, 2023).<sup>1</sup> The review is publicly available at <https://www.esri.ie/publications/using-behavioural-science-to-design-and-implement-active-travel-infrastructure-a> .

The material is organised into sections based on the costs and benefits of the schemes (the “why”), the individuals and groups involved (the “who”), the processes used (the “how”) and the timing of communications (the “when”). Within each section, specific findings from behavioural science are linked to implications for communications. It is important to understand that while the findings are based on evidence, the implications are based on researchers' judgements of what that evidence might suggest. Further research is needed to test specific forms of communication to determine whether they do indeed reduce misperceptions and biases.

## The WHY – Communicating benefits and costs

**Finding:** People instinctively oppose change and the uncertainty inherent in it. This “status quo bias” includes a preference for what is familiar and avoidance of uncertain changes.

### Implications:

- Communicate expected outcomes to increase familiarity with them
- Familiarise people with similar changes elsewhere
- Stress why change is needed
- Challenge the status quo by stressing issues with current system and how new system is a solution
- Provide instances where people have changed opinions following real-world experience with similar changes

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<sup>1</sup> Timmons, S., Andersson, Y., McGowan, F., & Lunn, P. (2023). Using Behavioural Science to Design and Implement Active Travel Infrastructure: A Narrative Review of Evidence, ESRI Working Paper 745, Dublin: ESRI

- Acknowledge that change can be initially uncomfortable but is often worth it

**Finding:** People are willing to act for the common good if they perceive that others are willing to do the same. However, people can fail to see how a policy in isolation is relevant to group goals, e.g. viewing active travel solely as a transport issue, not a climate issue.

**Implications:**

- In general, communicate common goals and how others are working towards them
- “Join the dots” between specific local schemes and the overall goals of active travel policy to reduce emissions causing climate change and improve health
- Highlight shared goals between all groups of people (drivers, cyclists, pedestrians) such as improved safety, reduced pollution, nicer public spaces, etc.

**Finding:** People are more supportive of things they perceive as effective and that they can benefit from. Demonstration of measured benefits of implementation in other locations increases support.

**Implications:**

- Demonstrate where plans have worked elsewhere
- Highlight benefits such as lower costs, time savings, increased safety etc.
- Highlight broader societal benefits such as public health, safety

**Finding:** People are more persuaded by everyday narrative than statistics and abstract arguments

**Implications:**

- Don’t bombard people with statistics, use and repeat only the most important ones
- Where possible use relatable stories to make the point
- Explain abstract effects through specific stories; use examples that resonate

**Finding:** When forming opinions about new issues, people are disproportionately swayed by the first arguments they encounter. Once opinions have formed, they are difficult to shift.

**Implications:**

- Disseminate accurate information about plans for active travel schemes early
- Include information about predicted impacts.
- Cite evidence to “pre-bunk” commonly held misperceptions rather than attempting to correct them after-the fact, e.g. similar schemes not resulting in local business losses, good infrastructure mattering more than weather for active travel use, overestimated impacts on car journey times, underestimated reductions in traffic.

- Don't spend too much time rebutting arguments relative to stressing positive benefits.

## The WHO – Individuals and Communities

**Finding:** Opposition often comes from vocal minorities, while a majority in support remains quiet, leading people to perceive opposition as more widespread than it is and support to be lower than it is.

**Implications:**

- Gather and spread information on the level of support for schemes.

**Finding:** People perceive some changes as the impositions or actions of an out-group.

**Implications:**

- Don't hide away and hope things go quiet. Engage with local communities and stress that the aim is to act on behalf of the local community.
- Try to use messengers from a diverse set of voices
- Communicate who is behind initiatives and where messages come from.
- Involve community voices in communications where possible.

## The HOW – Decision-processes

**Finding:** People focus on the fairness of decision-making processes as well as outcomes of them, often latching on to perceived unfairness, e.g. being shut out of decisions or late to hear of plans.

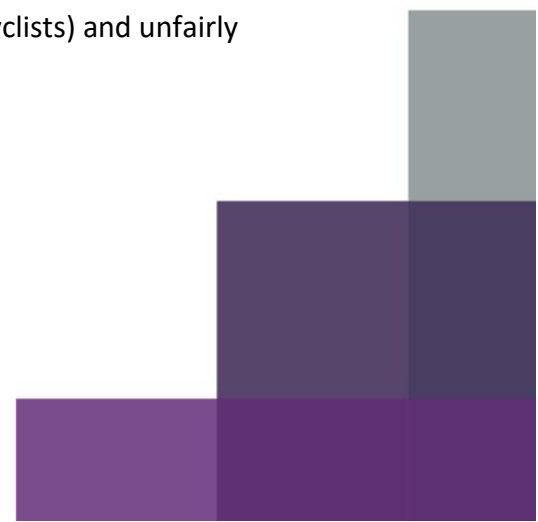
**Implications:**

- Design consultations to be as fair as possible and stress how they have been designed to be fair.
- Stress "fairness" as an explicit aim of the process and use the word "fair".

**Finding:** People care about the distributional fairness of schemes. One view is that active travel infrastructure benefits only a small minority (e.g. existing cyclists) and unfairly reallocates resources from motorists.

**Implications:**

- Don't blame car drivers, stress instead the benefits of widespread active travel.



- Communicate benefits for more vulnerable people, e.g., benefits of pedestrianisation for those with small children.
- Stress how groups with lower cycle rates (e.g., women and the elderly) also benefit.
- Highlight differences of perspective, e.g. from driver to child cyclist, who is not visible to driver
- Where possible, emphasise benefit to drivers of cyclists not sharing the same road.

## The **WHEN** – Timing of communications

**Finding:** Routines are more readily changed at salient temporal landmarks (e.g. after breaks, when new terms begin, etc.) and disruptions to commutes can lead to sustained shifts in modality.

**Implications:**

- Time communications to coincide with changes in routine, for example end-August
- Target new communities, or new residents of existing communities.

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