

‘Child in City’ Stuttgart October 2006

The overall theme of this year ‘Child in the City’ Conference was children’s mobility. How are children able to travel around the city, play outside and make use of public open space?

There were many presentations as to how different cities have tackled the issue of mobility and one common theme from many cities was how children travel to and from school. It is common throughout the major cities of Western Europe that more and more children are being driven to school. For example figures from Ireland show that between 1986 and 2002 the numbers of pupils aged 5-12 years who are driven to school has greatly increased. In 1986 68% of pupils travelled to school on foot, by bicycle, bus or train and 24% were taken by car. In 2002 the figures of pupils walking, cycling or using bus/train had declined to 45% and the number being driven had increased to over 50% (CSO).

<http://www.cso.ie/statistics/traveltoschoolandcollege.htm>

The driving of children to schools causes many problems. The environment around schools was never intended to cope with the level of traffic experienced around some schools, a level that leads to a lowering of road safety standards, higher levels of pollution with a negative effect on pupils’ health. Also the increase of cars on the road during the morning school run can be as high as 20% leading to substantial delays in travelling at this time of day.

We are creating a cycle where this increase in cars on the road and subsequent lowering of road safety leads to increased parental concerns about the safety of their children if they were to walk or cycle to school. In consequences parents feel obliged to drive their children to school thereby increasing the problem.

Increasingly we are becoming aware of overweight and obesity in children as a major public health concern. One in five children Irish children are overweight and one in twenty are obese. An overweight child is more likely to become an obese adult with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other disorders. Studies in the UK suggest that walking to school can use up more energy than PE lessons in school.

In addition children can gain valuable social contact and experiences during the journey to school on foot or by bicycle. Children who are driven to school get used to being driven and start to believe that the best way to get around is by car.

Speakers at the conference raised these and other concerns about children’s general mobility. Several approaches that have been adopted by cities across Europe were presented at the conference. I have also included in this paper some information about the approach being adopted by the Dublin Transportation Office who are actively engaged in tackling the issue.

Approaches to 'Safe Routes to School'

Stockholm

A project establishing safe routes to school has been set up. The project using a partnership approach between, local government, public transport providers, schools and public health departments develops locally based solutions with the aim of increasing the number of children who walk and cycle to schools and reducing the number who are driven. The project promotes 'walking and cycling buses' where parents take turns accompanying a group of children to school. In addition the project promotes 'drop off points', away from the school, for parents using cars. Children have been involved in the process. For the first time in Sweden children's drawings have contributed to the creation of new road signs.



Assembly Points for Walking Bus – Road Sign.

Information from Stockholm will soon be available in English check website at http://www.huddinge.se/h_templates/H_PicturePage_13891.aspx?epslanguage=EN

Further information on safe routes to school in Stockholm

<http://conference.europoint.eu/childinthecity/session9/daryani.pdf>

London

The Greater London Authority (GLA) headed by The Mayor for London, Ken Livingstone has specific powers and duties for spatial development, transport, environment and culture. They also have general powers to do anything that will promote economic and social development and environment improvements.

In common with other European Cities, London has a major problem in the increased traffic generated by children being driven to and from school. Parents often give the excuse that they are dropping children off at school on their way to work but in the UK 60% of mums and 57% of dads go home after the school journey. It is estimated that 23% of all traffic in London travelling an average of 7 kms is education related in the mornings.

With regional responsibilities the GLA have adopted a London wide response to the problem of travelling to school. The regional response from the GLA is two fold, firstly the GLA have introduced free travel on bus/trams for all children under 16 (they have recently extended this to under 18's in education). This has had the effect of increasing the number of bus trips for travel to school and leisure by under 16's by 20% and there has been a decline in car use. At the same time a significant number of children report that they are more likely to catch a bus than walk to their destination.

In addition to providing free travel for under 16's the GLA have introduced a range of measures to address 'traffic danger' such as safe play areas, enhanced neighbourhood policing to secure green spaces and the streetscapes. There has been a small but noticeable reduction in road casualties 10% for the first six months of 2005 as compared to 2004. The measures introduced in London are starting to have an effect children are more visible on public transport, they are more likely to travel independently and parents report their children using the bus more for leisure activities. Londoners as a whole welcome this initiative.

Further Information

<http://conference.europoint.eu/childinthecity/session2/lever.pdf>

The Netherlands Veilig Verkeer (Safe Transport Netherlands)

Veilig Verkeer is an Association where professionals and volunteers work together to increase road safety. It has 42,000 members. It is involved in a range of road safety campaigns including Walk and Cycle to School Day as part of the European Mobility Week. The Netherlands has seen a similar decline of children walking to school over the past ten years. The approach of Veilig Verkeer

<http://www.veiligverkeernederland.nl/> is to influence individual behaviour i.e. encouraging parents to walk with or allow their children to walk to school and make recommendations and provide support to schools and local authorities. The Association promotes an annual day (21st September) of walking to school. Three hundred local authorities, two thousand schools, 400,000 children and parents participate.

Results from 2005 showed a significant reduction (50%) of children being driven to school with a significant large rise in the number of children cycling to school. There was little change in the number of children walking to school. There was still less pupils being driven to school three weeks later.

Veilig Verkeer also promote Ten Golden rules For A Safe School Environment

1. The route to school is safe.
2. The school street itself must be safe.
3. A safe road crossing in front of the school.
4. The exit from the school premises is safe.
5. Clear view for children (No high objects).
6. Appropriate waiting facilities for parents.
7. Enough cycle racks for parents.
8. A good and sufficient cycle parking for the children.
9. A good parking place for the school bus.
10. Each school has a traffic committee and a 'traffic parent'.

There has been some progress in these areas but there needs to be continual attention to the issues as people revert to old behaviours, the issue moves down the political agenda and new parents are joining the school community.

Veilig Verkeer has found that you can change people's behaviour if they are asked and motivated.

Further information

<http://conference.europoint.eu/childinthecity/session9/wit.pdf>

Dublin

The Dublin Transportation Officer (DTO) (<http://www.dto.ie/>) has taken the lead in promoting Safe Routes to School. In 2000 they secured funding under the National Development Plan to establish some safer routes to school projects.

The pilot project involved a range of measures:

The Walking Bus

The Walking Bus is a group of primary school children who walk to school together supervised by volunteers usually parents. The children and the volunteers both wear reflective jackets and trolleys are provided for school bags.



A Walking Bus

For further information <http://www.dto.ie/walkbus.pdf>

Cycle Skills Training

Pupils received cycle training in the schoolyard and traffic awareness by on the road training.

Cycle Parking Provision

Cycle parking provision was provided on some schemes.

Cycling and Walking Promotion

A variety of media was used to promote cycling and walking to school. Leaflets were distributed to parents; school newsletter and websites were used.

Bus Promotion

Where regular bus routes serviced schools maps and information on bus timetables was provided for parents. Bus lay-bys and shelters were provided to increase the safety and comfort of children using the bus.

Car Sharing Database

In one scheme a car-sharing database was set up for parents where the use of the car was essential.

Improvement of the Front of School Environment and other Physical Works

All the schemes involved some physical works to the front of the school such as footpath build outs, raised platforms for pedestrian crossings, management of parking and providing bus bays.

The pilot scheme has now come to an end. However the dto continue to work in the area of promoting safer routes to school. They launched a questionnaire for primary and secondary school pupils in October 2006 with the aim of gaining an understanding of how children get to and from school in the greater Dublin area.

For further information on the Travel to school project
<http://www.dto.ie/web2006/saferroustoschool.pdf>

Other Examples from the Child in the City Conference

Brussels <http://conference.europoint.eu/childinthecity/session5/ndiaye.pdf>
Delft <http://conference.europoint.eu/childinthecity/session10/zomervrucht.pdf>

Conclusions

The issue of how children get to and from school causes common problems across many cities in Europe. Increasingly children are being driven to school with a subsequent decline in pupils walking, cycling or using public transport to get to and from school. This causes; increased congestions in our cities in the morning and afternoon, increased dangers to those children that use the streets because of the larger numbers of cars and a decrease in the amount of physical exercise children are having leading to overweight and obesity.

Different cities are adopting different approaches but there are common themes arising from each.

Firstly solutions need to be worked out on a local basis with schools, parents and pupils, local authorities and the police being involved.

Secondly, Parents and children will change their behaviour when encouraged and supported to do so.

We also need to make our streets safer for children to be able to walk or cycle to school.