



MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP
ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Belfast
A World Health Organization
Healthy City



Walking Bus Pilot Report 2022

Belfast Healthy Cities (BHC) is a partnership organisation that aims to develop Belfast as a healthy, equitable and sustainable city, and coordinates action on behalf of Belfast as a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network. The aim of the Healthy Cities movement is to bring stakeholders across sectors together to create healthier places, and its key role is to create tools and models for intersectoral collaboration. The role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to support local policy makers, elected representatives and practitioners through collating and sharing evidence on healthy places, building capacity and sharing learning on existing good practice, and piloting innovative concepts and ways of working.

Belfast Healthy Cities is grateful to the 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 staff and pupils at Our Lady's Primary School, Deanby Gardens; Sacred Heart Primary School, Oldpark Avenue; and, Ballysillan Primary School, Ballysillan Road, for their involvement and contributions to the Pilot.



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Summary of the Walking Bus Pilot

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.¹ 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.

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.² Locations in the area indicate high levels of air pollution that breach or approach the legal annual mean limit of nitrogen dioxide, 40 µg/m³.³ 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.⁴

DESCRIPTION:

During August 2021 and June 2022, a partnership involving 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); Belfast Healthy Cities; and, primary schools jointly developed and trialled walking buses during 'Walk to School' week in May 2022.

A walking bus is a group of children walking part or all of their journey to school supervised by teachers and/or parents. The start of the route is usually located less than one mile from the school and in a suitable alternative drop off location for those that normally use the car to travel to school, as well as providing additional support to children who may be too young, or feel the walking environment is unsafe, to walk to school.



AIM:

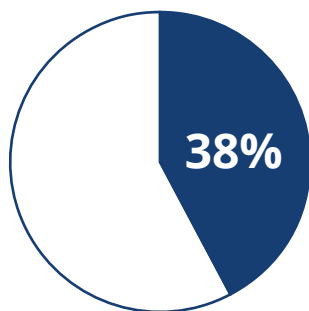
The aim of the Walking Bus Pilot was to:

- **Increase walking;**
- **Reduce car dependency; and,**
- **Improve air quality and reduce congestion in local areas.**

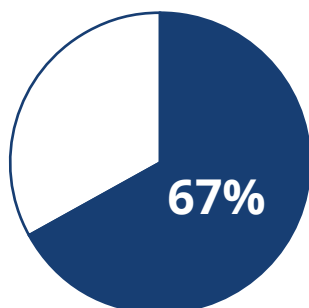
ACHIEVEMENTS:

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. 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.

Figure 1: Number and percentage of pupils highlighting the walking buses helped them to walk to school or wanted the walking buses to continue.



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



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



CONCLUSION:

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.

NEXT STEPS:

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.



How to develop walking buses

Reflecting on the Walking Bus Pilot, key steps that will be useful to consider to support development and uptake of walking buses are outlined below.

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. An example of a walking buses Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) is available at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>**
- **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.**

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 provided in Appendix 1.

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 provided in Appendix 1.

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.





Background

Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan Phase VII (2020-2025) sets out the organisation's commitment to work with stakeholders to deliver programmes to promote healthy transport, greening the city, community prosperity, increasing knowledge and capacity building, and maximise learning and knowledge exchange.⁵ The Healthy Transport programme includes a focus on reducing car dependency and supporting the creation of good-quality active travel infrastructure that boosts physical and mental health, increases physical activity, improves air quality and promotes access to public transport and all other services and facilities.⁶

Figure 2: Belfast Healthy Cities Phase VII Themes





In partnership with stakeholders, the aims of Belfast Healthy Cities Healthy Transport programme are to:

- 1. Raise awareness and create an understanding of the benefits of walking, promoting Belfast as a walking city and generating debate in relation to policies and plans for improved walking infrastructure.**
- 2. Actively engage and involve communities in assessing, influencing, advising and monitoring walking infrastructure, promoting, influencing and advising on accessibility for all and improved community prosperity.**
- 3. Influence policies and plans to include good quality walking infrastructure for healthier places and improved community prosperity.**
- 4. Generate awareness on the importance of improved or increased public transport routes as access to all services and facilities for communities that are 'left behind'.**
- 5. Promote legislation for no pavement parking that supports inclusive accessibility across Northern Ireland.**

As part of the Care Zone Project, established in 2019 to help address the high prevalence of mental health issues and suicide rates in the Oldpark Area in north Belfast, Belfast Healthy Cities developed a Health Profile of the Care Zone area.⁷ The Health Profile highlighted significant levels of deprivation in relation to income, employment and skills, health, and crime domains, with 4 out of 9 of the super output areas in the Care Zone area ranking in the top 25 most deprived in Northern Ireland (out of 891 in total).⁸ The Health Profile also highlighted there is a high proportion of people in parts of the area reporting poor or very poor health (11-15%) compared with the wider Belfast area (8%).⁹

In addition, locations within the Care Zone area indicated high levels of air pollution. In particular, the Crumlin Road at Oldpark Road, and Cliftonville Circus, Cliftonville Road monitoring sites showed levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution breached or were approaching the legal annual mean limit of 40 µg/m³.¹⁰ The Health Profile also highlighted in most parts of the area more than 60% of households did not have access to a car.¹¹

To address these and other issues highlighted in the Care Zone area, the project identified a series of actions for partners to support. This included piloting of alternative travel to school arrangements such as walking buses, and involving central and local government, and the private, voluntary and community sectors to support delivery.¹²

Following the publication of the Care Zone Health Profile¹³ and Report¹⁴, in May 2021, Belfast Healthy Cities undertook an active travel survey¹⁵ with four primary schools in the Care Zone area. These were Sacred Heart Primary School, Integrated Primary School Cliftonville, Our Lady's Primary School (also referred to as Deanby Gardens), and Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain.



The survey formed part of a Road Safety project funded by the Department for Infrastructure. It aimed to raise awareness of walking as a safe and easy mode of transport for the journey to school; identify current levels of walking; better understand issues limiting uptake of active forms of travel; explore opportunities to support increased journeys to school by walking; and, maintain long-term and sustained behaviour change.¹⁶ Approximately 170 responses were received to the survey.¹⁷

The survey identified the most popular method to travel to and from school was by car (53%), followed by walking (42%), see figure 4.¹⁸ 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%), see figure 5.¹⁹ The large majority of respondents, 80%, were also supportive of using a walking bus as a solution to enable children to walk to school, see figure 3.²⁰

Figure 3: Active travel survey response to question 'Would you consider allowing your child to walk to school with children attending the same school, if supervised by adults (Walking Bus)?'

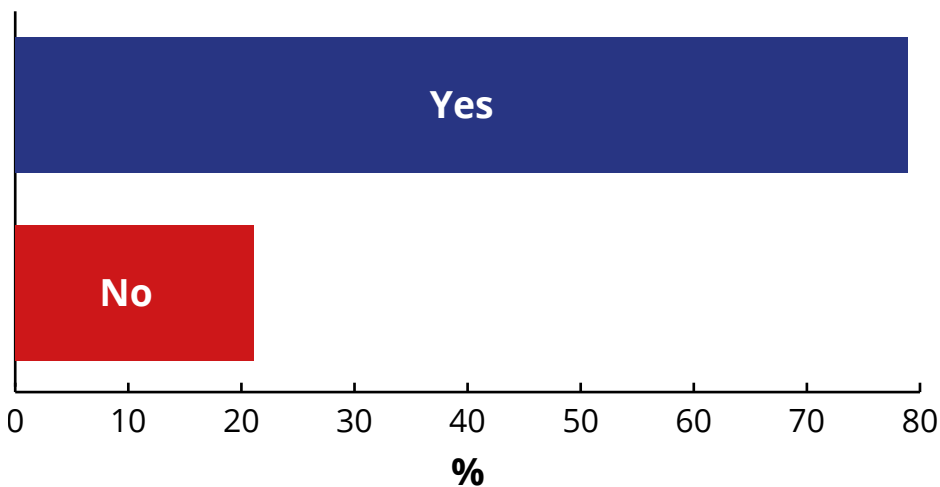




Figure 4: Active travel survey response to question 'How do you normally travel to and from school?'

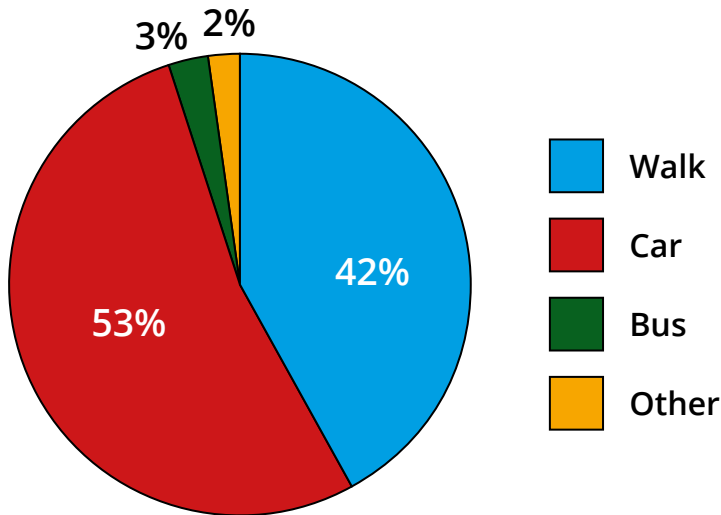
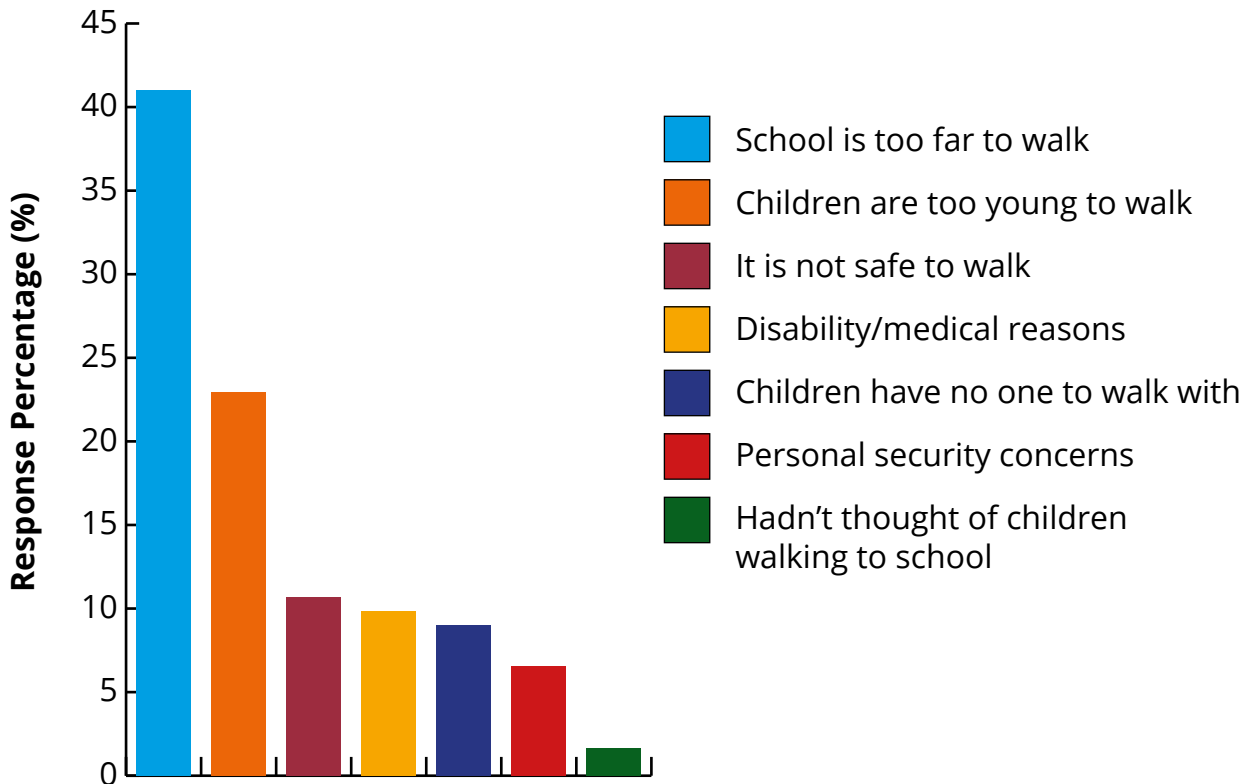


Figure 5: Active travel survey response to question 'What is the reason for not walking to and from school?'





Introduction

The findings and conclusions of the Care Zone Health Profile²¹ and Report²², and the Road Safety project²³ highlighted there was support for the development of walking buses in the Care Zone area. Using this as a clear rationale, Belfast Healthy Cities; 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 in the wider Care Zone area, developed a Pilot for introducing walking buses as a way for children to walk part or all of their journey to school.

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.

AIMS OF THE WALKING BUS PILOT

The aim of the Walking Bus Pilot was to:

- **Increase walking;**
- **Reduce car dependency; and,**
- **Improve air quality and reduce congestion in local areas.**



PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The report sets out details of the Walking Bus Pilot developed in the Care Zone area in north Belfast, and provides information and guidance on how to develop similar walking buses locally. The report highlights the process used to develop the Walking Bus Pilot, uptake and feedback from pupils, teachers, parents and local residents, and the next steps.





Involving key stakeholders

Initially, to gain ministerial and department support for the Walking Bus Pilot, Belfast Healthy Cities, and the Care Zone Project team met with Nicola Mallon, Minister for Infrastructure (Jan 2020- May 2022). The MAG were also approached to support the Pilot, which was received positively. A steering group was set up, bringing together stakeholders working at the strategic and community level to jointly develop and introduce the walking buses in and around the Care Zone area. Details of the members of the steering group are provided below.



BELFAST HEALTHY CITIES

Belfast Healthy Cities coordinated and supported stakeholders, organised and chaired regular meetings to develop the Walking Bus Pilot and discuss improvements to the local walking environment, and provided resources for the schools to start and continue the walking buses.



MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP (MAG), FOR ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Two Expert Advisors of this group provided expertise and advice to develop and introduce walking buses, including appropriate starting points and walking routes for the walking buses at each school, and helping to identify and promote investment and infrastructural improvements to the local environment to support walking.

CARE ZONE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Local residents involved in the Care Zone Project regularly shared insights into the views of the local community as the Walking Bus Pilot developed. This included individuals who were parents of children attending the schools involved. The Care Zone Community Champions helped to shape and support promotion of the Pilot, collecting feedback from local residents, and advising on improvements to the walking environment.

YEHA AND THE CARE ZONE PROJECT

Staff supported the regular involvement of the Care Zone Community Champions and promoted uptake and awareness of the Walking Bus Pilot.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Teachers and school principals informed the development and provision of the walking buses, and supported feedback from pupils, parents and teachers. An invitation was sent to the four schools involved in the Road Safety project. Of these, Sacred Heart Primary School and Our Lady's Primary School were able to commit to the Pilot. Ballysillan Primary School, located close to the Care Zone area had established a regular walking bus, and were invited to be involved in the Pilot as well.



Introducing walking buses

In addition, steering group members became familiar with examples of walking buses. The Healthy Cities Co-ordinator for Udine Healthy Cities, Italy, was invited to share their experience of walking buses. Colleagues provided advice to the teachers, Care Zone Community Champions and staff at YEHA and the Care Zone Project. An officer from Sustrans with experience of setting up walking buses in the Portadown area in Northern Ireland also shared advice and lessons learned. This included a discussion on the motivations for setting up walking buses, the different types of walking buses, key lessons learnt from successful examples, and further consideration of issues such as financing regular walking buses and responsibility for safety of the pupils along the route.

Developing routes for the walking buses

Once the walking buses steering group was established and members were familiar with examples of walking buses, the steering group developed routes for the walking buses for each of the schools.

SITE VISITS

In the first instance, the steering group members, including the school teachers, undertook a site visit of the schools and the surrounding neighbourhoods. The group considered issues such as the quality of the local walking environment, the safety of roads and crossings, and potential drop off locations for those walking or driving to school.

SCHOOL CATCHMENT AREA AND POPULAR RESIDENTIAL ADDRESSES

In tandem with this, the teachers provided information on the schools' catchment area and high-level information on where pupils lived. This identified the most appropriate locations to start the walking buses, close to the areas where the majority of pupils lived.



IDENTIFYING DROP OFF LOCATIONS AND WALKING ROUTES

Using the information collected during the site visit and from teachers, the Expert Advisors to the MAG developed potential walking routes and drop off zones. These proposed routes, shown in figure 6, were presented and discussed with the schools and the Care Zone Community Champions. These discussions highlighted that the proposed routes and drop off locations were suitable, but there was recognition that a number of issues should be considered including obstructions on pavements along the route, such as bins and litter; dog fouling; concerns of road safety particularly at road junctions; and, a need to ensure minimum disturbance for the local residents living near the start of the walking buses.

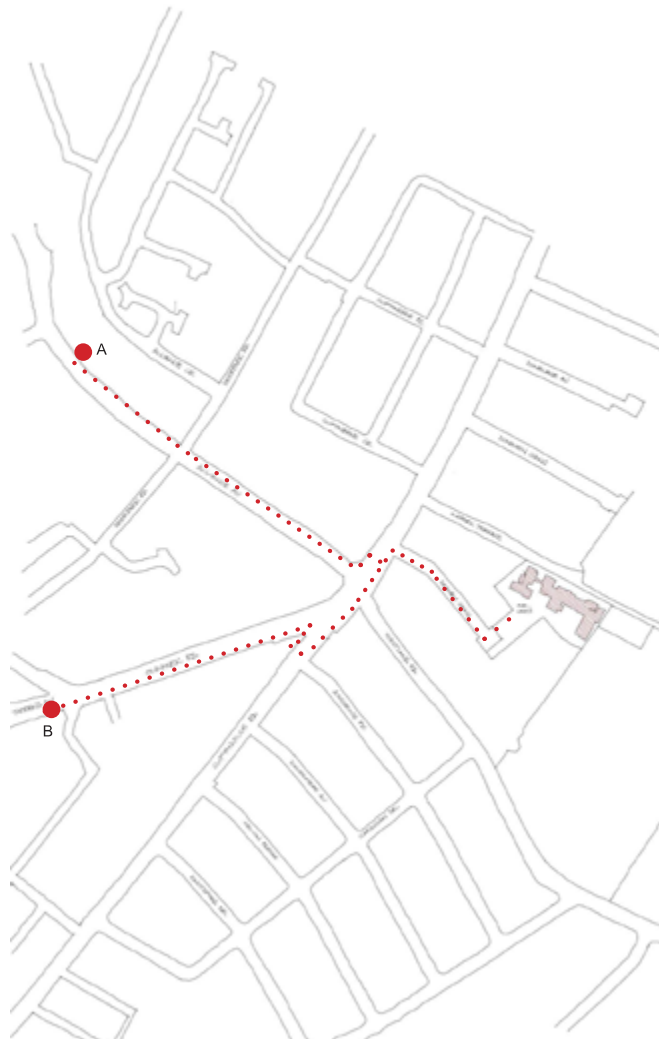
Figure 6: Walking buses route map for Our Lady's Primary School.



A) Walking Bus Stop Shops along Alliance Avenue



B) Walking Bus Stop Junction of Torrens Av + Old Park Av



Images: Garreth McMahon, Expert Advisor, MAG.



Preparing to trial walking buses

During the discussion on the proposed walking buses routes for the schools, the steering group acknowledged that the Walking Bus Pilot was being developed within a constrained inner city built environment. As such, the group preferred to trial the proposed routes, with a view to assess uptake and collect feedback. This would then be used to inform the schools' decision and capacity to commit to providing regular walking buses and using the new or amended routes. The steering group also recognised this information would be useful in helping to inform and justify wider changes to the local walking environment, which, in turn, would help improve the ability and likelihood of children walking to school independently or via the walking buses. The schools agreed to provide walking buses during 'Walk to School' week, 16th – 20th May 2022.

Figure 7: Poster promoting walking to school and joining the walking buses.



Image: YEHA



SUPPORT FROM PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

In preparation of trialling the walking buses, the teachers and Care Zone Community Champions highlighted a need to create further buy-in from parents and local residents. As part of this, the steering group developed a walking buses Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) resource to explain the concept of walking buses to parents, guardians, and teachers, and how to support the Pilot. The steering group also developed a poster promoting Walk to School week and joining the walking buses. These resources along with the proposed start locations and routes for the walking buses were shared with parents and guardians via the schools' social media, website, and mailing lists, and are available to download at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/walking-bus>

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE WALKING BUSES

As part of the Pilot, Belfast Healthy Cities provided resources to support the schools with the walking buses during Walk to School week. This was informed by discussions with the Care Zone Community Champions and teachers. The schools were provided with high visibility jackets, stickers promoting walking to school and walking buses, party blowers, balloons, and paddles printed with 'stop' and 'go'. Actors were also hired to dress as the Wizard of Oz characters and participate in the walking buses. These resources helped to improve visibility of, and generate excitement from the children and adults taking part in the walking buses; incentivise pupils to join and regularly take part throughout Walk to School week; and, to raise awareness of the Pilot amongst local residents and those driving along or near the routes. A break-down of the costs to trial the walking buses during Walk to School week is shown in Appendix 2.

PROMOTION OF THE WALKING BUSES

Throughout the week, members of the steering group prioritised a coordinated approach to promoting the walking buses. The schools were encouraged to take daily pictures of the walking buses and share these via the schools' social media. The Care Zone Community Champions and staff from YEHA and the Care Zone Project developed and shared a short promotional video of the walking buses. The schools also invited local Councillors, the Lord Mayor of Belfast, and local news outlets to join and promote the Walking Bus Pilot. The Pilot received very positive coverage in the local media, with the news article and video generating over 8000 and 3000 views, respectively. The video is available at: <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/walking-buses-three-belfast-schools-24007479>



Uptake and feedback of the walking buses

The three primary schools organised walking buses for each morning during Walk to School week. Our Lady's Primary School and Sacred Heart Primary School were able to provide two walking bus routes each day. Ballysillan Primary School, which already had a walking bus, was able to provide one of the two suggested routes. The existing route was amended so the walking bus was safer for pupils, and more visible to parents. The intention was to try the new walking route which focused on attracting uptake from those that depended on using the car to travel to school, when more staff were able to commit to supporting the walking buses.



RESULTS

Four types of surveys were developed and shared with schools and the Care Zone Community Champions. Examples are provided in Appendix 1. These collected the views of pupils, teachers, parents, and local residents living along the route. Our Lady's Primary School and Sacred Heart Primary School collected and provided feedback, including responses from approximately 300 pupils, 22 parents, and 21 teachers.



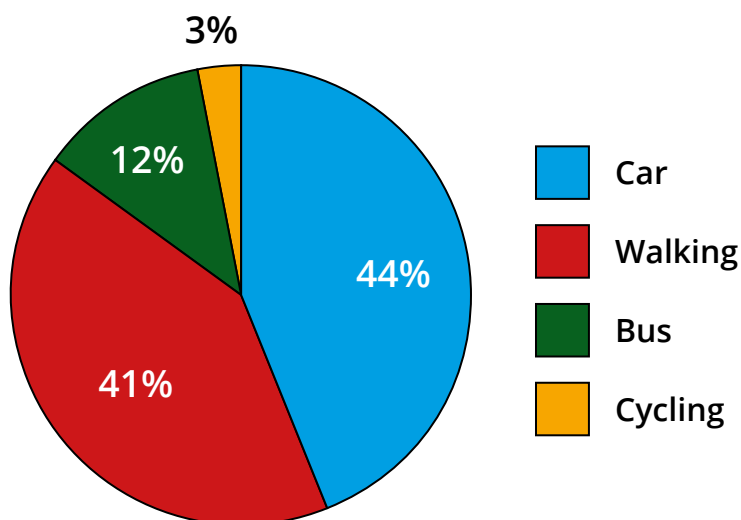
FEEDBACK FROM PUPILS

Teachers asked pupils in a classroom setting to share their views on the walking buses. The questions asked were:

- **What is the age of pupils?**
- **How do pupils normally travel to school?**
- **How many pupils walked to school during Walk to School week?**
- **How many pupils took part in the walking buses?**
- **How many pupils would like the walking buses to continue?**
- **How many pupils thought the walking buses helped them to walk to school?**
- **How many pupils thought taking part in the walking buses made them feel happy, healthy and/or safe?**
- **Do the pupils have further thoughts on the walking buses and how it can be improved?**

From the responses, it was possible to provide a baseline assessment of the normal travel patterns of pupils. As shown in figure 8, there was a high level of car dependency, with the most popular form of transport used to travel to school identified as the car (44%). This was closely followed by walking (41%). A small proportion of pupils from both schools also highlighted they travel to school by bus or by cycling.

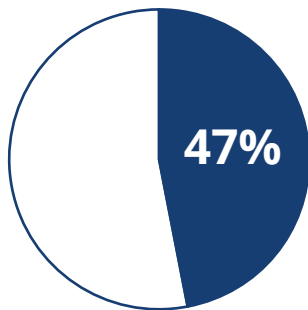
Figure 8: Response from pupils to question 'how do you normally travel to school?'



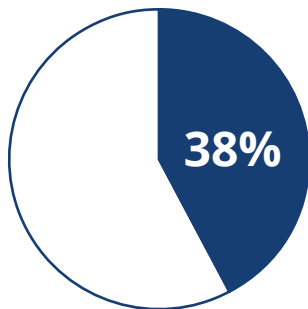


The results highlight very good uptake of and support for the walking buses. As shown in figure 9, almost half of the pupils that responded to the survey stated they took part in the walking buses, more than a third highlighted the walking buses helped them to walk to school, and two-thirds wanted the walking buses to continue.

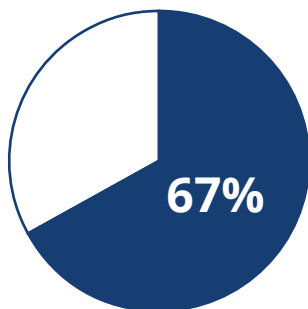
Figure 9: Total and percentage of pupils responding to survey highlighting they took part in the walking buses, the walking buses helped them to walk to school, and/or they wanted the walking buses to continue.



139 pupils...
took part in the walking buses.



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



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



Figure 10, below, illustrates the differences between the two schools in the responses from pupils. Whilst the survey results were limited in identifying the reasons for these differences, it is clear that Our Lady's Primary School, which is also an all-girls school, had more uptake of, and support for, the walking buses. As such, it is worth noting the Walking Bus Pilot particularly supported more young girls to integrate walking as a daily habit.

Figure 10: Results of pupils responding to survey as percentage of the respondents from each primary school.

	Primary School	Percentage
Percentage of pupils reporting they took part in the walking buses	Our Lady's	54%
	Sacred Heart	34%

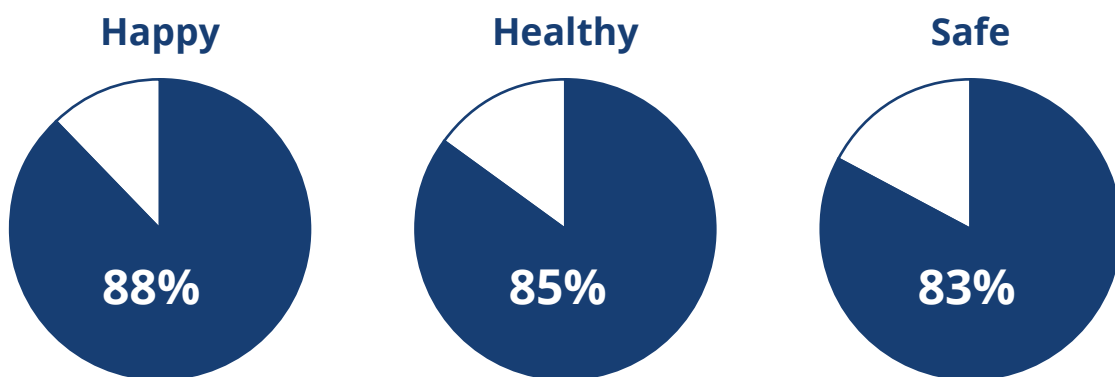
	Primary School	Percentage
Percentage of pupils reporting the walking buses helped them to walk to school	Our Lady's	42%
	Sacred Heart	31%

	Primary School	Percentage
Percentage of pupils reporting they wanted the walking buses to continue	Our Lady's	72%
	Sacred Heart	59%



From the pupils who responded to the survey and took part in the walking buses, the significant majority highlighted taking part made them feel happy, healthy and/or safe, as illustrated in figure 11.

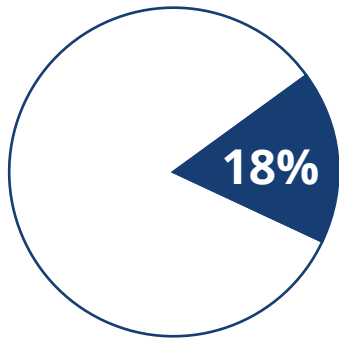
Figure 11: Percentage of pupils that took part in the walking buses and responded to the survey highlighting the walking buses made them feel happy, healthy, and/or safe.



Whilst the results indicated very strong support from pupils for walking buses, approximately one fifth of the pupils who responded to the survey reported either the walking buses did not help them to walk to school (18%), or that they did not want the walking buses to continue (17%). It is worth noting these responses were closely linked to the age of pupils, with this view being shared predominately with those that were also in the older age groups, as illustrated in figure 12.



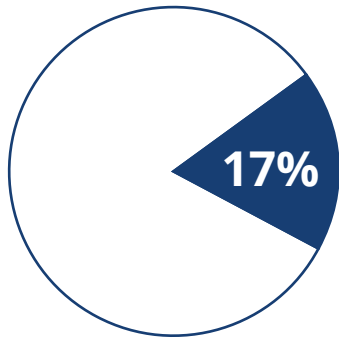
Figure 12: Total and percentage of pupils responding to the survey highlighting the walking buses did not help them walk to school, or did not want the walking buses to continue; and, by age range.



53 pupils...

said the walking buses did not help them walk to school.

of the 53 pupils: **58%** were aged 9-11, **38%** were aged 8-9, **4%** were aged 4-7



51 pupils...

would not want the walking buses to continue.

of the 51 pupils: **74%** were aged 9-11, **20%** were aged 8-9, **6%** were aged 4-7

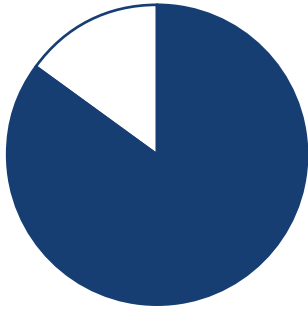
FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

A survey was also provided to parents seeking their views on the walking buses. 22 parents responded to the survey across the two schools. Of those that responded, there was good feedback from parents whose children normally travelled to school by car (40%) or walking (52%).

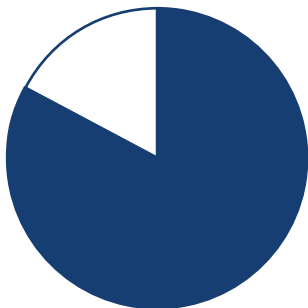
The feedback from parents was very positive. Of those that responded to the survey, 19 (86%) highlighted the walking buses helped their children to walk to school, and 18 (82%) wanted the walking buses to continue, as illustrated in figure 13. For parents, the most significant benefit of the walking buses was that it provided an opportunity for their children to spend time with friends or make new ones (68%), the walking buses were fun or exciting for children (23%), and it encourages more walking, exercise and healthy habits (18%), as shown in figure 14.



Figure 13: Percentage of parents responding to the survey stating the walking buses helped or encouraged their children to walk to school, and/or would like the walking buses to continue.



86% of parents said the walking buses helped or encouraged their children to walk to school.



82% of parents would like to see the walking buses continue.

Parents also provided feedback on how the walking buses could be improved to encourage more children and parents to take part. The most popular response, was that the walking buses worked well. However, parents highlighted support for providing incentives to the children that regularly take part, and findings ways to make the walking buses more fun, such as introducing games to play along the way that would encourage more children to take part, as shown in figure 15.



Figure 14: Feedback from parents on the benefits of the walking buses.

	Total Parents	Percentage
Provides children with an opportunity to spend time with friends or make new ones	15	68%
Fun and exciting for children	5	23%
Encourages walking more, exercise or healthy habits	4	18%
Encourages children to get up and get ready for school and quicker/earlier	3	14%
Encourages children to be independent	3	14%
Saves time and takes pressure from parents in the morning	3	14%
Safe way for children to walk to school	2	9%

Figure 15: Feedback from parents on the the opportunities to improve the walking buses and/or promote greater uptake.

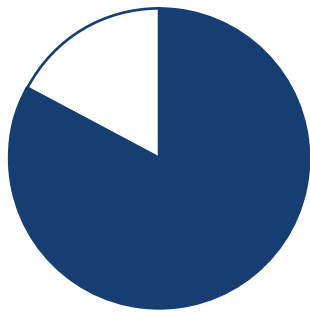
	Total Parents	Percentage
Perfect or works well	7	32%
Provides incentives or rewards for the children that take part	6	27%
Make it more fun or noisy	4	18%
Ask/let parents join in	3	14%
Promote the walking bus more	3	14%
Have more pick up locations or try different route	3	14%



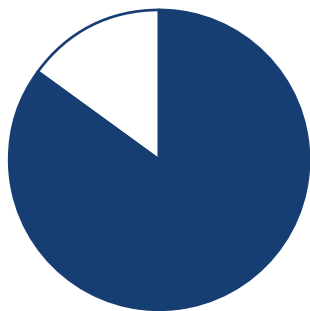
FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS

Teachers also provided feedback on their views on the walking buses, and the support needed moving forward. A template of the survey is provided in Appendix 1. 21 teachers across the two schools provided feedback. The significant majority highlighted the walking buses helped or encouraged more children to walk to school (81%), and that they would like the walking buses to continue (86%), shown in figure 16.

Figure 16: Percentage of teachers responding to the survey highlighting the walking buses helped or encouraged children to walk to school, or would like the walking buses to continue.



81% of teachers said the walking buses helped or encouraged their children to walk to school.



86% of teachers would like to see the walking buses continue.

The most significant benefit of the walking buses, recognised by teachers, was that it encouraged children to walk, thereby increasing their daily exercise and created good habits for an active lifestyle (52%). Similar to parents, teachers also thought the walking buses provided pupils with an opportunity to socialise with friends, have fun and feel happy or excited (38%). Teachers also highlighted the walking buses supported pupils to arrive on time or to attend school (29%), feel more alert and ready for starting school work (19%) as well as noticing reduced traffic around the school (19%), shown in figure 17.

Similar to the response from parents, in order to promote greater uptake, teachers prioritised incentives for pupils who regularly take part (67%), shown in figure 18. Suggestions were prizes, free breakfasts, and healthy treats. Teachers also indicated areas they needed further support to continue or improve the walking buses. Teachers prioritised more involvement from parents, grandparents, and incentives for the teachers that take part, see figure 19.



Figure 17: Feedback from teachers on the benefits of the walking buses.

	Total Teachers	Percentage
Encourages children to walk, exercise and create good habits for an active lifestyle	11	52%
Provides an opportunity for children to have fun socialise and feel happy or excited	8	38%
Improves children's attendance to school and arriving on time	6	29%
Helps children wake up, feel energised and be ready for school work	4	19%
Less traffic around school grounds	4	19%
Provide children with fresh air	2	10%

Figure 18: Feedback from teachers on the opportunities to promote greater uptake of walking buses.

	Total Teachers	Percentage
Incentives and rewards for children who take part	14	67%
More pick up locations or central meeting points	5	24%
Get parents or grandparents involved	5	24%
More promotion of the walking bus and its benefits	5	24%
Make it fun	3	14%



Figure 19: Feedback from teachers on the support needed to continue or improve the walking buses.

	Total Teachers	Percentage
More support from parents and/or grandparents	5	24%
More volunteers/adult support	4	19%
More incentives/rewards for teachers' commitment	3	14%

FEEDBACK FROM RESIDENTS

Local residents living along the walking buses routes were also asked to share their views on the walking buses. Whilst the responses were limited, those that provided feedback highlighted they were aware and very supportive of the walking buses; there was a notable reduction in traffic due to the walking buses; and, that the children seemed happier and more energetic when walking to school.

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE LOCAL WALKING ENVIRONMENT

Following the trial of the walking buses, the steering group, including the teachers and the Care Zone Community Champions, recognised the opportunity and importance of ensuring the walking buses which encouraged behavioural change towards active and healthy travel, are connected to, and supported by, improvements to the local walking environment.

As part of this, the Care Zone Community Champions undertook a walk assessment of the walking buses routes for Our Lady's Primary School. Five aspects of a walk friendly environment were considered. These were perceptions of place, quality of pavements, outdoor safety, seating, and access to and use of shops and services. The Care Zone Community Champions scored each aspect between average and good for both routes. The key issues raised were dog mess, broken glass, cars and bins on pavements, and particularly dangerous crossings along one of the routes, which also lacked a pedestrian crossing. These aspects are shown in figure 20. Walk assessment survey templates are available at: <https://belfasthealthycities.com/walkability>



Teachers at Our Lady's Primary School, and Sacred Heart Primary School also identified locations along the route that could benefit from additional pedestrian crossings that would improve road safety for pupils and local residents. A letter was sent to John O'Dowd, Minister for Infrastructure (June 2022 – present), seeking to consider development of these crossings along the Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road, shown in figure 20. The Minister for Infrastructure responded positively, stating he is fully supportive of the Walking Bus Pilot, and has advised that the Department for Infrastructure will arrange a survey and assessment at the suggested locations to determine the need for controlled crossings.

Figure 20: Examples of pavement parking, bins and street clutter, and dangerous crossings along walking buses routes for Our Lady's Primary School. Locations are Alliance Avenue and crossings along Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road.



Images: Emma McMeekin (Care Zone Community Champion).





Conclusions and Next Steps

Following the Walking Bus Pilot, Our Lady's Primary School continued to provide walking buses until the end of the 2021-2022 academic year, and Ballysillan Primary School continued with the amended walking bus route. All three primary schools indicated a desire to continue using walking buses in the new academic year (2022-2023).

There has been a clear indication from pupils, parents and teachers that the walking buses has helped pupils to walk to school. This has led to positive behaviour change, with the Pilot providing pupils with an opportunity to integrate active and healthy transport as a daily habit. The feedback has also highlighted additional benefits of the walking buses, such as providing pupils with an opportunity to socialise with and make new friends, improving alertness and attendance, and helping to reduce traffic congestion around the schools.

Whilst behaviour change was the focus of the Pilot, it also began to make links to improvements in the local walking environment, and ensuring these are influenced by local residents. The Care Zone Community Champions carried out walk assessments of the routes to highlight issues that can be addressed to improve the local walking environment for everyone, such as the quality of pavements, pedestrian crossings, and road and outdoor safety. This was supported by teachers successfully seeking support from political leaders to provide additional pedestrian crossings along the walking buses routes which would help improve road safety.

Looking forward, members of the steering group highlighted there was a need to support the schools involved to continue to provide walking buses in the next academic year. This will consider the feedback from parents and teachers in relation to the need for more involvement from parents, grandparents and other adults to support the provision of regular walking buses, alongside potential incentives for pupils to help improve uptake.

The steering group, including the Expert Advisors to the MAG, will also continue to promote infrastructural changes to increase the safety of children walking to school.



Belfast Healthy Cities, in partnership with others is seeking to:

- **Expand the Pilot to support more schools across Belfast to introduce and use walking buses as a way to enable active and healthy travel for children; and,**
- **Utilise walking buses as a way to identify and encourage investment in, and improvements to, local walking environments, to help support active travel and healthy behaviour change.**

In addition, the MAG, in partnership with others, will:

- **Provide high level strategic and technical support, particularly in relation to route selection and associated public realm improvements; and,**
- **Provide help in obtaining capital funding for safe, high quality infrastructure, recognising its importance in supporting behavioural change to deliver maximum impact and benefits.**



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Walking Bus - Survey for Teachers

The school has been working with Belfast Healthy Cities to use walking buses as a way to support more children to walk part or all of their journey to school, and help reduce congestion and improve road safety near the school. A walking bus is a group of children walking together to or from school supported by an adult at the front and back of the group. The school had trialled walking bus during walk-to-school week, 16th-20th May. We would be grateful if you could provide feedback on the walking buses by answering the questions below.

1. Does the walking bus help or encourage more children to walk to school?

YES NO

2. What are some of the benefits of the walking buses?

3. How can the walking buses be improved?

4. How can we encourage more children and parents to take part?

5. What support would you need to continue and/or improve the walking buses?

Please circle or write your answers. Once completed please return to:



Walking Bus - Survey for Parents

The school has been working with Belfast Healthy Cities to use walking buses as a way to support more children to walk part or all of their journey to school, and help reduce congestion and improve road safety near the school. A walking bus is a group of children walking together to or from school supported by an adult at the front and back of the group. The school had trialled walking buses during walk-to-school-week, 16th-20th May. We would be grateful if you could provide feedback on the walking buses by answering the questions below.

1. What is your home postcode?

2. How do your children normally travel to school?

WALK CYCLE BUS CAR

3. Did the walking buses help or encourage your children to walk to school?

YES NO

4. What were some of the benefits of the walking buses?

5. How can the walking buses be improved?

6. How can we encourage more children and parents to take part in the walking buses?

7. Would you like the walking buses to continue?

YES NO

Please circle or write your answers. Once completed please return to:



Walking Bus - Survey for Local Residents

The school has been working with Belfast Healthy Cities to use walking buses as a way to support more children to walk to school, and help reduce congestion and improve road safety nearby. A walking bus is a group of children walking to school supervised by teachers or parents. The start of the route is located less than a mile from the school and is a suitable drop-off point for car users. By providing a supervised short walk, children who don't normally walk to school due to issues of living too far, 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. The school had introduced walking buses during walk-to-school week, 16th-20th May. We would like to collect the views of local residents on the walking buses to help inform how the initiative can be improved moving forward.

As a thank you for taking the time to answer these questions there is an opportunity to enter into a draw for a voucher. If you would like to take part in the draw, please provide your telephone or email address below. Please note that this data will be treated as confidential and you will remain anonymous in any analysis.

1. What is your home postcode ?

2. Are you aware of the walking buses?

YES NO

3. What were or could be some of the benefits of the walking buses for local residents and the children taking part?

4. How can the walking buses be improved for local residents and the children taking part?

5. Telephone or email address (optional, for voucher draw)

Please circle or write your answers. Once completed please return to:



Walking Bus - Survey for Children

The school has been working with Belfast Healthy Cities to use walking buses as a way to support more children to walk part or all of their journey to school, and help reduce congestion and improve road safety near the school. A walking bus is a group of children walking together to or from school supported by an adult at the front and back of the group. The school had trialled walking buses during walk-to-school week, 16th-20th May. We would be grateful if you could ask the children to provide feedback on the walking buses by providing answers to the questions below.

1. What is the age range of the children?

2. How many children normally travel to school...

WALK CYCLE BUS CAR

3. How many children walked to school during walk-to-school week (16th – 20th May)?

4. How many children took part in the walking buses?

5. How many children would like the walking buses to continue at the school?

YES NO

For those that took part in the walking bus:

6. How many children thought the walking buses helped them to walk to school?

YES NO

7. How many children thought joining the walking buses made them feel...

HAPPY HEALTHY SAFE

8. Do the children have any other thoughts on the walking buses and how it can be improved?

Please circle or write your answers. Once completed please return to:



Cost Break-down

A break-down of the costs to trial the walking buses. This does not include staff time and in kind contributions from the stakeholders involved throughout the Pilot.

	Costs (approximately)
Wizard of Oz characters joining the walking buses (4 characters for three mornings, one morning at each school)	£2200
Hi visibility jackets with 'walking bus' printed (100 children size, 16 adult size)	£640
Double sided 'stop' and 'go' paddles (pack of 8)	£220
Helium balloons with 'walking bus', 'children walking' printed (100 Balloons)	£120
Stickers printed with 'walk to school' and 'walking bus' (pack of 1000)	£90
A3 printed laminated posters (9 posters, not including design fees)	£60
Party blowers for children (4 packets)	£10
TOTAL	£3340
Average per school	£1113



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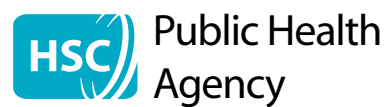
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