Who are Sustrans?

Our vision

A society where the way we travel creates healthier places and happier lives for everyone.

Core Value: Including everyone

We are here for everyone. We create safe and accessible places, value difference, and support everyone to participate as fully as possible in everything we do.

The benefits of walking, cycling, wheeling and healthy places aren't experienced in the same way by everyone.

We involve people with different and seldom-heard voices, to develop solutions that work for everyone.

What have we been doing?

Sustrans and our partners in the UK have been exploring the connection between our transport systems and mental health, and the role active travel plays in supporting mental well-being.

Mental health conditions that affect cognitive and communication skills can prevent travel - and an inability to use transport, or an absence of transport, Can have a profound effect on how connected we feel.

Sustrans wants to ensure that our work best addresses and supports people with these conditions.

Two studies in particular have informed our thinking on this topic–
- *Mental health and travel behaviour*, Mackett (2021)
- *Loneliness and Transport*, Williams (2021)

Results from 'Mental health and travel behaviour'

People reporting mental health conditions identify substantial barriers to travel

- Car driving – **30%** of people reporting mental health conditions identify substantial barriers

- Public transport – **20% to 36%** for different modes

- Cycling – **17%** reported that they are not able to cycle due to their mental health condition

- Walking – **10%** reported that they are not able to walk

Results from cross sectional survey of 385 people reporting mental health conditions

Conditions that affect cognitive skills can prevent travel:
- Concentration
- Interpretation of information
- Confidence in decision making
- Interacting with other people
- Comprehension and memory

The most commonly identified causes of anxiety were…

Interacting with fellow travellers
- e.g. what other people think, having to mix with strangers, how other people will behave

Needing support
- e.g. feeling out of control, feeling claustrophobic and unable to escape, not being able to obtain help

Wayfinding
- e.g. feeling disorientated, getting lost, having to take decisions about where to go, remembering where they are going

Needing to take urgent action
- e.g. failure of the bus, train or car, finding alternative travel options, finding suitable toilet facilities

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5

Policy recommendations…

Improving landmark signposting and visibility → Provide frequent signposts to landmarks, include maps in signage and test with a variety of users

Travel training → Partner with mental health support charities and organisations to develop and provide travel training

Travel assistance → Create 'safe places' along routes, such as nearby shops or offices with trained staff, where people can seek support

Tackling anti-social behaviour → Design out areas where infrastructure facilitates anti-social behaviour and work with local communities

Access to toilets → Improve the number and visibility of public toilet facilities

Co-designing spaces → Co-creating spaces with people who have a mental health condition may lead to well-developed inclusive spaces

Working with public transport providers → Work with public transport to train staff in providing empathetic support

Results from 'Loneliness and transport'

The health risks of loneliness have been equated with the risks from smoking, obesity or alcoholism

Reducing loneliness is now recognised in multiple areas of policy and practice as an important outcome

Research in high-income countries identify two age groups who report higher levels of loneliness reflecting a U-shaped association between age and loneliness -

Systematic literature review of 46 studies relating to transport and loneliness, covering 27 countries globally and approx. 188,850 participants

Late teens/early adults

Older adults

Exploring the connection between loneliness and transport

For most of us, a large part of the dynamic of our social lives depends on getting to places to see the people that we know and love, and accessing the social resources in our communities.

Without the ability to make these connections we risk becoming isolated, and this can lead to feelings of loneliness

How we get around has a fundamental effect on these social connections.

It's influenced by factors such as:
- whether we are able to walk to meet the people that we love
- whether there are convenient links to access the places where we meet people
- whether barriers exist to us accessing these places
- whether we have the means to use the transport modes that work best for us.

The study identified three key themes

1. Transport as a means of **reaching destinations** where you meet with other people

Older life and early parenthood were highlighted as stages of the life course when transportation difficulties were particularly associated with loneliness

2. Transport as a **'third space'** in which you meet other people

Public transport was particularly noted as a space where you can meet other people.

3. Transport as a **positive source of isolation**

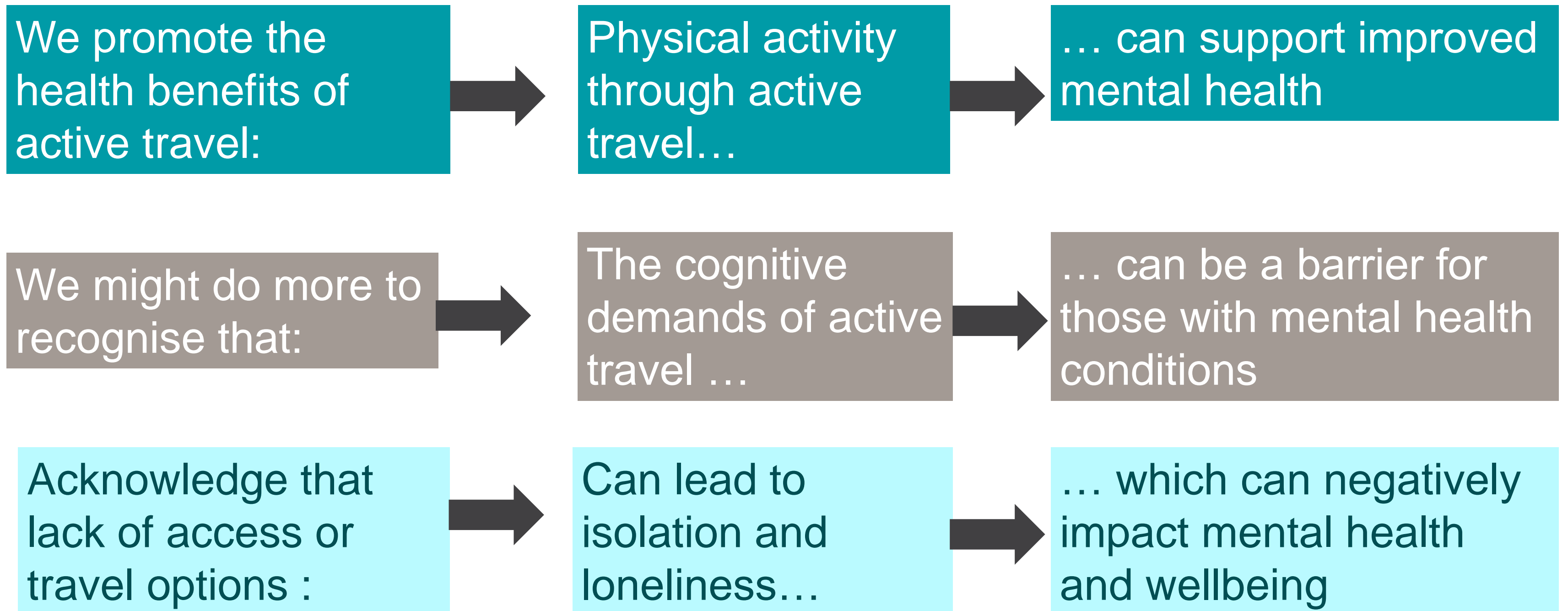Travelling alone can also be beneficial for mental health and wellbeing

Recommendations

1. Interventions are needed to **support people in phases of life** when driving is not an option, such as older age and single parents.

2. Public and community transport, and active travel routes need to **support people reaching friends and family**, not just places of work or retail.

3. Some people value opportunities to **connect** while travelling, while other appreciate the time to **disconnect.** Modes of travel and transport policy should consider both of these desires.

4. Transport policy and interventions should consider all road users not just drivers, with the **assessment of loneliness or social connections** providing valuable insights into the effects of these interventions.

From this research Sustrans understands that mental health and active travel have a complex relationship. We will use this insight to inform our work and promotion of active travel.

| We promote the health benefits of active travel: | → | Physical activity through active travel… | → | … can support improved mental health |

| We might do more to recognise that: | → | The cognitive demands of active travel … | → | … can be a barrier for those with mental health conditions |

| Acknowledge that lack of access or travel options : | → | Can lead to isolation and loneliness… | → | … which can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing |

Thank you for your attention!

For questions:

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Papers discussed in this presentation can be accessed through
https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/research/