

# Transport to Thrive

## Why we shouldn't ignore the transport needs of young people

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Photo: John Linton/Sustrans

“There was this really good job that was paying me way more than where I’m working now... The fact is, the bus system don’t even run early in the morning... it was really emotional... I couldn’t get to that job.” Female from Nottinghamshire

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# Executive summary

## Transport to Thrive

In the UK many disadvantaged groups lack transport choices, including young people aged 16-24. This can reduce opportunities for work and education, reduce access and lead to isolation. There has been little research to identify and understand the transport issues and barriers experienced by young people.

This is why the Health Foundation generously funded the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) and Sustrans to deliver the Transport to Thrive project.

Transport to Thrive aimed to understand and address the transport barriers that many young people aged 16-24 face in accessing life-defining opportunities and experiences. The project worked with a panel of 'Young Advisors' to ensure lived experience informed its research design and recommendations.

This report is the first of its kind to focus on the 16-24 age group who are leaving behind youth and moving into adulthood. It presents new analyses of national travel data, combined with insights from in-depth interviews with young people leaving school and college.



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## The need to improve transport for young people

Transport policy is leaving young people behind as they enter adulthood. The needs of young people are being ignored, and this could have an impact on their ability to access education, work and life opportunities, affecting their health and wellbeing.

Between the ages of 16 and 24, young people go through life-defining experiences and changes. During this time, most will aim to move through education into employment, leave the family home, and become more independent.

Our research found that young people make fewer trips than any other age group. In 2019, 16-24-year-olds made 21% fewer trips compared to working age adults of 25-64 years. This gap has widened over the past 20 years and is likely to particularly affect young people from disadvantaged groups, including people of colour, people from low-income households and disabled people.

We found the likelihood of a young person having a low level of mobility (defined as making 10 or fewer trips a week) depends on their employment status, household income and car access:

- Young people who are not employed or who are students are 2.7 times more likely to have a low level of mobility (compared to young people who are employed full-time).
- Young people from households with the lowest income quintile are 1.4 times more likely to have a low level of mobility (compared to young people from highest income quintile households).
- Young people with no access to a car are 2.1 times more likely to have a low level of mobility (compared to young people who are the main driver of a car).

Lower levels of mobility are often connected to difficulties in accessing and using transport. This has been more widely studied in other groups, for example disabled people, where it is known as the transport accessibility gap.

National transport investment and policy decisions have for many years prioritised private motor vehicles. However, only 40% of young people have a full driving licence in comparison to 74% of adults aged 16 or over. And only 28% are the main driver of a car in comparison to 57% of adults.

This means many young people rely on buses, walking and cycling. Bus services, however, have been cut in recent years and networks for safe cycling where people are protected from motor vehicles do not exist in most parts of the UK.

This can limit the ability of many young people to access services and amenities, including education and work opportunities. The inability to access education, work and other destinations has a significant impact on individuals and wider society. Late adolescence into early adulthood

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is a pivotal time during which young people learn skills, access life-defining opportunities, develop their values and aspirations and expand their horizons to become independent adults. Transport is a crucial part of this.

Denying young people access to transport stifles their development. This has a knock-on impact to our economy and society. Young people are the future leaders of the UK and we should be doing all we can to support them to get on and do well in life.

Young people are more likely to travel using a range of transport options including public transport, walking, cycling and new shared mobility option such as e-scooters. Young people can do the most to enable the government to meet its net zero targets. They are the age group who recognise the need to reduce car use and use more sustainable transport such as walking, cycling and e-scooters, which emit less carbon. They contribute less to carbon emissions, as well as being likely to see the most adverse effects of future climate change, but are not prioritised by current transport policy.

It is essential that we meet the transport needs of young people and other disadvantaged groups. At the heart of this is improving active travel and public transport, in parallel to supporting multi-modal, low car lifestyles for many and thriving futures for all.

## Solutions to help young people

Based on our findings we have made policy recommendations to improve transport for young people. These are primarily aimed at the UK Government, other devolved national governments across the UK and local transport authorities. Our recommendations aim to give young people genuine transport choices to ensure transport no longer holds them back. These recommendations will also benefit others, especially other disadvantaged groups.

### Ensure that the needs of young people are better recognised in transport planning

Young people aged 16-24 are often ignored in transport planning alongside other disadvantaged groups.

Local transport authorities and national governments should act to:

- a. Ensure young people and their lived experience informs transport policy and practice.
- b. Support more research with young people to understand the factors that influence their transport decisions, and the potential for reduced car use through car-delay or avoidance, and new models of car use.

## Provide long term dedicated investment for walking, cycling and public transport

Most transport investment in the UK is spent on long-distance road and rail improvements. We need to change this to invest more in local transport, especially walking, cycling and public transport.

The UK Government and devolved governments should prioritise transport investment to:

- a. Provide free or low cost bus fares and subsidised rail travel for young people.
- b. Create safe and accessible walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure for young people.
- c. Provide financial support to young people who are unable to access the cycle to work scheme to purchase a cycle.

## Help young people to walk, cycle, use public transport and use shared mobility

Support must be provided to young people through improvements to transport policy and programmes to give them genuine transport choices to access the things they need to live well.

The UK Government and devolved governments should:

- a. Devolve powers to local transport authorities to take greater control of buses, setting routes and minimum service levels including for frequency and reliability.
- b. Provide local transport authorities with more powers to introduce single ticketing systems for multimodal journeys, including trains, trams, buses and micromobility options.
- c. Offer cycle training to every UK child to ensure young people have the skills and confidence to cycle.
- d. Introduce legislation and guidance for e-scooters to ensure safety, inclusive access and support reduced car use.
- e. Take action to ensure car share schemes better meet the needs of young people.

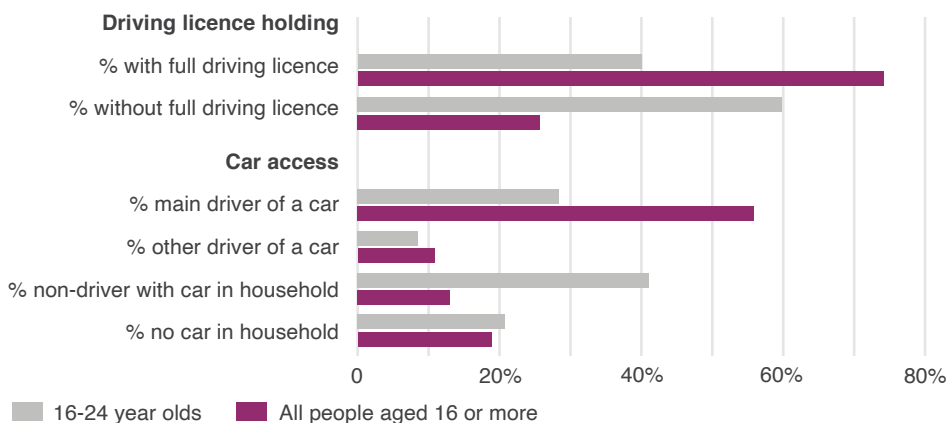
# Section 1: Introduction

## The need for adequate transport in the transition from youth into adulthood

Between the ages of 16 and 24, young people go through life-defining experiences and changes (Jordan et al., 2019). During this time, most will aim to move through education into employment, become independent and leave home. It's also a time for forging key relationships and lifelong connections with friends, family and community. These milestones have been largely the same across generations. But today's young people face very different opportunities and challenges to those experienced by their parents (Duffy et al., 2017). While young people spend more time online, there are still many activities which they will need to travel to and be there in person.

Learning to drive and getting a car was previously seen as a rite of passage for many young people once they turned 17. However, a study for the Department for Transport found this is changing (Chatterjee et al., 2018) and that the percentage of 17-20 year olds with a full driving licence has decreased from 48% in 1992/94 to 29% in 2014.

The most recent data shows 60% of 16-24 year olds do not have a driving licence and 63% are not able to drive – see Figure 1. This highlights that young people require alternatives to the car to independently meet their travel needs.



**Figure 1:** Licence holding and car access (source: National Travel Survey data for England for 2015-19)

Many young people also state they wish to use cars less and use public transport more in the future because of concerns about climate change. A survey undertaken in November 2022 for the Department for Transport found 49% of 16-24 year olds agreed 'In future, I am willing to use cars less to reduce my contribution to climate change' compared to 42% across all age groups. Also 52% of 16-24 year olds agreed they were willing to use public transport more compared to 40% across all age groups (DfT, 2023).

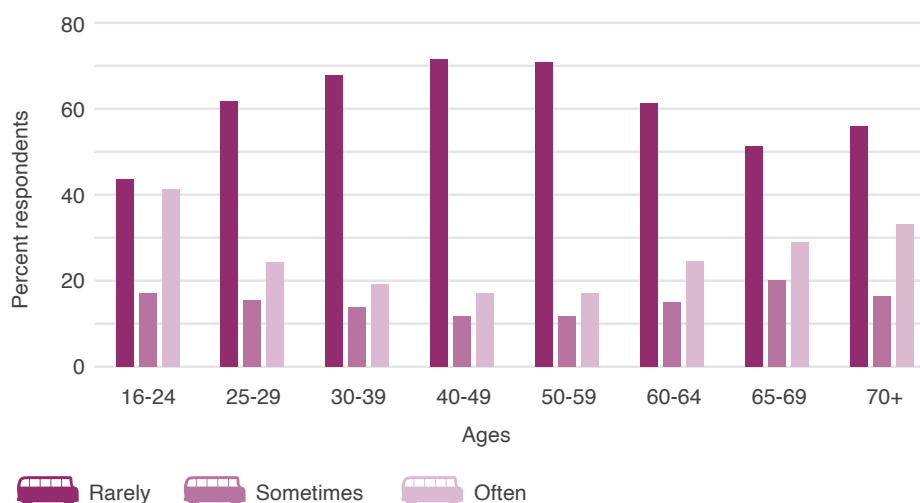
## Young people see transport as a barrier to progressing their lives

Since 2017, the Health Foundation has conducted the Young People’s Future Health Inquiry to understand the factors affecting the future health of young people and use this knowledge to build actionable policy recommendations. During the inquiry’s initial engagement phase, young people from across the UK identified transport as one of five key barriers for connecting with important opportunities, such as work, a chance to develop skills, or places where they can build relationships (Jordan et al., 2019).

The Health Foundation subsequently commissioned Sustrans and the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) to conduct a review of international literature on the role of transport in the lives of young people (Chatterjee et al., 2019a). The review found evidence for several different impact pathways where transport limits access to opportunities but a need for more specific evidence for young people in the UK. This led to the Health Foundation funding UWE Bristol and Sustrans to conduct the Transport to Thrive project. Transport to Thrive aims to strengthen the evidence base and make the policy case for transport that enables young people aged 16-24 to make journeys and reach opportunities that help them to thrive.

## The need for a better understanding of young people’s travel behaviours and experiences

There is a need to better understand how young people aged 16 to 24 are making use of the transport system and what problems they are encountering. Available data only gives a basic indication of this. For example, we know that young people use buses more than older age groups (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Bus use frequency by age (source: Understanding Society data for England for 2014-15 reported in Chatterjee et al. 2019b)

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This is a starting point but does not tell us how travel behaviour changes between the ages of 16 and 24 and how travel behaviour varies across the diverse spectrum of young people. We know from the initial work of the Young People's Future Health Inquiry (Jordan et al., 2019) that many young people see transport as inhibiting their ambitions. But without a sufficient depth of understanding of young people's needs, uses and experiences of the transport system, we cannot make sound judgements on how to enhance transport provision for them.

## Improving transport for young people can also support wider goals

Society has a pressing need to decarbonise travel. Car travel is a major contributor to domestic carbon emissions (DfT, 2021a) and young people use cars far less than older age groups. Enhancements to low carbon transport options could better support young people's travel needs and encourage them to continue to use low carbon alternatives in their later lives. This would also benefit other groups (women, people of colour, disabled people, those with low incomes) who drive less than the general population and want to use low carbon transport options. Alternatives to the car also often involve active travel as part or all of the journey and this is beneficial to longer term health.

## The purpose of this report

The report addresses two research questions.

- How do young people's travel behaviours contrast with older age groups and how do their behaviours change between the ages of 16 and 24?
- What are the transport needs and experiences of young people as they progress their lives between 16 and 24 years of age and what barriers do they face to meeting their needs?

Answering the first question will tell us how young people are currently able to get around with the current transport system. Answering the second question will tell us whether their needs are being met. This is the basis for our recommendations on how transport can support the needs of young people aged 16-24.

**Section 2** of the report explains the data sources and methodology used to generate the new evidence presented in this report. The evidence is presented in **Section 3** under five themes. **Section 4** summarises young people's travel needs based on the evidence and sets out policy recommendations that stem from these. **Section 5** presents our conclusions.



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## Section 2: Data sources and methodology

The report draws on three sources of data:

- National Travel Survey (NTS) data,
- In-depth interviews with school leavers
- Walking and Cycling Index data

	Data source		
Characteristics	National Travel Survey (NTS)	In-depth interviews with school leavers	Walking and Cycling Index
Owner	Department for Transport	UWE Bristol	Sustrans
Period	2015-2019	2022-2023	2021
Description	England's annual household survey of personal travel. Consists of a face-to-face interview and a 7 day self-completed written travel diary.	Biographic interviews with a small group of young people immediately before and after leaving education. Participants were asked about the role of transport in their past, present and future lives.	Survey of walking, wheeling and cycling in 18 urban areas across the UK and Ireland. Asks residents about attitudes and behaviours to walking, wheeling and cycling and travel in general.
Recruitment	Multi-stage stratified random samples of postal addresses across England. Face-to-face interviews.	Interview participants recruited via schools/colleges and fieldwork recruitment agency. Diverse sample sought in terms of location, post-education career plans, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.	Stratified random samples of postal addresses in each city. Invitations by post with 'push-to-online'.
Sample	75,000 respondents of all age groups (~ 800 persons per age year).	18 young people aged 17-18 from Bristol (8), Cornwall (3), Nottinghamshire (1), Pembrokeshire (3) and Greater Manchester (3).	23,000 respondents from 17 UK cities including 808 16-20 year olds and 1243 21-25 year olds.
Purpose of analysis carried out for this report	Understand how travel behaviours of 16-24 year olds compares to older age groups, how it varies within the age group and how it changes between adolescence and adulthood.	Understand the role of transport in the opportunities young people pursue, or are unable to pursue, as they leave education or training at the age of 17 or 18 and before and after this.	Assess differences in attitudes and behaviours to walking, wheeling and cycling between 16-25 year olds and other age groups and gender differences among 16-25 year olds.
Limitations	Unable to consider data for 2020-21 due to pandemic effects on sample/data.	Small sample that may not be typical of wider population of 17-18 year olds. Findings may reflect the particular concerns of 17-18 year olds which differ from people in their early 20s.	Only covers urban residents.
Further information	Used Special Access License request to access restricted variables (yearly age bands, detailed mode/purpose classifications). See DfT (2021b) for methodological details.	Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded before thematic analysis conducted.	See Cessford et al. (2022) for methodological details.

Table 1: Data used in this report

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Our analysis of each data source looked for evidence to answer the two research questions set out in Section 1.

National Travel Survey data was used to go beyond published statistics in understanding how the travel behaviours of young people differ from other age groups, how it varies within the age group and to identify how travel behaviour changes between the age of 16 and 24.

The school leaver interviews were used to understand how transport features as an enabler and barrier at key points in young people's lives when new needs and ambitions arise.

Walking and Cycling Index data was used to understand why young people aged 16-24 cycle less than people younger and older than them.

**The themes presented in the next section of report emerged from the following process:**

1. Initial analysis of each data source
2. Workshop to identify cross-cutting themes across data sets
3. Second set of analysis of each data source focusing on themes identified
4. Second workshop to refine themes and identify key findings and policy recommendations
5. Feedback from the Transport to Thrive young person advisory panel on themes, key findings and policy recommendations
6. Revisions of key findings and policy recommendations



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## Section 3: Findings

This section presents evidence on young people's travel behaviours, needs and experiences under the following five headings.

1. Young people travel less than other age groups and the gap is widening.
2. The availability and cost of transport are limiting factors for young people.
3. Young people have shifting transport needs and use a mix of modes.
4. Active travel and public transport are key for young people's basic mobility.
5. Young people have mixed expectations for future car use.

### 1. Young people travel less than other age groups and the gap is widening

This section looks at the extent of trip making of young people compared to the rest of the population.

#### Summary

Young people aged 16-24 make 14% fewer trips compared to the population average and 21% fewer trips compared to working age adults of 25-64 years. The gaps in trip making have widened in the last 20 years.

Young people also make more trips by public transport than any other age group with four in five young people saying they rely on it.

Lack of financial resources is a key cause of low levels of trip making amongst the young population.

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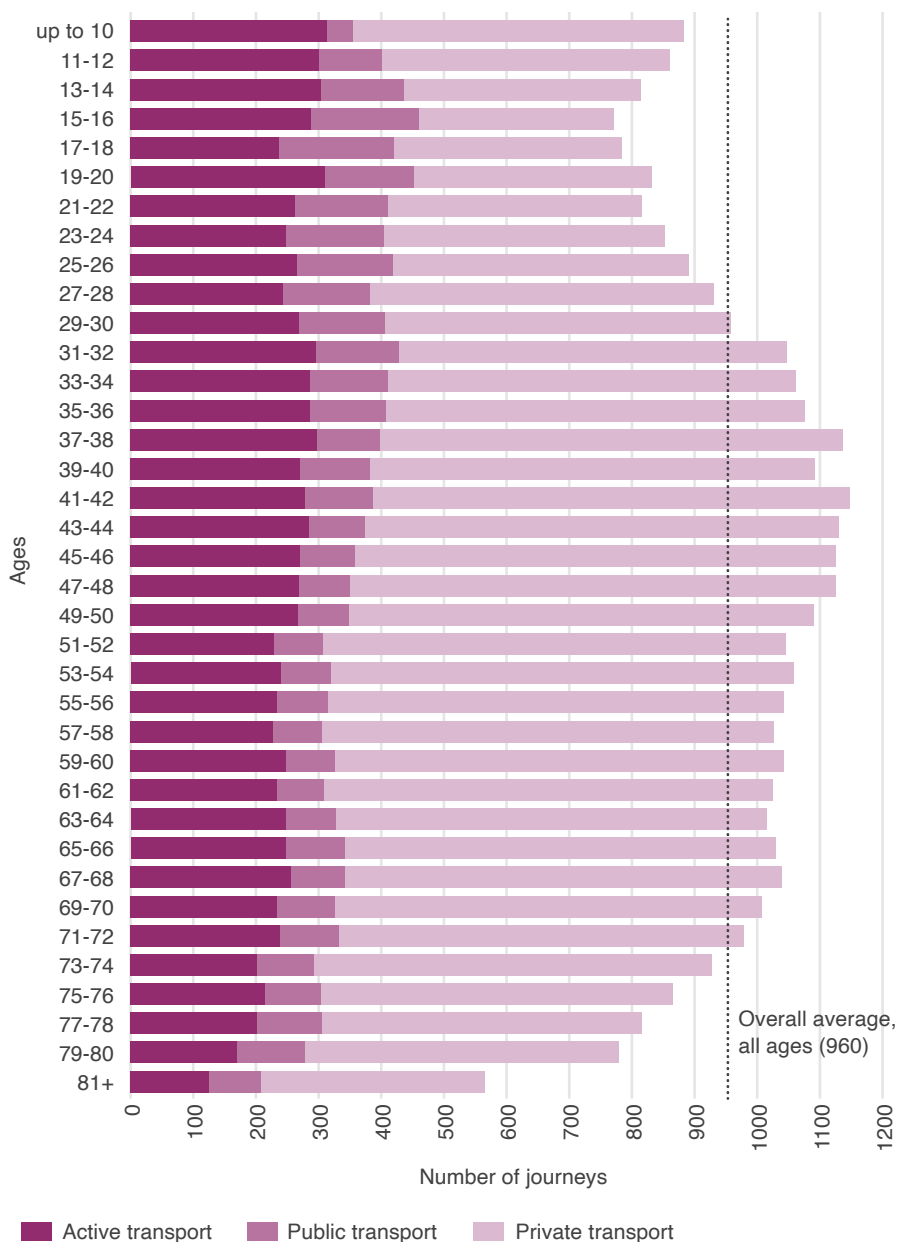
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## Young people make fewer trips than other age groups

We analysed NTS travel diary data to see how the extent of trip making varies with age. Figure 3 presents the average number of trips<sup>(1)</sup> per year for two-year age groups ('age pairs'). It also shows the breakdown of trips by active, public and private transport<sup>(2)</sup>.



**Figure 3:** Average annual number of trips by age (source: NTS data for England for 2015-19)

<sup>1</sup> A trip is defined in the National Travel Survey as a one-way course of travel with a single main purpose.

<sup>2</sup> Active transport – walk, bicycle; Public transport – local bus, coach, rail, light rail, London Underground, national rail, taxi, other public transport; Private transport – car driver, car passenger, motorcycle, private hire bus.

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Figure 3 shows young people on average make fewer trips per year compared to other age groups, apart from those over 80. Trip rates fall as young people enter their teenage years (when they make fewer car passenger trips) before increasing in their mid-20s (when they make an increasing number of car driver trips).

Figure 3 also shows that young people, aged between 15 and 26, make more public transport trips than the rest of the population. Greater reliance on public transport is confirmed by responses to a survey for the Department for Transport which found 40% of 16-24 year olds agreed 'I rely on public transport and would find it difficult not to use it' compared to 28% across all age groups (DfT, 2023).

The differences in overall trip making and travel distance between 16-24 year olds and the overall population in 2019 is summarised below.

16-24 year olds made:	16-24 year olds made:
14% fewer trips overall	13% fewer miles overall
34% fewer trips by private transport	28% fewer miles by private transport
49% more trips by public transport	54% more miles by public transport
1% more trips by active transport	9% more miles by active transport

The difference is even more stark when comparing 16-24 year olds to working age adults aged 25-64 years with the younger group making 21% fewer trips.



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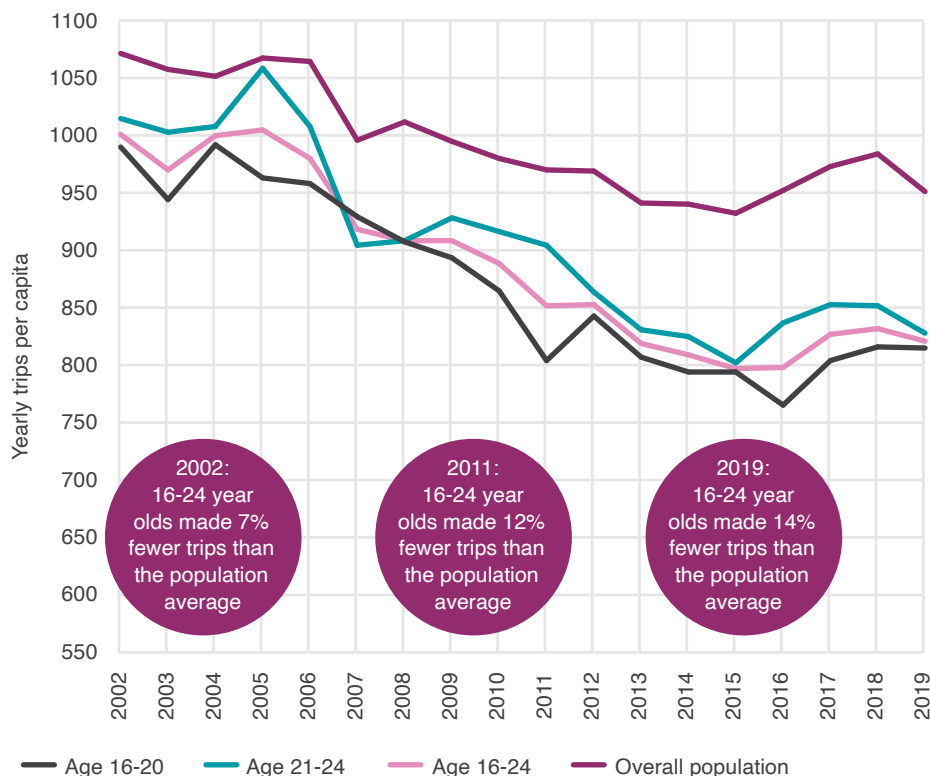
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## The gap in trip making between young people and older age groups has doubled since 2002

It is important to consider whether the lower trip making of young people is a recent phenomenon or has existed for a long time.

Figure 4 shows the trend in trip making for the population of England and for younger age groups. It shows 16-24 year olds made 7% fewer trips per year than the population average in 2002 and the difference has widened over time to 14%. This suggests it is an issue that has risen in significance in the last 20 years.



**Figure 4:** Trend in average annual number of trips (source: NTS data for England for 2002-19)

If we consider the situation in 2021 (where the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic was still present) it is seen from NTS data that 16-24 year olds made 29% fewer trips per year than the population average (36% fewer than working age adults aged 25-64 years). Young people's mobility was acutely affected by the pandemic. It remains to be seen how far it has recovered since then.

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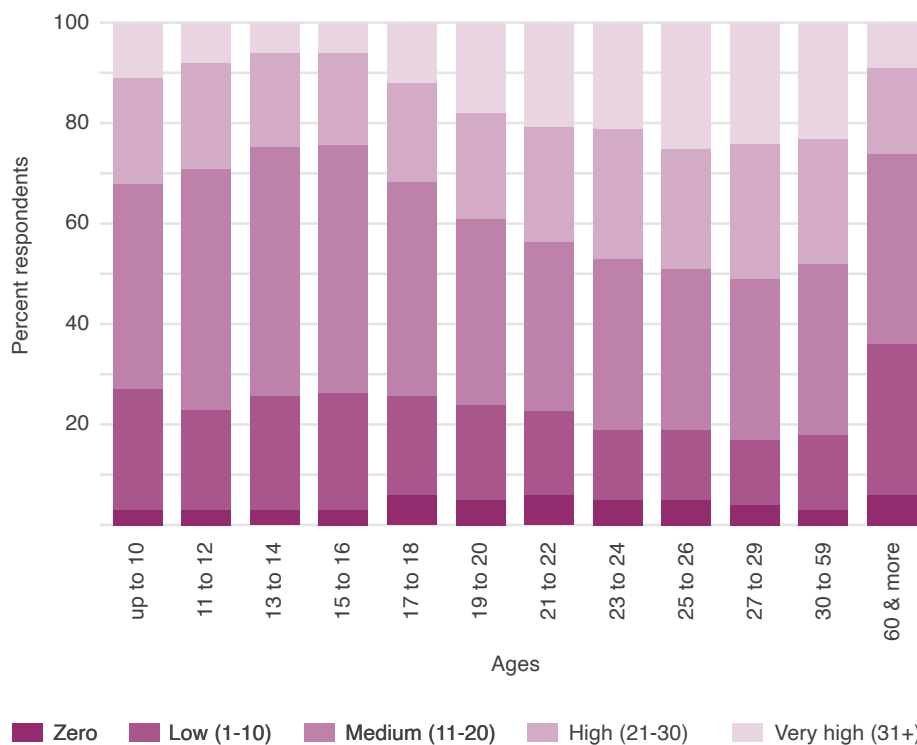
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## Young people who make few trips

We took a closer look at the NTS travel diary data, beyond average trip rates, to identify individual variation in trip making levels. Figure 5 shows the percentage of people in five trip frequency categories (from zero per week to over 30 per week) for age pairs between 11 and 29 (and for under 11s, 27-29 year olds, 30-59 year olds and over 59s).



**Figure 5:** Weekly trip frequency categories by age (source: NTS data for England for 2015-19)

Figure 5 shows the percentage of young people making no trips at all in a week increases from 3% for 15-16 year olds to 6% for 17-18 year olds and stays at about this percentage until the age of 26. This suggests there is a small but noteworthy group within the young population who are not leaving their home at all who may face potential risks to their long term development.

More generally, Figure 5 shows a higher percentage of young people up to 22 years of age are in the lowest two categories of trip frequency compared to adults of 23-59 years of age. Overall, the percentage of 16-24 year olds making 10 trips or fewer in a week is 23% compared to 18% of 30-59 year olds.

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From further analysis of the NTS data we found the likelihood of a young person aged 16-24 making 10 trips a week or less depends on their employment status, household income and car access.

- 2.7 times more likely for 16-24 year olds who are not employed or who are students (compared to 16-24 year olds who are employed full-time)
- 1.4 times more likely for 16-24 year olds in lowest household income quintile (compared to 16-24 year olds in highest income quintile)
- 2.1 times more likely for 16-24 year olds with no car access (compared to 16-24 year olds who are the main driver of car)

This implies that lack of financial resources is a key cause of low levels of trip making, although it should be recognised that causation could also go in the other direction where those with limited need to travel do not have a car.

## 2. The availability and cost of transport are limiting factors for young people

In this section we look at factors that affect the capability of young people to make journeys, primarily based on the school leaver interviews but also referring to evidence from other studies.

### Summary

Young people are often prevented from taking up valuable opportunities such as work experience due to their inability to get to them.

Lack of car access or good public transport has been shown to impact on people's life opportunities.

Where there is a good public transport option, young people are often frustrated with its cost and the impact on their disposable income. This lowers their self-esteem and makes them less inclined to seek and take up economic and social opportunities.



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## The transport system limits the ability of young people to access opportunities

The interviews revealed multiple instances where young people were unable to pursue opportunities due to lack of transport and the inability to make journeys.

### Male from Bristol was unable to take up work experience in graphic design

“There’s a couple of studios around Bristol that were quite hard to get to without a car that I was looking at, but I just wouldn’t be able to get there, and give time from, like, after school or anything.”

### Female from Nottinghamshire was unable to take up a higher-paid job to help finance university

“There was this really good job. The fact is, the bus system don’t even run early in the morning. I was trying to find a way around it but it just wasn’t working. That was just really sad for me because I couldn’t do a job that I’d be earning a lot more than I’m doing now.”

### Male from Pembrokeshire was unable to take up a job in his career area of choice

“I was looking at IT companies but they wanted a driving licence as well. I even applied for [a job in IT] a couple of months ago now and they were like do you have a driving licence? I was like, no. One of them was like ‘Then you might struggle to get in. We’ve had people try to use the buses before...it just doesn’t work. You’ll probably have to drive or have some alternative way to get in.’”

The significance of not being able to drive or not having a good public transport connection was demonstrated in the ‘Access to Transport and Life Opportunities’ study which UWE Bristol conducted with NatGen for the Department for Transport (Chatterjee et al., 2019b).

The study found that having a car makes it 3.8 times more likely that someone is employed, twice as likely that someone can access services and 1.7 times more likely that someone can go out socially.

Having good local public transport was also found to be important in enabling people to access services and social participation. Rating local public transport as good rather than poor makes it nearly 2.8 times more likely that someone can access services and 1.4 times more likely that someone can go out socially.

The study highlighted the risk of economic and social exclusion for people without personal car access or access to good public transport. Young people will be affected by this more than other age groups as they have lower car access and are more dependent on public transport access.

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# The influence of cost on travel choices for young people

Across young people interviewed, the cost of transport was a prominent theme and a major consideration when arranging their travel. The high costs of transport:

- a. Encouraged young people to choose cheaper but less efficient or desirable transport options which reduced their free time.
- b. Reduced the disposable income of those relying on local public transport to access key destinations such as employment and education.
- c. Reduced the likelihood of young people making discretionary trips. They spoke about being selective over social opportunities. The cost of rail was a notable barrier for many in seeking new experiences and pushing their boundaries.
- d. Prevented young people learning to drive due to the cost of lessons, insurance and maintenance.

Young people did not always have access to travel discounts. Where available, discounts did not always meet their needs. For example:

- Rail discounts were not valid at peak times when some young people need to travel to get to university, apprenticeships or work.
- Discounts were only valid for some operators resulting in young people paying more or not travelling.
- Weekly, monthly or yearly passes did not always benefit young people who may only use public transport occasionally.
- Young people are also more likely to not be in employment or on a low income and therefore not have access to the cycle to work scheme to gain discounts on the cost of a cycle and cycle accessories.

### Female from Bristol

“I’ve started an apprenticeship and am commuting every day... I get the train. The train is much quicker than getting a bus. It takes about 20-minutes and the bus is about an hour and a half... it is more expensive but it’s just more convenient.

The train for a return ticket is £12.40 and I’ve got to do that every day. I think obviously cost for the train, it’s almost £200 a month which is a lot. I do have a rail card as well. It doesn’t make a huge difference on how much it is I think because I usually travel at peak times. [The train costs] quite a bit, just under a fifth of what I get a month.”

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## Economic pressures on young people

The transport cost concerns raised by young people in the interviews reflect the wider economic context. Young people are more likely to be students, on a low income (House of Commons Library, 2022) or unemployed (The Health Foundation, 2022). The likelihood of experiencing financial instability increases as they move towards their mid-twenties (Landreth Strong and Webster, 2022).

In 2022, the Transport to Thrive project published 'Fair bus fares for young people', a policy briefing which looked at the availability of bus fare support schemes for young people (Collings et al., 2022). It found a variable picture across the UK but highlighted a small number of schemes where significant support was available beyond 16 years of age. The briefing reported on how these schemes can enhance mobility for young people from all backgrounds by removing cost as a barrier to opportunity and also support them to stay connected to friends, save money and be independent.

### 3. Young people have shifting transport needs and use a mix of modes

This section looks at what types of travel are important to young people and how this changes as they move from adolescence to adulthood. This section uses NTS data to see how young people use different transport modes to meet their travel needs.

#### Summary

Young people's travel needs are shifting. As they experience major life changes and grow in their independence their networks grow and disperse.

As a result, their journey needs change rapidly, and young people are likely to use a wide variety of transport modes.

21% of 16-24 year olds use a combination of private, public and active transport modes in a week compared to 15% of the overall population.

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# Transport plays an important role in young people's personal development

In late adolescence, many young people want to make increasing steps towards financial and social independence. Our interviews with young people highlighted how making journeys independently for the first time plays an important role in personal development by supporting them to:

- a. learn new skills in navigating the transport system
- b. have choice and autonomy in when and where they travel
- c. test their boundaries by making new one-off journeys and seeking new experiences
- d. have a sense of identity

As well as important for developing life skills, these experiences play an important function in building young people's confidence in their capabilities, improving quality of life and enhancing self-esteem.

### Male from Bristol

"I think that [16 onwards is a] specific time that's kind of when you first get your own independence travelling wise. I think mine was at 16, just going to Cornwall on the train by myself... I think it's just a little noteworthy... since then I have continued just to be more independent.

It's more just sort of a little bit more confidence, that I can just do that myself. And also a bit of a lesson of just what to do, like go to the train station, use the ticket, get on the train, show the conductor your ticket, go down the carriages. I think it's just a learning method, that's how I describe it."



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## Young people’s shifting travel needs

Our interviews also revealed how young people’s travel needs change over time due to daily variations, irregular schedules and life events – see Panel below.

Daily variation	Irregular schedules	Life events
<p>Young people made the same trip in different ways. For example:</p> <p>Several young people lived across two-parental addresses and made journeys from different starting points.</p> <p>They used back up modes when bikes broke, public transport services were cancelled, weather was poor, they were running late, or if they needed to carry luggage or equipment.</p> <p>Some chose different ways to travel based on preferences that day. For example, they may opt to travel with friends, not use active travel when they felt tired, or use taxis to help them feel safe.</p>	<p>Many core activities that young people undertake have irregular and changing patterns, such as apprenticeships, shift work or further and higher education courses.</p> <p>Opportunities to socialise are often irregular and last-minute.</p> <p>Some spoke about how their sports clubs changed location regularly depending on events or competitions.</p>	<p>Young people highlighted several major life changes in addition to leaving compulsory education.</p> <p>Many began new education opportunities, left their family homes, or started full time employment. Young people often changed their part-time employment or took up temporary positions.</p> <p>Young people increasingly wanted to seek new experiences in their free time. Through these changes their networks become increasingly dispersed.</p> <p>Their attitudes to and confidence in using transport evolved. In many cases, free time became more limited. These factors altered transport preferences.</p>

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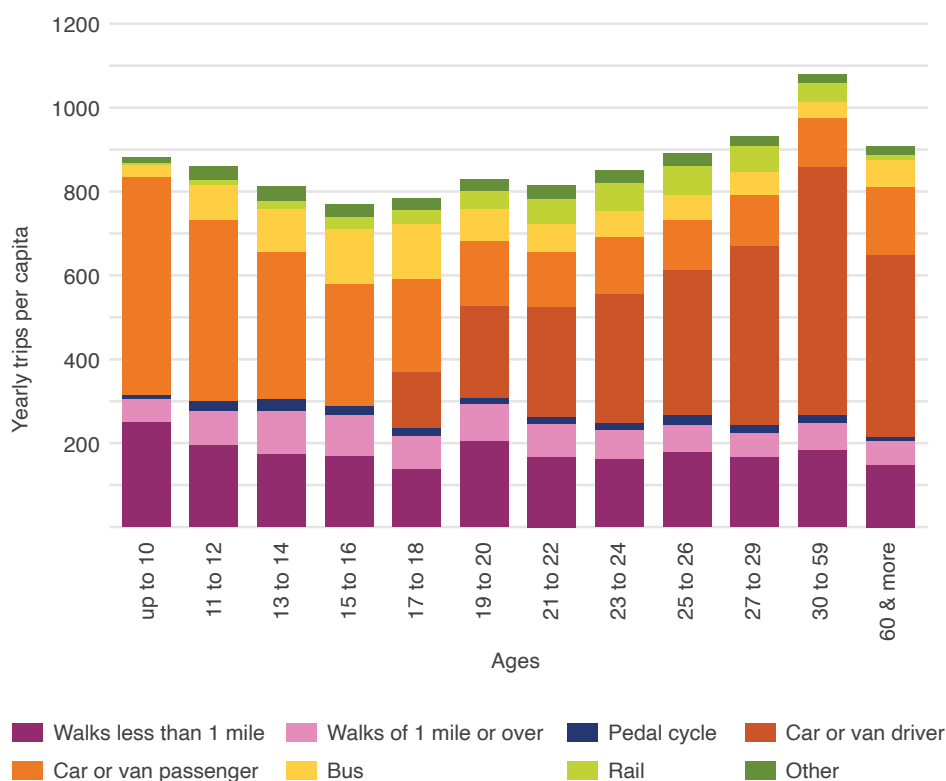
## Young people use a mix of transport modes to meet their needs

Young people are less likely to use a car to meet their travel needs than older adults because they are less likely to have a driving licence and access to a car.

We analysed NTS travel diary data to understand how young people meet their travel needs and to see how the use of different modes varies with age.

Figure 6 shows young people have a more balanced use of different transport modes than older adults. For example, the trips of the 17-18 age group are spread evenly between walking, car driver, car passenger and bus, while the trips of 30-59 years olds are dominated by car driver trips.

A more balanced use of different modes is confirmed by responses to a survey for the Department for Transport. The survey found a higher percentage of 16-24 year olds walked, cycled, got a lift by car and used bus, coach, tram, train and taxi for travel to work in the past four weeks than the overall population (DfT, 2023).



**Figure 6:** Average annual trips per person by mode (source: NTS data for England for 2015-19)

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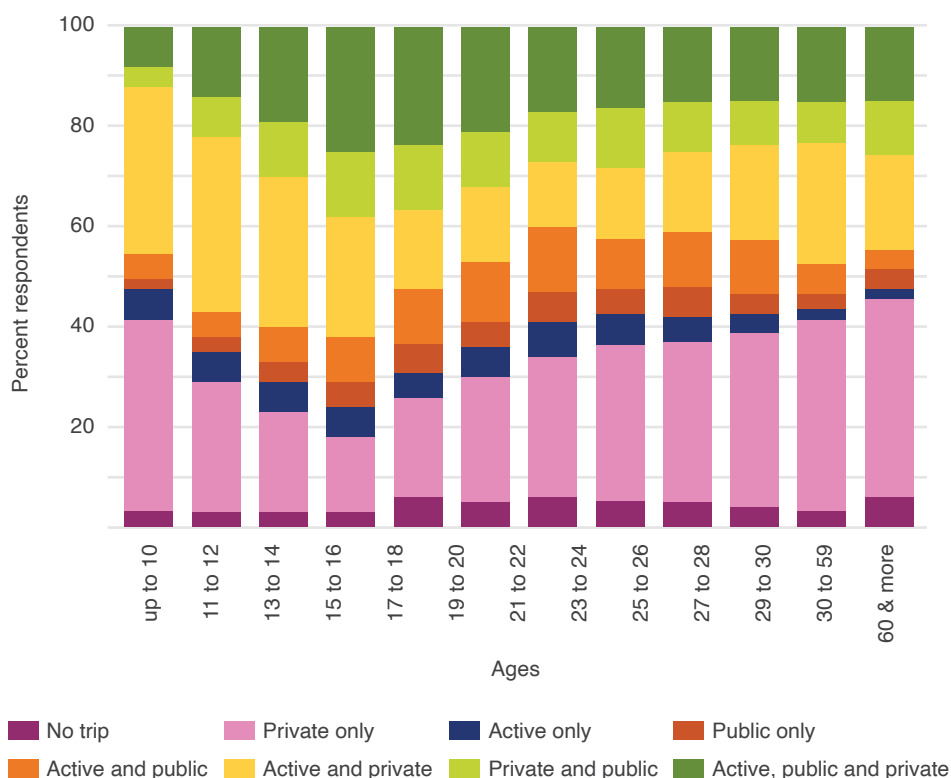
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We took a closer look at the NTS travel diary data, beyond the average mode share, to identify individual variation in mode use. Figure 7 presents the combinations of modes used, in terms of private, public and active transport modes<sup>3</sup>, for age pairs between 11 and 29 (and for under 11s, 27-29 year olds, 30-59 year olds and over 59s). It shows a smaller percentage of young people use private transport only in a week than the overall population (for the 16-24 age group it is 24% and for the overall population it is 36%).

Figure 7 also shows a greater percentage of young people use a combination of private, public and active transport modes than the overall population. For the 16-24 age group it is 21% and for the overall population it is 15%. In general, a greater proportion of young people are in the three multimodal groups involving public transport than other age groups.

Percent respondents by type of modes used at stage level



**Figure 7:** Combination of modes used over a week (source: NTS data for England for 2015-19)

<sup>3</sup>For this analysis we considered travel stages not trips, so as to capture the full range of transport modes used. A trip consists of one or more stages. A new stage is defined when there is a change in the form of transport.

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The following quote from one of our in-depth interviews with school leavers illustrates how one young person uses different transport modes for their out-of-home activities.

### Female from Bristol

“Work is a five-minute walk, probably. It’s very close. Going out on the weekends, I walk almost everywhere.

I get the coach if I’m going to visit my friends who are at university [and] drive with my family to go do things like walks or visit my grandma who lives on the outskirts of Bristol.

[I use e-scooters] a couple of times a month. I started using them for fun. If my night ends before 12, and I don’t want to walk home, that’s a nice way for me to get home quickly.

[I used to] do stuff like get an Uber if it’s late at night [because of] fear of walking on my own.”

## 4. Active travel and public transport are key for young people’s basic mobility

Young people use a greater mix of transport modes than other age groups. In this section we examine the role of walking, cycling and public transport.

### Summary

With low levels of car access, young people need alternative transport options that give them control, flexibility and speed.

Access to good walking, cycling and public transport options is vital to help young people access educational and employment opportunities.

There are low levels of cycling across the population (including young people) and the potential benefits of cycling are not being realised.

Young people identify lack of access to cycles and safe cycle routes as barriers to cycling.

## Young people have insufficient control over their mobility

Many young people expressed frustration in their interviews with the lack of control they had over their mobility at a time they wanted to move towards independence. Interviews showed that even in households with a family car most young people did not want to ask parents for lifts. In several cases, parents had commitments which reduced their ability to offer a ‘taxi service’.



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Young people highly value public buses for giving them a degree of independence. However, for many this is compromised by unreliable services which can make them late for work and education. Slow services and multiple interchanges also make journeys long and unpleasant. Analysis of NTS travel diary data shows the average journey length on public transport is 6.0 miles for 17-18 year olds compared to 4.5 miles for 30-59 year olds.

Interviews highlighted examples of limited control damaging young people's self-esteem and reducing their confidence to engage in employment and education.

### Male from Greater Manchester

"I'm at university and I'm travelling there from Stockport... I have been punished getting two or three trains, maybe, to university. Even to the point where I'm thinking of moving out next year just because it can be pretty horrible."

### Male from Pembrokeshire

"I suppose with the job it was kind of my first step into the industry. We'd drop my brother at half eight. We'd then get into town. It's about a 20, 30-minute drive to get to town. It's now twenty to. It's about a 25-minute cycle, but they wanted us answering the phones at nine. I don't think I made the best first impressions because of being late. I wanted to be on time. I was trying to cycle fast but obviously there's a limit to how fast I can cycle and there wasn't any other viable option."

## Walking and public transport are integral for young people accessing educational and employment opportunities

The interviews highlighted how walking and public transport provide access to valuable opportunities that shaped young people's aspirations, built their knowledge and skills and boosted their CV.

### Female at university in Greater Manchester

"The public bus is really important to me because if it didn't exist I don't think I'd have gone to the high school and sixth form that I went to. I don't think I would have been able to get a lift back then because my mum wasn't driving and my dad would get the bus to work as well. I would have gone to a local comprehensive school and the school I went to was a grammar school so it pretty much set me up to getting into uni as well."

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### Male on a course in film in Bristol

“[I walk to college] most days. Sometimes if it is raining or if I am tired or if it’s slightly late, I would get a bus.

I have got some opportunities through [college]: I am starting to do some work on film sets which I am really enjoying.

It’s a big step towards what I wanna do. First, it gave me a bit of confidence, like what I want to do is achievable. Second, it’s an experience which is quite interesting. Third, the director liked me and they referred me onto another [opportunity] which is great!”

### Female on an apprenticeship in Bristol

“I had a job last year... part time... [I got] the bus most of the way and then I walk for about 10/15 minutes.

I definitely gained a lot of confidence through doing that because I was in customer service. I was speaking to people all the time which is something I might have struggled with a bit before.

I think it helped me going into my apprenticeship. It was a bit scary at first but having those skills helped me to make friends and form connections with people.”

### Male at university in Manchester

“My family doesn’t own a car so if we are to go into city, we will have to use a train. Obviously, my family who all live in Swindon, we have to get a train for that. And then when I was looking on universities I had to take the train to there as well.”



Photo: Alan McAteer/Sustrans

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## Cycling offers advantages over other transport options but has low take-up

The interviews highlighted how cycling offers a solution to a lack of control for some young people. It gives them flexibility over the time they travel and the destinations they can reach. In some cases, this allowed young people to engage in volunteer and employment opportunities that would not have been possible otherwise.

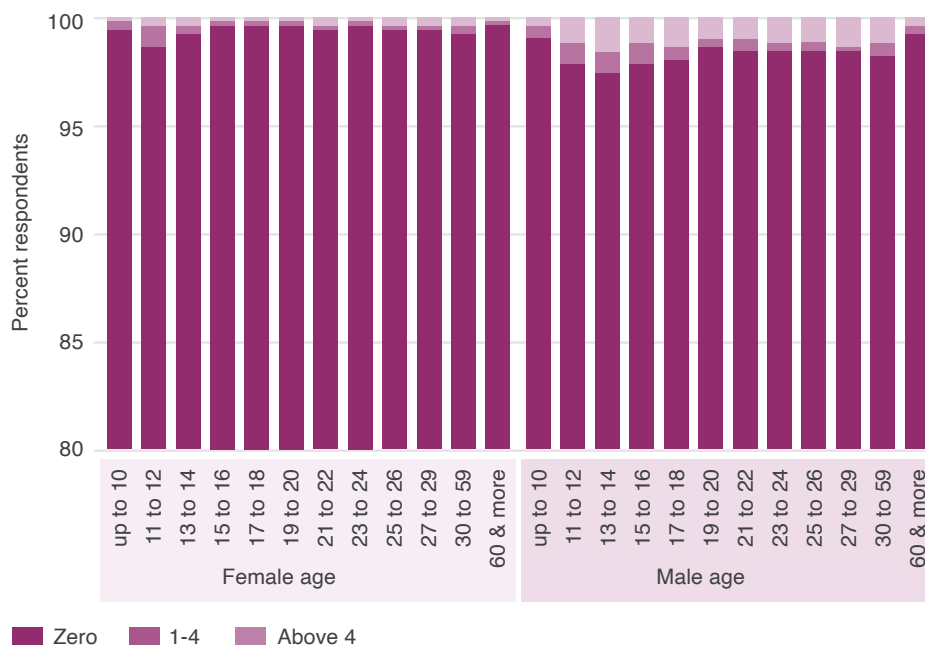
### Male from Bristol

“All of this academic year I went round the local primary school every Friday to talk about science and do experiments with them. That was really good fun and science communication or research is something that I’d to do in the future.

Having a major cycle lane meant that I could get there super quickly. I’d get home and it would be like ten past three and I need to get there in 20 minutes... being able to know that in two minutes I can be there was really good for me.”

Cycling can be an important option for supporting a low-car lifestyle, providing efficient mobility and a way of travelling greater distances than on foot. However, the potential for this solution has not yet been realised as most young people (and people in all age groups) do not cycle as shown in Figure 8 below.

Percent respondents by weekly cycling frequency by gender



**Figure 8:** Weekly cycling stages by age (source: NTS data for England for 2015-19)

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Overall, 5% of 16-24 year olds reported any cycling in a one week period. Only 2% of young women aged 16-24 reported any cycling compared to 9% of young men. From further analysis of the NTS data we found the likelihood of a young person aged 16-24 cycling at least once a week is related to car access as well as gender.

- 3.0 times more likely for 16-24 year old men to cycle (compared to 16-24 year old women)
- 2.5 times more likely for 16-24 year olds with no car access to cycle (compared to 16-24 year old main drivers of car)

This suggests it tends to be young men without car access who turn to cycling which offers greater control, flexibility and speed over other transport options. The benefits of cycling could be enjoyed by larger numbers of the young population as discussed next.

## Access to cycles and safer cycle routes will encourage more young people to cycle

Analysis of the Walking and Cycling Index data shows that lack of access to a cycle is a big factor for young people. 68% of 16-25 year olds (compared to 55% for all people) report access to a bicycle would be useful to cycle more. 59% of 16-25 year olds (compared to 49% of all people) say that access to a cycle share scheme would be useful to cycle more. The Index found that lack of access to a cycle is an issue equally for men and women.

About a third of young people aged 16-25 say they do not cycle and would like to (36% of women and 31% of men). These young people say the following would be very useful in helping them cycle more:

- More traffic-free cycle routes (62% of women, 49% of men)
- Signposted local cycle routes along quieter roads (51% of women, 44% of men)
- 20 mph speed limit (28% of women, 24% of men)

It is clear that safer cycle routes with less traffic are particularly important to encourage young women to cycle.

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## 5. Young people have mixed expectations for future car use

To finish we reflect on what young people said in the school leaver interviews about their future transport aspirations.

### Summary

There were mixed opinions on the role the car would play for young people in the future. Many saw multi-modal futures that included car use.

Key motivators for car use were freedom and autonomy, accessing destinations not possible without a car and negative experiences of alternatives to the car.

Many motivations for car ownership and use could be reduced by having better public, active and shared transport provision.

### Young people's motivations for car driving

The interviews revealed the following motivations for driving a car in the future.

#### Independence and control

Young people want more control over their mobility and not to 'live by a timetable'. They did not want to rely on others.

Some reported that they would like to use cars to improve the reliability of their journeys when travelling to work and education activities.

#### Negative experiences of car alternatives

Whilst young people relied on public transport, regular poor experiences, particularly due to unreliable and inefficient local buses and rail strikes, decreased their desire to travel these ways in their future.

#### Unlocking destinations and experiences which are difficult without a car

Examples included visiting friends or family that live in different parts of the country, daytrips, or accessing remote areas with poor public transport.

#### Necessary for basic mobility

Particularly for young people living in rural areas, a car was the only realistic option they had for making journeys in their future.

#### For future employment

Many aspired for careers where car-based 'business travel' might be necessary.

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## Young people have mixed opinions about car use

Most young people interviewed saw car use as part of their future mobility. However, interviews highlighted different views on the role the car would play.

Most young people interviewed wanted cars to fulfil only a subset of their journeys. Some saw public transport as a good option for accessing employment in urban centres but wanted access to a car for leisure journeys or to stay connected to family and friends. Others saw a need for a car to pursue their career ambitions but wanted to use other modes for leisure trips or longer journeys.

Many spoke about their desire for active transport to form part of their future mobility and cited its health, efficiency and enjoyment benefits. Several spoke about using car hire or car share schemes rather than owning a car. A minority saw car use as the sole solution to their mobility.

The findings from the interviews indicate that many motivations for car ownership and use could be reduced by having better provision for public transport, active transport and shared transport. And as we mentioned in the introduction, one half of young people say they are willing to use cars less and public transport more to help tackle climate change.



Photo: Jon Bewley/Sustrans

## Section 4: Time to act

This section presents policy recommendations to meet the transport needs of young people based on the evidence presented in Section 3.

Our recommendations aim to give young people genuine transport choices to ensure transport no longer holds them back. These recommendations will also benefit others, especially other disadvantaged groups.

### 1. Ensure that the needs of young people are better recognised in transport planning

#### Summary

Young people aged 16-24 are often ignored in transport planning alongside other disadvantaged groups.

Local transport authorities and national governments should act to:

- a. Ensure young people and their lived experience informs transport policy and practice.
- b. Support more research with young people to understand the factors that influence their transport decisions, and the potential for reduced car use through car-delay or avoidance, and new models of car use.

#### **Local transport authorities and national governments should ensure young people and their lived experience informs transport policy and practice.**

Young people aged 16-24 are often ignored by transport planners and decision makers, despite facing similar challenges and barriers to other disadvantaged groups. As evidenced in this report, transport policy is leaving young people behind. Young people make considerably fewer trips than other working age adults and this gap is widening, limiting their life opportunities.

While many young people work in the transport sector, very few are in decision-making or leadership positions, such as politicians, councillors, and directors of local authorities and private transport companies.

Representation and engagement should be at the core of transport planning to ensure young people's needs are understood and met. Examples of this could include setting up paid panels of young people to inform investment plans and policy, better engagement with young people when designing schemes and services, and commitment to long term plans to diversify the transport sector.

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**Local transport authorities and national governments should support more research with young people to understand the factors that influence their transport decisions, and the potential for reduced car use through car-delay or avoidance, and new models of car use.**

As young people move into adulthood, their transport needs and attitudes develop and change. This group are more likely than any other to rely on a range of modes to meet their shifting needs.

Similar to other disadvantaged groups, there is a gap in the evidence and research on young people's travel behaviours. Young people's travel behaviours are different from older age groups, but we currently do not know enough about this and how best to support them.

Young people are least likely to have car-dominated lifestyles. Their sustainable transport behaviours are compatible with the Government's pressing targets to tackle the climate emergency for which transport is the primary contributor of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. There are also opportunities to better understand and support young people to be less car dependent than previous generations. This would support the UK's transition to net zero.

We therefore recommend further research in both these areas to help increase opportunities for young people and ensure their transport choices fit with the need to reduce emissions.

## 2. Provide long term dedicated investment in walking, cycling and public transport

Most transport investment in the UK is spent on long-distance road and rail improvements. We need to change this to invest more in local transport, especially walking, cycling and public transport.

### Summary

The UK and devolved governments should prioritise transport investment to:

- a. Provide free or low cost bus fares and subsidised rail travel for young people.
- b. Create safe and accessible walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure for young people.
- c. Provide financial support to young people who are unable to access the cycle to work scheme to purchase a cycle.

To help raise funding for walking, wheeling cycling and public transport, the UK Government should review all major road schemes against its legal targets for net zero. Cancelling road schemes that are not consistent



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with the UK's net zero obligations would free up billions for more sustainable transport which would support more people, especially from disadvantaged groups.

### **The UK and devolved governments should provide free or low cost bus fares and subsidised rail travel for young people at all times of the day.**

Young people are often on a low income through low-paid and part-time work or not in work. They also receive decreasing financial support from family as they move into adulthood.

The high costs of public and shared transport, along with taxis, are a deterrent to travel. Expenditure on transport can reduce disposable income. Current pricing and discount structures often fail to acknowledge the transport needs of young people, which require flexible and multimodal travel options.

Young people tell us they rely upon bus services more than any other transport mode. We recommend the UK and devolved governments make local bus use free for all young people. Examples where the cost of bus travel for young people has been removed or reduced, show that these schemes can help unlock young people's mobility and 'level the playing field' by removing cost as a barrier to mobility (Collings et al., 2022). In Scotland, the Government introduced free bus travel for under 22s. After a year the uptake for all those eligible aged 16-21 was 71.5% (Transport Scotland, 2023).

Existing rail discounts, like the young person's railcard, are hugely useful but often exclude peak period travel, making it more expensive for young people to access work and educational opportunities. Complex pricing structures within and between public transport operators, areas and modes can also deter young people from using them. Similarly, uncertainty around the cost of journeys when using shared mobility schemes can make them a less accessible option for young people.



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Therefore, we recommend that UK and devolved governments review rail subsidies with a view to ensuring they still apply during the morning peak period where travel is often essential for many young people to access education or work.

A recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) study found that investing more in public transport could give the economy a £50bn annual boost and create 140,000 new transport jobs (TUC, 2023), whilst additionally helping the country meet its net zero targets.

### **The UK and devolved governments should invest in safe and accessible walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure for young people.**

Young people need a door-to-door transport option that gives them control and flexibility around how they travel without the need to own a car whenever possible. Active travel can give flexibility over when and where young people travel which public transport cannot always provide. Active travel plays an important part of almost all public transport journeys, for example walking to the bus stop or cycling home from the train station.

Walking is good for shorter trips or ones that include bus and rail journeys but there are many barriers that prevent people from walking. These include fears around road and personal safety, inaccessible footways, lack of good crossing points and poor public transport integration.

Cycling and the increasing use of e-scooters can offer efficient mobility over greater distances, either alone or as part of a multimodal journey using public transport. A high uptake of e-scooters by young people in the national rental e-scooter trials in England suggests they are an important beneficiary. The largest trial took place in the West of England where 49% of e-scooter trips were by 18-24-year-olds in (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

However, most young people and in particular young women, do not cycle or use an e-scooter. Young women are underrepresented as e-scooter users. In the West of England trial, males made 2.8 times more e-scooter trips than females. A provisional driving licence is needed to rent an e-scooter which creates an additional barrier for potential users.

A step-change, similar to what we are beginning to see in Scotland, in investment in safe and accessible walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure for young people would increase active travel levels and help meet the current UK Government target of 50% of journeys walked or cycled in urban areas in England. Investment could be used for protected cycle paths, off-road routes, low traffic neighbourhoods, banning pavement parking, introducing side road crossings and making 20mph the default speed limit across built up areas.

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## The UK Government should provide financial support to young people who are unable to access the cycle to work scheme to purchase a cycle.

While cycling is comparatively far cheaper than public transport the initial outlay to purchase a cycle and accessories can be prohibitively expensive for many young people.

The Government's cycle to work scheme has helped two million people access a cycle. Participants save between 32% and 42% by not having to pay tax and National Insurance on the cost of a cycle and accessories. Four-in-five participants say they cycle every week, up from just two-in-five before joining. However, it is a salary sacrifice scheme that excludes anyone not in employment, people on low incomes and the self-employed.

Young people are less likely than any other working age groups to be in full time employment and earning enough to qualify for the cycle to work scheme. We therefore recommend the UK Government reviews other options for people, including young people, to access financial support to purchase a cycle.

## 3. Help young people to walk, cycle, use public transport and shared mobility

### Summary

Support must be provided to give young people genuine transport choices to access the things they need to live well through improvements to transport policy and programmes.

The UK and devolved governments should:

- a. Devolve powers to local transport authorities to take greater control of buses, setting routes and minimum service levels, including for frequency and reliability.
- b. Provide more powers to local transport authorities to introduce single ticketing systems for multimodal journeys, including trains, trams, buses and micromobility options.
- c. Offer cycle training to every UK child to ensure young people have the skills and confidence to cycle.
- d. Introduce legislation and guidance for e-scooters to ensure safety, inclusive access and support reduced car use.
- e. Take action to ensure car share schemes better meet the needs of young people.

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### **The UK and devolved governments should devolve powers to local transport authorities to take greater control of buses, setting routes and minimum service levels, including for frequency and reliability.**

Local public transport is critical to young people's day to day mobility. It is often the only option to facilitate access to education, employment, and social opportunities. However, negative experiences stop young people from accessing what they need and motivate car ownership. Public transport is often costly, unreliable, and slow. Services can be infrequent and do not run early or late, especially in suburban and rural areas.

Young people rely on local public transport and need an efficient, affordable and reliable network. Local transport works better in London, Nottingham and Edinburgh where authorities have greater power or public ownership of bus companies. Recent changes in Greater Manchester mean the city region now has powers over coverage, fares and timetabling.

Local transport authorities need greater powers to improve the passenger experience and extend and improve bus and tram networks. This would help meet the ambitions outlined in the Government's national strategy for buses in England, improve services for young people and encourage more users and have positive economic benefits for bus companies.

### **The UK and devolved governments should provide more powers to local transport authorities to introduce single ticketing systems for multimodal journeys, including trains, trams, buses and micromobility options.**

As young people move into adulthood, their transport needs and attitudes develop and change. They are more likely to rely on a range of modes to meet their needs.

This means that young people need active, public and shared transport provision in parallel and with better integrated public and shared transport information, booking and payment systems. However, there is currently a lack of integration across modes, operators and between cities especially with fares across providers and locations.

Giving powers to local transport authorities, like those in London, to introduce single ticketing systems for multimodal journeys would improve integration and affordability across public transport networks. This should include trains, trams, buses and micromobility options to best support the diverse transport needs of young people.

### **The UK and devolved governments should offer cycle training to every UK child to ensure young people have the skills and confidence to cycle.**

Many young people have never learnt to cycle or are not confident enough to cycle where they live, especially on roads. Some people may have migrated to the UK from countries where cycling is less practiced, or not

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practiced amongst certain groups, such as women. They may be less aware of how to find support and language barriers may exist when trying to access help.

Training should be available to all children in the UK, ensuring accessibility is considered for children who may need additional support or resources, such as an adapted cycle. Cycle training, including Bikeability, should also be offered to all adults, including young adults. Better infrastructure alongside the confidence and provision of cycles will help young people become more independent and access what they need to live well, including education and career opportunities.

### **The UK Government should introduce legislation and guidance for e-scooters to ensure their use is safe, inclusive and supports reduced car use.**

It is currently illegal to use e-scooters across the UK, except from on private land and through a number of trials taking place in English cities and towns. However, as e-scooters are not illegal to sell their use has risen rapidly across the UK, especially amongst young people, particularly young men.

E-scooter use has the potential to offer similar benefits to young people as cycling does, except for the benefits from physical activity. This includes economic and environmental benefits of reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The UK Government needs to introduce legislation for e-scooter use to ensure it is safe, inclusive and supports reduced car use.

### **The UK and devolved governments should take action to ensure car share schemes are widely available for young people.**

Whilst public and active transport has the potential to fulfil the needs of many young people for most of their journeys, many young people will need to use a car at certain times and for certain journeys. Many young people live in rural areas and will need to make journeys that are not supported by local public transport, or occasionally need to transport things when taking bulky items to a recycling centre or moving home.

Access to a car without the need for car ownership could support young people to fulfil experiences that they value highly but which would not be possible otherwise. Such journeys include visiting remote areas for recreation that are not accessible by public transport. Being able to make these journeys is a motivator for young people aspiring to car use.

Participation in car share schemes is associated with low levels of car use (CoMoUk, 2022), however some car share schemes do not offer membership to people younger than 21 and some only accepting people over the age of 25. Exploring young-person friendly models for car sharing could help negate the need for car ownership and support Government targets to address the climate emergency by discouraging private use.

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## Section 5: Conclusions

Transport policy is leaving young people behind as they enter adulthood. Young people aged 16-24 year made 21% fewer trips compared to working age adults of 25-64 years in 2019 and this gap has widened over the past 20 years. This is limiting their access to education, employment and social opportunities. National transport funding disproportionately serves private car use over public and active transport which would benefit young people and climate targets.

Young people contribute the least towards carbon emissions. Their voices are now at the forefront of climate activism and they are the future leaders that will need to navigate the climate crisis. Despite this, they currently experience multiple barriers to transport and opportunity from a society that promotes car use.

Late adolescence into early adulthood is a pivotal time during which young people learn skills, access life-defining opportunity, develop their values and aspirations, and expand their horizons to become independent adults and transport is a crucial part of this. However, inadequate mobility not only reduces their ability to access work whilst young, but can damage their long term economic, social and health prospects.

With increases to the cost-of-living, there is a risk that the transport accessibility gap for young people will widen alongside other disadvantaged groups such as people of colour, people on low income, disabled people, and women.

It is essential that we better meet the transport needs of young people and other disadvantaged groups. At the heart of this is improving active travel and public transport in parallel to support multi-modal, low car lifestyles for many and thriving futures for all.

If we can get this right there are multiple benefits for young people, wider society and the economy.

Improving transport for 16-24-year-olds will support social and economic outcomes for the next generation of leaders and for society as a whole. It will directly help young people already feeling the impacts of the cost of living more acutely than the rest of the population. Investing in public transport, walking and cycling will also act to reduce motivations for car ownership among young people supporting our net zero targets.

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# About Transport to Thrive

## What is Transport to Thrive?

Transport to Thrive aims to make the policy case for transport that better enables young people aged 16-24 to make journeys and reach opportunities that help them to thrive. The Transport to Thrive project is delivered by the University of the West of England and Sustrans.

This project is funded by and part of the Health Foundation's Young people's future health inquiry. The Health Foundation is an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and health care for people in the UK.

## With thanks to our expert advisors

**Young Advisors** are a group of young people aged 16-25 years who provide expertise to the Transport to Thrive project through their lived experience.

**The Board of Policy Advisors** provide policy insights and expertise, with representation from Department for Transport, Transport Scotland, Urban Transport Group, CoMoUK, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Edinburgh Napier University and Sustrans.



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