

Clearing the path: walking's key role in low-carbon cities

Presentation for 2WalkandCycle Conference 2024.
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this presentation is made in a personal capacity.

About Living Streets Aotearoa

Living Streets Aotearoa



www.livingstreets.org.nz

Living Streets Aotearoa is the New Zealand organisation for people on foot, promoting walking-friendly communities. We are a nationwide organisation with local branches and affiliates throughout New Zealand.

We want more people walking and enjoying public spaces be they young or old, fast or slow, whether walking, sitting, commuting, shopping, between appointments, or out on the streets for exercise, for leisure or for pleasure.

The importance of walking and walkability is officially recognized, at least in theory ...

- Based on 2015 household travel survey data, almost one in five journeys (17%) are taken on foot.
- Walking is at the top of Waka Kotahi's Sustainable Transport Hierarchy ... but what does that mean in practice?
- The importance of walkable catchments is enshrined in the National Policy Statement on Urban Development – but that does not necessarily translate into a focus on actual walkability.
- Waka Kotahi has recently updated its Pedestrian Network Guidance, but a lot more needs to be done to ensure that the industry (transport professionals, contractors etc) knows and follows this guidance. And the fact that it's guidance, not standards, reduces its effectiveness.

... yet walking is often marginalised. Why?

- Everybody – or very close to everybody - can walk. This is great, but it means walking doesn't have a clearly identifiable, visible identity or a commercial infrastructure.
- 17% of walking journeys in NZ are taken on foot (2015 figures) yet walking was poorly funded by comparison with other modes even before the present Government came to power.
- Both walking and cycling are important, but not the same. However, they are often lumped together into active modes and treated as if they are the same.
- By being placed into the same activity class, “walking and cycling infrastructure”, in the National Land Transport Programme, walking & cycling are put into competition for scarce funding.
- Creating new footpaths should be an integral part of building new roads, but it appears the new draft GPS prevents footpath construction being paid for out of roading funding. The new draft GPS also allows for the removal of infrastructure that reduces vehicle speeds and hence increases pedestrian safety..

New urgency since I proposed this presentation

- If the policy direction and funding arrangements set out in the draft GPS are maintained in the final version, that is bad news for pedestrians and for our cities and communities.
- The Government is also putting forward fast-track legislation to enable it to push through projects, including many roading projects, without adequate scrutiny or accountability.
- Let's not pretend life was perfect under the previous Government, in terms of either policy or delivery, but significant initiatives to improve walking, such as the National Walking Plan, were at least on the table.
- Faced with a Government which has removed the GPS goal of reducing transport emissions and has chosen to invest massively in new roading, I believe advocates for walking, cycling and public transport need to find ways to work together productively.

Making space for walking – literal and figurative

- The use of street space is highly contested. Every time something other than pedestrians (for example, hire e-scooters, parked vehicles, shop signs) is allowed to block the footpath, that's a loss for walking – and for walkable cities.
- Living Streets Aotearoa says firmly that footpaths are for feet (and for people using low-speed mobility devices such as wheelchairs and mobility scooters).
- The provision of safe, separated footpaths for pedestrians goes hand in hand with safe, separated infrastructure for cyclists and micromobility users. We should collectively be pushing for more of the road space to be allocated to non-car modes.
- Shared paths are bad for both pedestrians and cyclists. “Overall, perceptions of safety are strong with 86% viewing walking as safe in their region. However, safety perceptions drop when walking at night (52%) and around cyclists on shared paths (56%)”
– see <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/walking-cycling-and-public-transport/walking/walking-standards-and-guidelines/pedestrian-network-guidance/walking-in-new-zealand/walking-activity-and-trends-in-new-zealand/>

What needs to be addressed for better walking: 1

- Ensuring that both walking and cycling are well funded, and that funding for one mode doesn't come at the expense of the other – along the lines of the Irish proposal to allocate a minimum 10% of the transport budget to walking and 10% to cycling (see <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>)
- Getting scooters off footpaths. LSA is not calling for rental scooters to be banned, as has happened in Paris. Instead, we want them to go in dedicated 'third lanes' for micromobility users and cyclists, and be stored in dedicated, off-pavement parking spaces.

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What needs to be addressed for better walking: 2

- Low traffic neighbourhoods work, as a recent UK study shows – see <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/mar/08/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-generally-popular-report-ordered-by-sunak-finds>. The political opposition to them is based on performative “culture wars” politics, not evidence.
- Installing more raised pedestrian crossings. The presentation by Rolly Rowland of Waka Kotahi to LSA’s 2023 Walking Summit makes their value clear (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cydKM4Xzpsg>) as does Australian evidence that raised platforms at pedestrian crossings lead to casualty crash reductions of 63%, while raised platforms at mid-blocks reduce casualty crashes by 47% (see <https://archive.acrs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/JACRS-MAY2017-Vol282.pdf>, p. 25)

What needs to be addressed for better walking: 3

- The speed reduction regulations introduced by the previous Government were a strong step in the right direction & should be strengthened. Auckland Transport says:

“We know that where safe and appropriate speed limits have been implemented injuries and deaths have reduced. Data from the first phase of speed limit changes in June 2020, showed a 30 percent reduction in deaths and a 21 percent reduction in serious injuries. In comparison, across all Auckland roads for the time period (24 months), road deaths increased by 9 percent.” (<https://at.govt.nz/projects-roadworks/vision-zero-for-the-greater-good/safe-speeds-programme/safe-speeds-the-reasons>)

- The risk to pedestrians isn't only from increased speed – it's from the increased mass of vehicles. Overseas jurisdictions are taking steps to address this: “From parking fees in Paris to registration fees in Washington D.C., forward-thinking cities are slapping heavy penalties on heavy vehicles.” (see <https://reasonstobecheerful.world/can-cities-drive-subs-off-their-streets/>). New Zealand needs to do likewise.

If activists and advocates want better cities, we need to build on areas of agreement...

- Almost everything discussed on the previous three slides is good for cyclists and micromobility users as well as pedestrians.
- Safer speeds, low-traffic neighbourhoods, safe and separated infrastructure, fewer heavy and oversize vehicles on our streets, and not having to compete within the same funding pool would benefit all of us. And raised pedestrian crossings also help to slow down traffic.
- The present Government's proposed transport policies, if enacted, put at risk the work of every organisation that wants our streets to be safer and better for people on foot, people on bikes, public transport users, and micromobility users – and puts children, elderly people, and people with disabilities at especial risk.

... and productively manage areas of disagreement

- But pretending that we'll always agree isn't helpful. Sometimes, advocates for different modes will have different interests. Agreeing on everything isn't realistic, but we do need to ensure that we manage disagreements well, and make them about policies, not personalities, wherever we can.
- I know of at least one example from the last few years where disagreements between advocates in Facebook groups have quickly come to the attention of senior politicians in Wellington. That doesn't help the cause of either walking or cycling.
- Perhaps a good starting point could be a Memorandum of Understanding between different sustainable transport groups – that's something I'd be happy to explore further.
- I'm keen to hear your thoughts! Contact me on president@livingstreets.org.nz

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