

JONATHAN BRAY



Transport and the pursuit of happiness

Public transport makes a huge contribution to the nation's mental and physical wellbeing, so how can our sector play the health card?

► The pursuit of happiness may be a fundamental of the US constitution but it's not something that's been written into less lofty documents - like local transport strategies. However, perhaps it will be in the future. This is because the health of the nation is becoming a more pressing concern: given falling levels of physical activity and the widespread prevalence of mental health problems.

As more people live lives which alternate between a keyboard, a TV remote and a steering wheel, levels of physical activity have declined. This matters because physical inactivity gives rise to a host of debilitating, if not fatal, conditions that has led us to a place where it is the cause of one in six deaths, and the cost to the NHS of tackling the outcomes of physical inactivity is £1bn a year.

Meanwhile, the modern world is not only marooning more people on their couches, driving cushions and chairs, it is also contributing to the fact that one in four of us will experience a mental health problem in any given year. Beyond the medical terminology (and the translation of the problem into pound signs) is the idea of wellbeing, or more prosaically, happiness.

So, what does this mean for transport? A lot. Exercise and feeling healthy makes people happier, social interaction makes people happier than social isolation (by and large!) and being able to access opportunities and activities does likewise. Transport can help with all of this. And of course this can all be

translated back into pound signs in terms of greater productivity, less sickness and so on.

It's no surprise that active travel (walking and cycling) is particularly good for you. In fact, in terms of improving public health, encouraging people to walk and cycle is arguably the most effective tool there is because it is something that people are able to easily incorporate into their daily routines, meaning they are more likely to keep up the habit.

What's perhaps more surprising is how well encouraging greater use of public transport scores for improving public health. An American study found that people who use public transport spend a median of 19 minutes daily walking to and from public transport. Some 29% of people achieved the required 30 minutes or more daily physical activity solely by walking to and from public transport. Meanwhile a research study of 9,000 people in England found that those who used their free bus passes were 25% less likely to be obese in 2008 than those who did not.

Indeed there's a nice read across between the latest public health advice which is that adults (aged 19 to 64) should aim to take part in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more. In other words a gym is inessential but that bout of physical activity which is the walk to and from the station or bus stop every day could be just the job.

And there's more. My colleague at Urban Transport Group, Rebecca Fuller, translated

the New Economics Foundation's five ways to wellbeing into a lovely infographic (see the page opposite) on how public transport contributes to mental wellbeing, because not only does it help keep people active it also allows people to connect with others, take notice of the world around them, keeps people learning and provides opportunities for people to give. All of which, the experts say, is the stuff of a happy life.

Above and beyond all of this is that if public transport (alongside greater promotion of active travel) is seen as part of a wider push to make our cities cleaner, greener and more attractive places to visit, enjoy, live, work and invest in, then it will be seen as part of the solution rather than something that has to be accommodated. The public transport sector has made great play in recent years of its green credentials as well as the progress it's made on accessibility for disabled people. Although clearly it would be asking for trouble to suggest that all public transport journeys promote a sense of transcendent wellbeing, a new frontier may be how public transport can play a part in promoting healthier lifestyles - particularly around the idea of the value of short bursts of physical activity as part of daily routines - as well as how public transport sits alongside, and complements, active travel.

A tale of two sectors

Now we've established what the transport sector can do for the health sector the question is what can health do for transport? The answer is more. A lot more.

One practical example is Total Transport. As an aside, if there's one thing I've done that might have some longevity it might be coining the phrase 'Total Transport' (inspired by the Dutch idea of Total Football, where any player could play any position, which linked back into the way in which the Netherlands pioneered the pooling of cross sector transport budgets and fleets). Anyway fast forward to 2016 and what I'm hearing is the lack of sustained and meaningful participation by the health sector is what's holding back more than one of the pilot projects.

There's a lot of people with good Total Transport plans that are tearing their hair out because although local Patient Transport Services are neither good (including poor scheduling and performance, often with

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over specified vehicles) or efficient - there is no real interest or intent to let go. A combination it seems of a number of factors which include the health sector speaking a different bureaucratic language to the one used by the transport sector; bureaucratic resistance on the grounds that ‘Turkeys don’t vote for Christmas’; and that it’s just not seen as a priority by decision makers in the health sector. After all, people join the health service to fix people and save lives, not fix transport schedules and talk about bus networks. Either way it’s not good enough as the prize of getting more involvement by the health sector in Total Transport schemes could, if scaled up, make huge savings as well as provide a better service for users alongside more sustainable wider local transport networks.

More widely there’s the question of how the wider contribution that the transport sector makes to health might be better captured. Public transport gets people to healthcare appointments (and reduces the cost of missed appointments), provision for active travel makes people healthier and less reliant on the health service, concessions for older and disabled people gets people out of their houses and makes them happier and fitter. Yet transport pays for these interventions and the health service (with its better protected budgets) gains.

There have been some moves in the right direction on bringing these two sectors closer together. For example more of the advice and position papers coming out of the top tiers of the health sector recognise and reflect the importance of transport measures to health, and there is a HEAT analysis tool which is being used more frequently to appraise the health benefits of transport interventions (we’ve pulled together more on this and the wider evidence base on transport and health at this hub on our website: www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/public-health).

However, the idea of prevention being better than cure doesn’t make for a dramatic episode of *Casualty* and nor is it yet what collectively gets the NHS out of bed in the morning. So getting health funding for transport interventions that might prevent the cost of later expensive treatments is not so easy. At the same time there’s no doubt that the health dimension to the transport debate is becoming

How public transport contributes to mental wellbeing

Connect with people around you



Public transport connects people to family and friends, whether on the vehicle itself or at the places it links people to.

Simply talking to people at the bus stop can make a big difference to people who might otherwise be lonely or isolated.

Furthermore, by reducing congestion we can create environments where it is easier for people to interact socially and which promote outdoor play.

Be active



Walking or cycling to and from public transport can help meet recommended daily levels of physical activity.

Public transport also connects people to sports and leisure facilities.

Take notice



Travelling on public transport allows time to think, look out of the window and notice the world around us.

Keep learning



Time spent on public transport can be used to read, listen to a podcast or do work. Some buses even have onboard libraries!

Public transport also enables people to access school, college, university and other learning opportunities.

Give



The communal experience of public transport presents opportunities to do positive things for other people - such as giving up a seat for someone else or helping someone with a buggy get off the bus.

Public transport also connects people to volunteering opportunities.

More information

Based on the 'Five ways to wellbeing' devised by nef (2008).

For more on how bus travel contributes to health and wellbeing see pteg (2013) The Case for the Urban Bus <http://www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/types/reports/case-urban-bus-economic-and-social-benefits-investing-urban-bus>

For more on transport and health see our Public Health resource hub <http://www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/public-health>



more prominent and it’s possible that the battle against obesity and physical inactivity could become as big in the future as the public health push on smoking cessation has been hitherto. The positive side effects for the transport sector should contribute to *Passenger Transport* readers’ sense of professional wellbeing. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.