

One thousand more Year 7s could cycle to school

MK Schools Travel Survey Report, March 2023 -

by Tom Bulman and Tim Coffey, Cycling CitizensMK

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Mural at Stantonbury School, created by local artist John Watson in 1978

1. Summary

This report is based on responses from nearly 2,500 students across most MK secondary schools.

It focuses on the Year 7 data which indicates that half of them are currently being driven to and from school and that a significant number of these students could be cycling.

The main reason students give for not cycling are perceived journey time and safety. What would encourage them is cycling with friends, safer redways and roads and less to carry to and from school.

These are areas on which schools and MK City Council can take action. This report makes recommendations for action.



Cycling Citizens MK supporters at City Status Celebration Ride, July 2022

2. Introduction

This research was initiated by [Cycling CitizensMK](https://www.citizensmk.org.uk/campaigns/cycling-citizensmk), a developing alliance of pro-cycling civil society and business institutions whose goal is to increase cycling to school and work in Milton Keynes¹.

Why? Because using road vehicles accounts for nearly one-fifth of greenhouse gas emissions², has increased by 30% in the last 30 years³, is greater in MK⁴, and MK City Council has pledged to become carbon-neutral by 2030. Central and local government are seeking ways to reduce this impact of emissions and also enhance the positive benefits of active travel on health and well-being⁵.

The survey sought to gain solid data on how students travel to and from school and to explore the reasons for their choices. In particular, we wanted to find out how many students who could be cycling, don't and what is the best way to encourage students out of cars and onto cycles.

This report aims to inform the active travel policies of MK schools and MK City Council. Its intended readership is MK school headteachers and governors, council cabinet members and officers; also local and regional news providers.

In the context of global warming, the declining physical health of young people and a cost of living crisis, it is time to do more to promote cycling to school through an evidence-based approach.



Headteacher and students at [Watling Academy](https://www.watlingacademy.org.uk/), October 2022

¹ www.citizensmk.org.uk/campaigns/cycling-citizensmk

² www.bbc.com/future/article/20200317-climate-change-cut-carbon-emissions-from-your-commute

³ www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/roadtransportandairemissions/2019-09-16

⁴ 41% of greenhouse gas emissions in MK are from transport, which is above the England average of 36% (Vital Signs, MK Community Foundation, 2023).

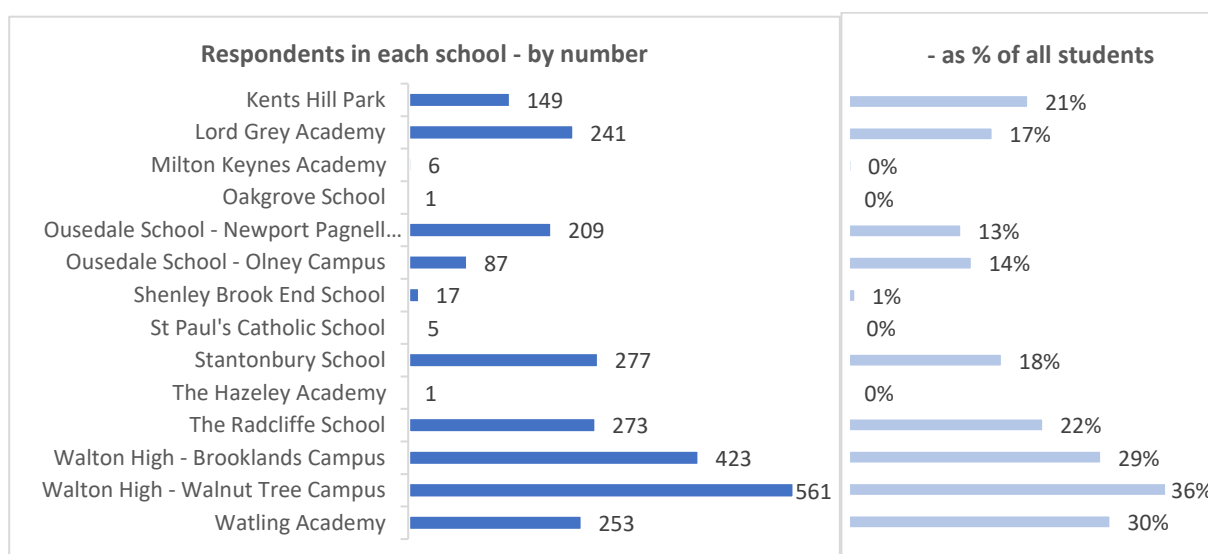
⁵ Danish study of 30,000 people over 15 years shows those who regularly cycle 15 minutes to work and back are 40% less likely to die than those who do not (Lars Bo Andersen et al (2000) in Peter Walker, The Miracle Pill (2021) p7).

3. Method

This [survey](#) was initially designed by Tim Coffey of Ousedale School and shared with all MK secondary schools by Tom Bulman, Cycling CitizensMK Organiser, through email, phone calls and meetings. It was filled in by students during November and December 2022.

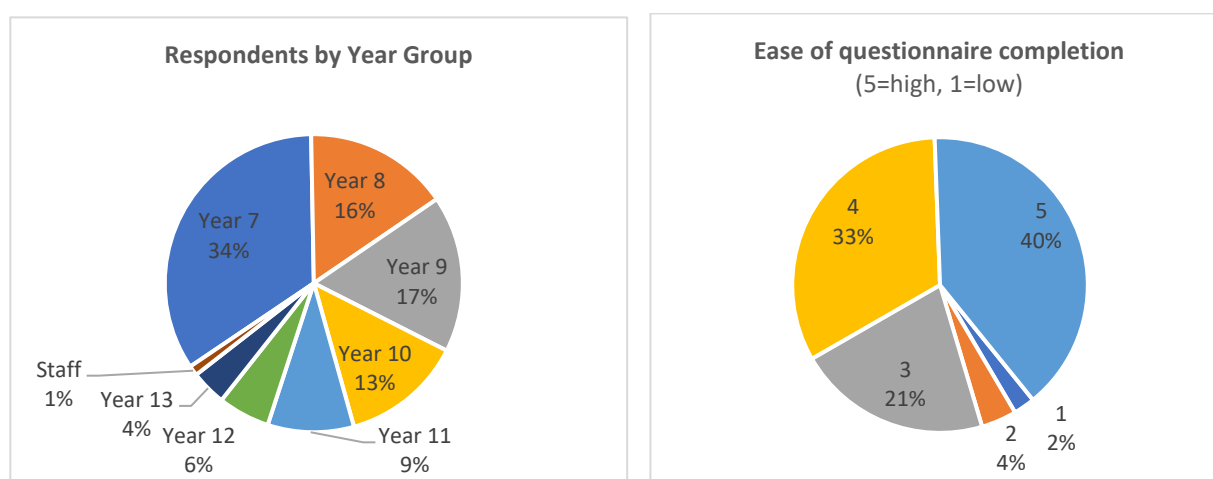
Some schools shared the survey link with students via class tutors to complete the questionnaire in class, while others used Parent mail or other means to encourage students to complete it in their own time.

Although the method was a little ad hoc, 2,477 students (and 26 staff) from 12 schools responded, which represents 12% of the city's secondary school student population.



The Hazeley Academy did not participate having recently administered its own student survey about active travel (and Lord Grey Academy did an additional survey for staff only, with 28 responses).

34% of all participants were Year 7 students. 67% were in Years 7-9. 94% of participants found the survey easy to complete (rating 3 or more out of 5).



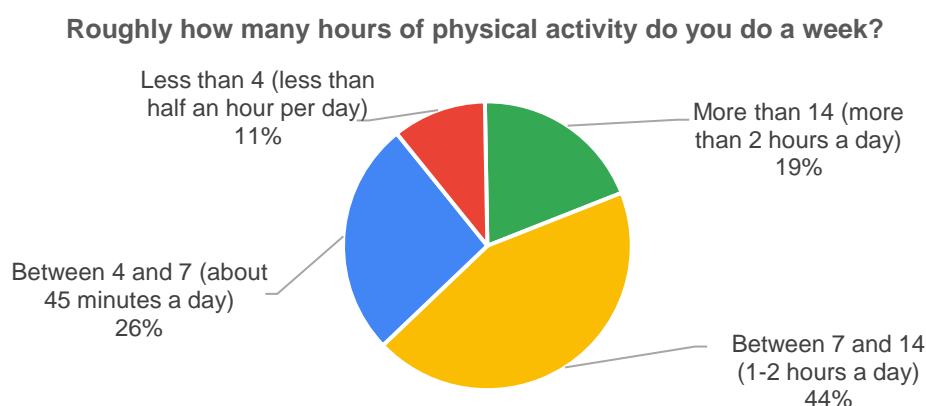
4. Results

This report focuses on Year 7 students only, for two reasons. First, Year 7 has the highest proportion of survey respondents (34%). Second, Year 7 students are likely to be more responsive and will benefit for more years than the older cohorts.

All the results below relate to the 855 Year 7 student respondents only, which is approximately one-quarter of the whole Year 7 cohort across MK. (Full survey results can be viewed at tinyurl.com/2p9efunr.) While it is hard to draw general conclusions across a whole school age range, some extrapolation of the data is used, as explained below.

4.1. Physical Activity

According to their responses, 37% of Year 7 students do less than the government recommended 60 minutes of physical activity for 5-18 year olds each week⁶.



This is a risk to their long-term health and should cause concern for parents, schools and public health services. 63% are physically fit enough to cycle 15 minutes to school and back each day.



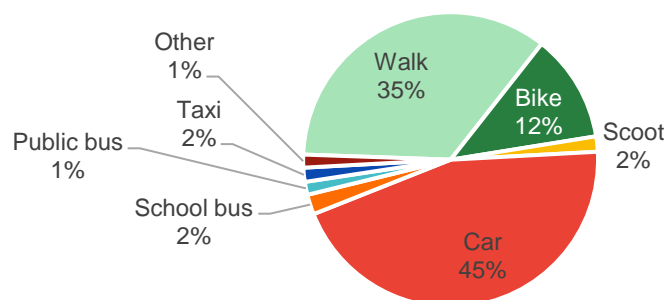
Year 5-6 pupils compete in inaugural [Bikeability Olympics](#), July 2022

⁶ www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people-5-to-18-years

4.2. Travel Mode

Half of all Year 7 students are mostly (3+ days/week) driven to school by car, bus or taxi, while 35% walk and 12% cycle.

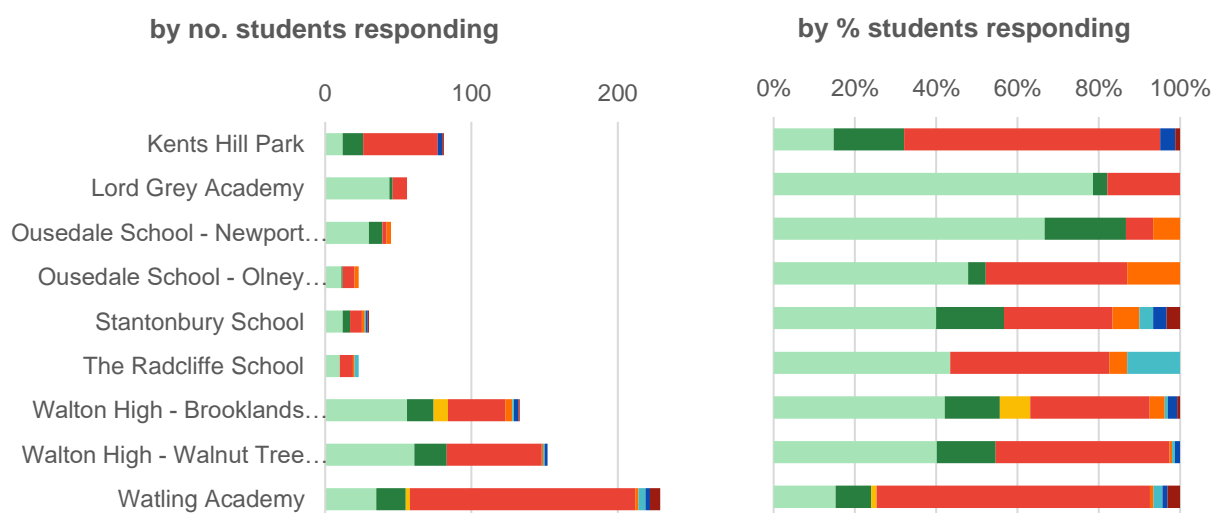
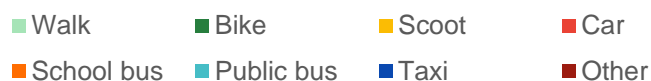
Mode of travel to school (3+ times per week)
- all respondents



By school

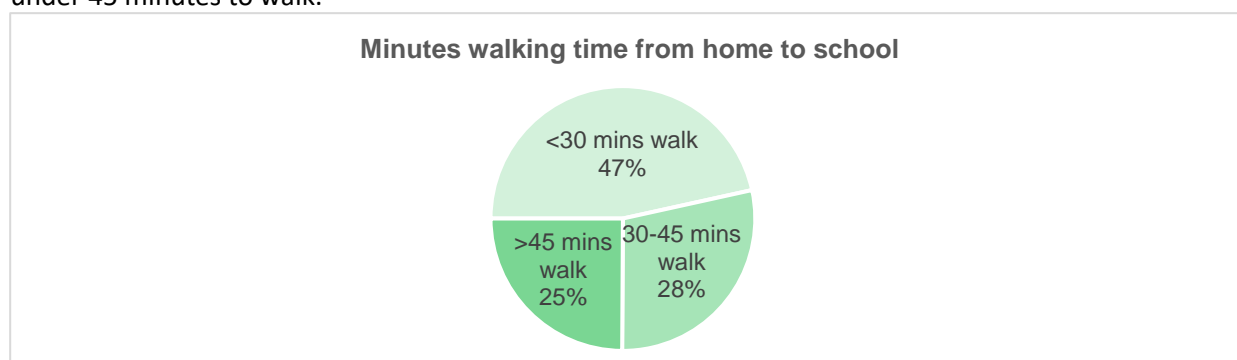
It is interesting to note that one of the oldest campuses, (Ousedale School in Newport Pagnell) has the highest proportion of Year 7 students cycling to school (20%), whilst the city's newest schools (Kents Hill Park and Watling Academy) have the highest proportion of students travelling by car.

Mode of travel to school mostly (3+ times per week) – by school



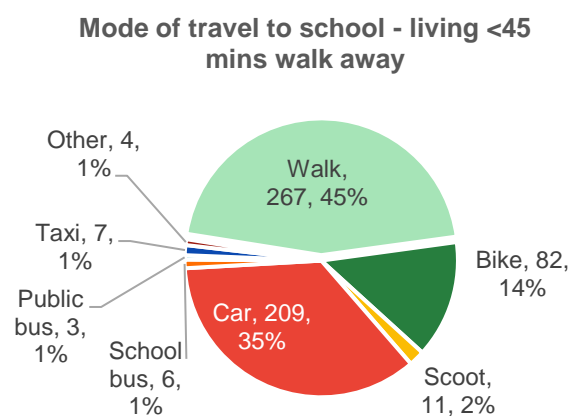
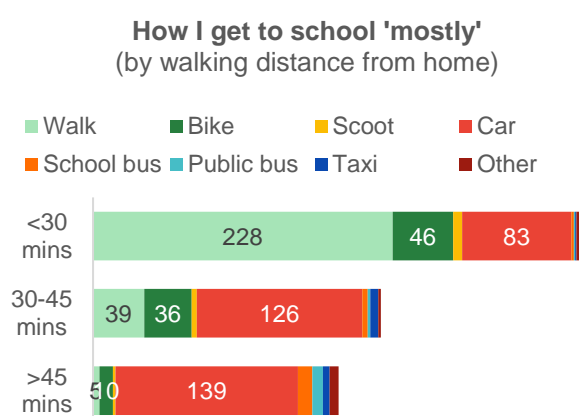
4.3. Travel Time

50% of all Year 7 respondents are driven to school, yet 75% of all respondents say that it would take them under 45 minutes to walk.



A 45-minute walk equates to about 2 miles distance, or a very manageable 15-minute cycle ride (including locking up the cycle). But only 14% of those students do actually cycle while 38% are being driven (by car, bus or taxi).

Most students living less than a 30 minute walk from school choose to walk (228, 62%) and 12% cycle, but a surprisingly large number (83, 23%) are driven by car.

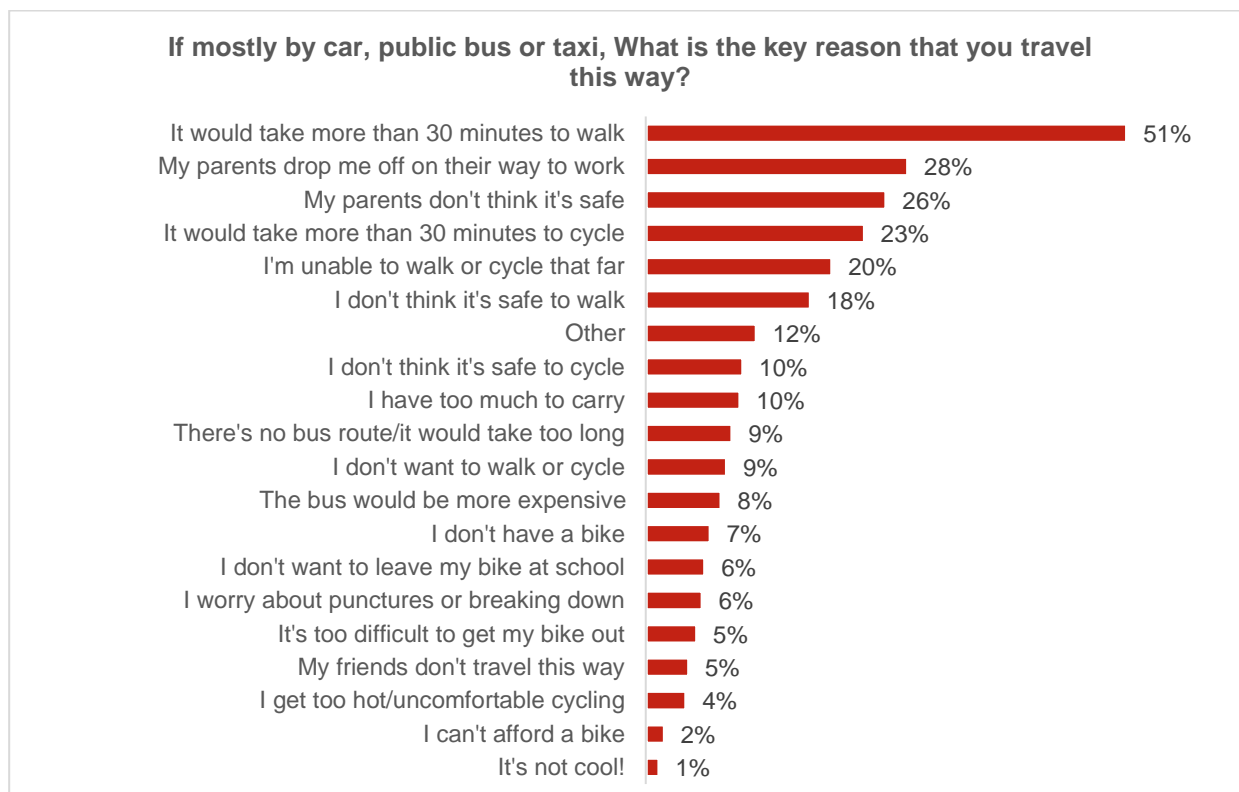


Extrapolating to the total population of MK Year 7 students (approximately 3,500), these results suggest that as many as 1,000 *more* Year 7 students could be cycling instead of being driven to school⁷. This would represent a three-fold increase from the current 500 (14%) who are currently cycling. That's roughly 70 more cyclists per school and up to 70 more vehicles not congesting the roads around each school. If this could be replicated in every subsequent year group, it would add up to nearly 500 fewer cars per school by the time the first cohort leaves sixth form. So why don't more students cycle?

⁷ 3500 x 75% (those living within two miles) x 38% (those being driven) = 998

4.4. Why students are driven to school

For Year 7 students who are mostly driven to school (348), the 'key reasons' are shown below.



Distance

- **Walking.** 51% said 'It would take more than 30 minutes to walk'. But we know (from 4.3) that 23% of those who are mostly driven by car live within 30 minutes' walk of school.
- **Cycling.** 23% say 'It would take more than 30 minutes to cycle', and 20% say 'I'm unable to walk or cycle that far'. We know (from 4.3) that 75% live within 15 minutes cycling distance.

Do they know how long it really takes to walk or cycle to school?

Safety

28% said the key reason for being driven was that 'My parents drop me off' and 26% 'My parents don't think it's safe to walk/cycle'. This suggests that parents are involved in the decisions and could be included in any education programme. 18% said 'I don't think it's safe to walk' and 10% say 'I don't think it's safe to cycle'. This suggests that students are themselves fearful of traveling by foot or cycle.

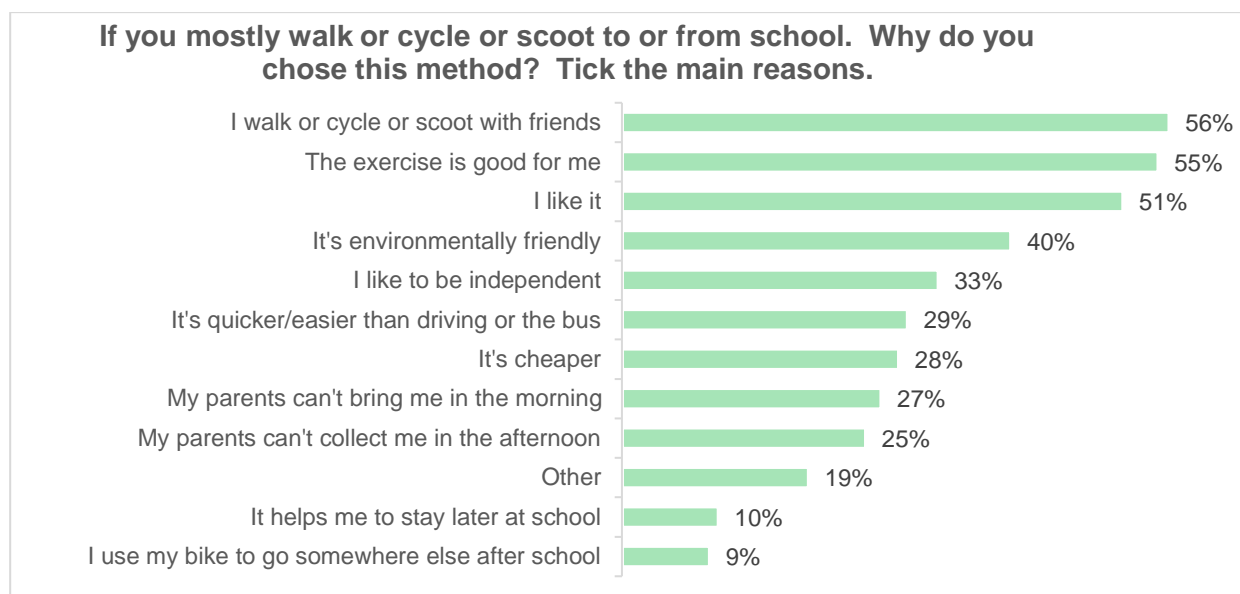
Cost and confidence

Financial cost is a consideration for 10% of respondents: 8% say 'The bus would be more expensive' and 2% say 'I can't afford a bike'. 10% say 'I have too much to carry', 6% say 'I don't want to leave my bike at school' and 6% say 'I worry about punctures or breaking down'.

4.5. Why walk, cycle or scoot

Why I walk, cycle or scoot

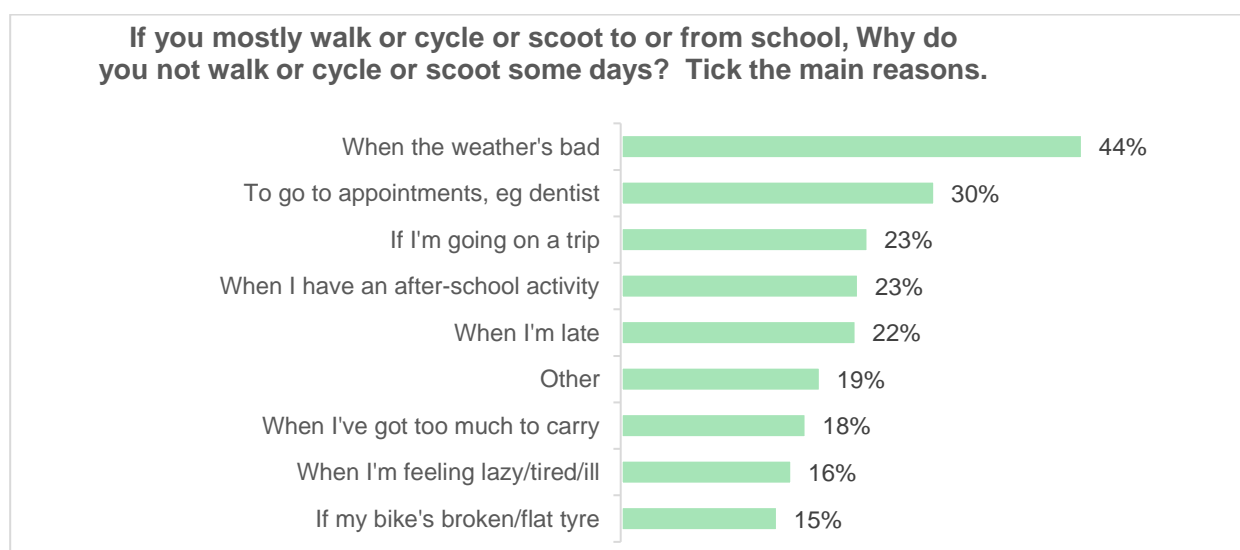
56% of Year 7 student respondents who walk, cycle or scoot most days said being 'with friends' is the main reason they do it. Peer influence is important.



More than half gave reasons which reflect personal preferences: 55% 'the exercise is good for me', 51% 'like it'. Other reasons are: 40% 'it's environmentally friendly' and 33% 'I like to be independent'.

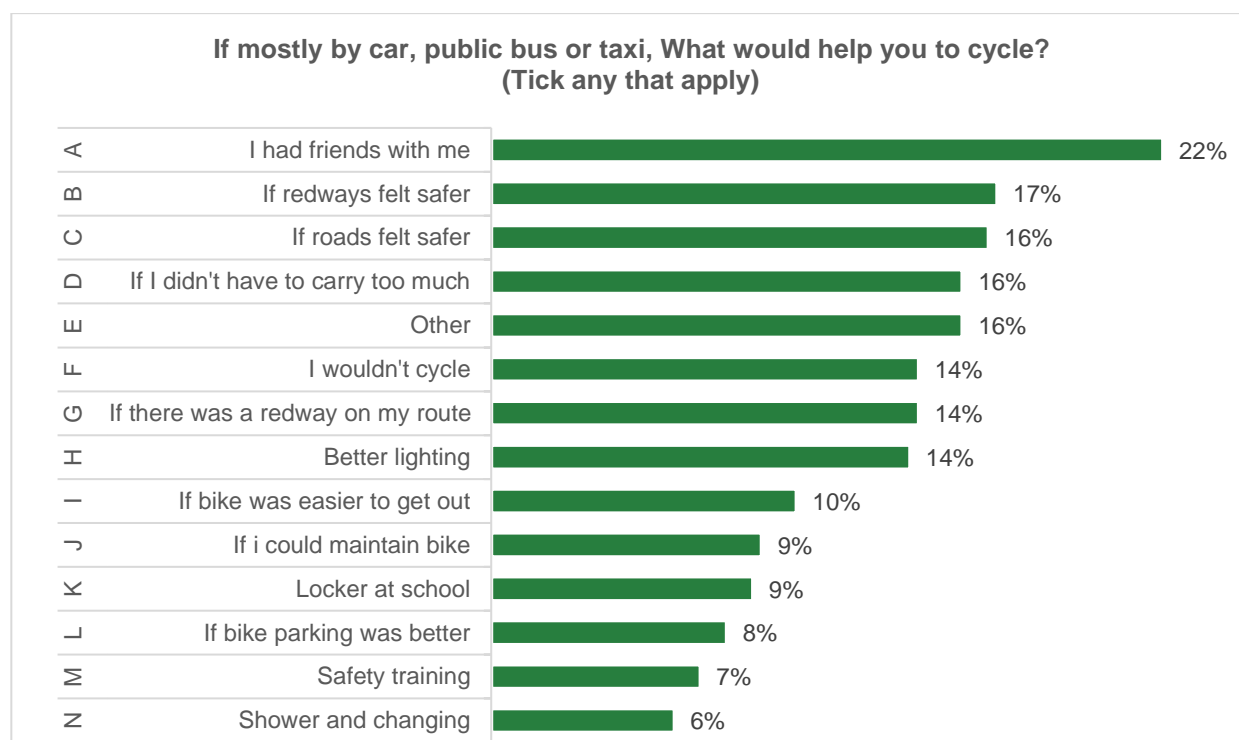
Why I don't walk, cycle or scoot

The figures below relate to students who are already active travellers on most days. It is understandable that there will be days when it is easier to be driven. Bad weather (44%) is the most commonly given reason.



4.6. What would help me cycle to school

Those who travel mostly by car, bus or taxi, were asked ‘What would help you to cycle rather than catch the bus or drive?’. The answers marked ‘definitely’ are listed below:



These answers to ‘what would help you to cycle’ can be categorised according to which agency – school or local authority - might take action to provide the incentive (see Conclusions below).

14% of all Year 7 students responding (348) say they wouldn't cycle. That means 86% would consider it.

17% and 16% say it would help if redways and roads felt safer.

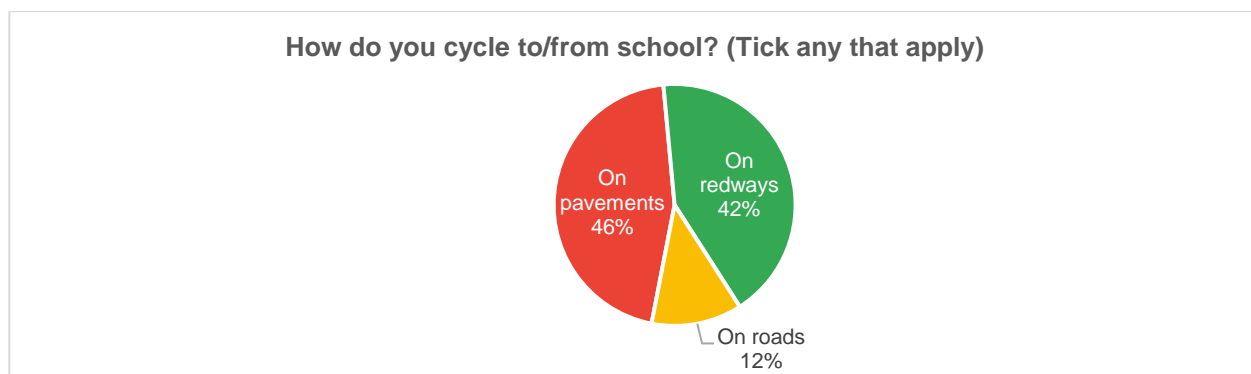
It would be helpful to research further the 16% who say ‘other’ factors would help them to cycle.



Year 5-6 pupils learn to safety-check bicycles at Bikeability Olympics, July 2022

4.7. Redways, roads and pavements

Of those Year 7 students who mostly cycle to school (12%), nearly half (46%) cycle on pavements, which is illegal.



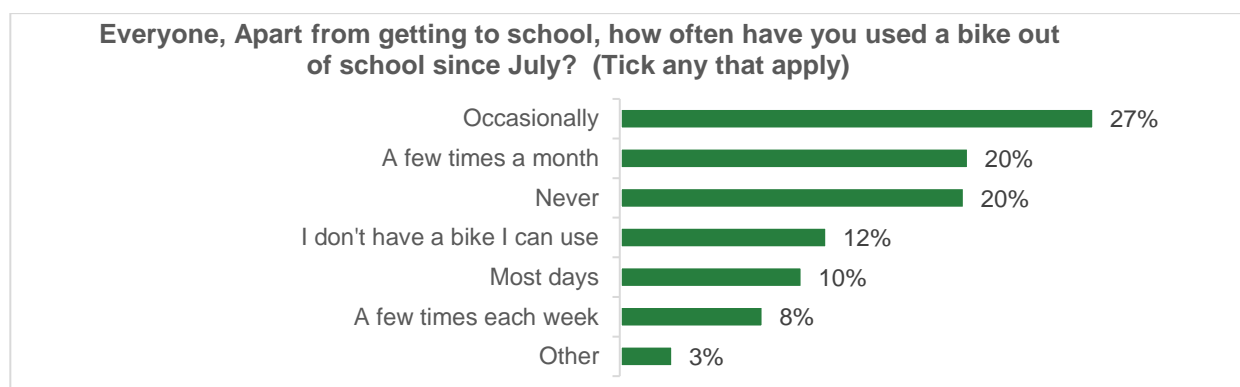
It can be suggested that fear of being unsafe on Redways and roads is causing children to break the law. This should give MK City Council cause to address the perceived lack of safety, through improved infrastructure and education.



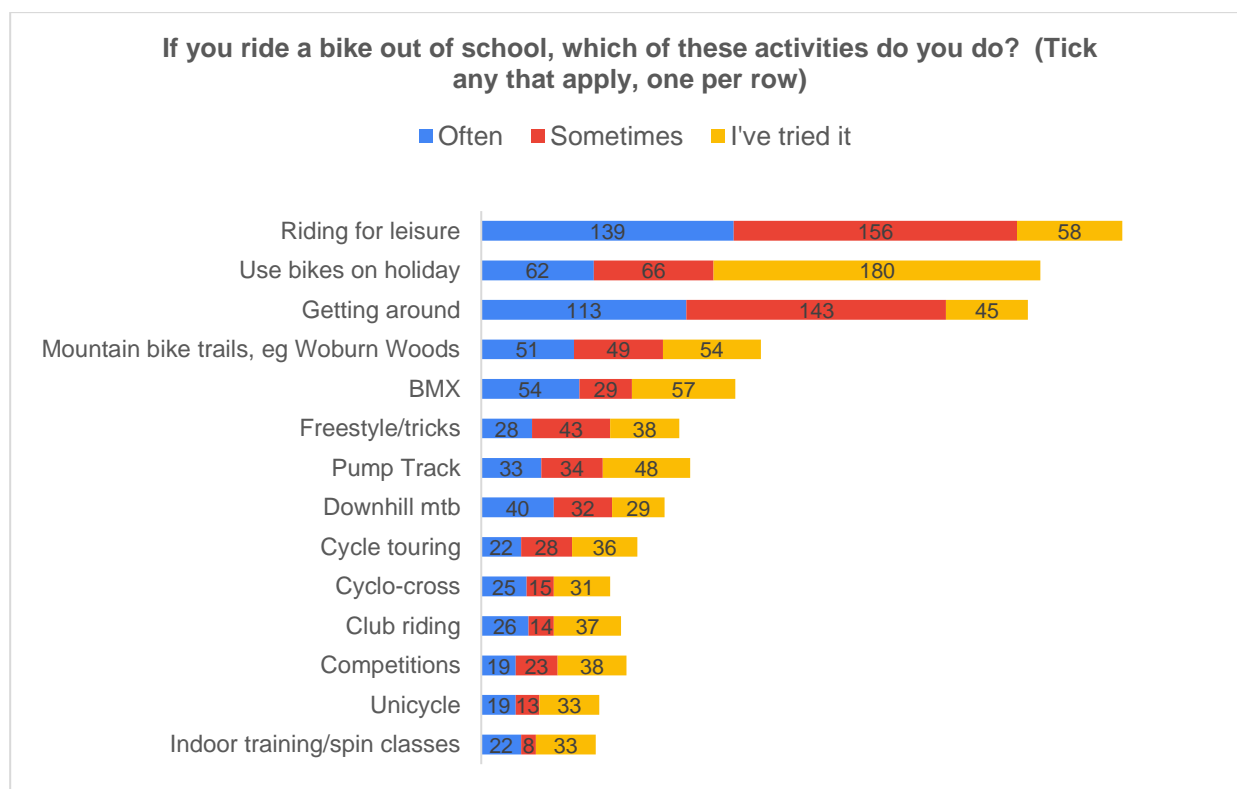
Student cycling on Redway

4.8. Cycling out of school

65% have used a cycle out of school in the previous six months (all apart from 'Never' and 'Other' below). So nearly two-thirds can cycle and have access to a cycle.



Year 7 respondents who ride a bike out of school do so for a variety of reasons, including a large number 'for leisure' (353, 41%) and 'on holiday' (308, 36%).



The number who use a cycle for 'Getting around' out of school (301), is more than three times the number who cycle to school (92). Something substantial is preventing them from cycling to school.

5. Conclusions

The structure of the questionnaire was not perfect, especially enabling students to select multiple options without considering carefully how the data would be processed, and the data has been interpreted in particular ways (as described above). But there are some clear conclusions to be drawn.

Half of the Year 7 students surveyed are driven to school by car, bus or taxi (4.2), with negative impacts on the environment, their health and their family's finances.

Three-quarters live within a 15-minute cycle ride of school (4.3). Nearly two-thirds are cyclists, with access to a bike (4.8) and fit enough to cycle 15 minutes to school and back each day (4.1). If extrapolated to all Year 7 students across Milton Keynes, these survey results suggest that up to 1000 Year 7 students who are currently being driven to school could instead cycle. This would triple the number of Year 7 students cycling to school.

Currently, however, while 35% use a cycle outside school (4.8) and 86% would consider cycling to school (4.6), only 12% actually do mostly cycle to school (4.2). Why?

Nearly one-quarter of those who are driven say it is too far to cycle, more than one quarter say their parents don't think it is safe and one-tenth say they themselves don't think it's safe (4.4). This suggests that perceptions of journey time and safety are important. Could they be better informed of the actual risks and benefits of cycling to school?

Of the 49% who mostly walk, cycle or scoot to school, more than half say the main reason is because they do it with friends (4.5). This suggests that peer influence may be powerful.

It may cause concern that nearly half of all Year 7 students who mostly cycle to school do so on pavements (4.7), since it is illegal.

When asked what would help them to cycle (4.6), the main reasons given by Year 7 students who would consider cycling are 'if I had friends with me', 'if redways felt safer' and 'if roads felt safer'. These are areas on which schools and the local authority can take action to affect positively so that more students are encouraged to cycle to school (see Recommendations below).



School students join a large group ride on a city centre road, July 2022

6. Recommendations

To encourage Year 7 students to cycle, a number of actions can be taken by schools and Milton Keynes City Council based on reasons given by students for not cycling (in 4.6).

Schools

- Reduce weight of school books and equipment which students need to carry (C)
- Provide lockers for storage of helmets and cycling accessories (K), especially in new-build schools
- Provide cycle safety training (M), e.g. Bikeability
- Improve cycle parking facilities (J), e.g. dedicated Year 7 parking spaces
- Provide information to help parents improve access to bikes at home (I) and help their children with bicycle maintenance (L), encourage cycling/discourage driving during Year 6-7 transition.

MK City Council

- Make roads safer (E)
- Make Redways safer (F), e.g. at blind bends and road junctions
- Make more Redways (G)
- Improve lighting on Redways/roads (H)

These potential actions have different levels of complexity and cost, but some could be implemented quickly. Infrastructure changes are most costly so should be prioritised carefully.

Next steps

Secondary schools should audit safe routes to school through Modeshift Stars⁸, and work with feeder primary schools to promote cycling, e.g. inform Year 6 parents about safe routes to schools and Bikeability training and organise cycling groups so new Year 7 students can travel together (as championed by Cllr Zoe Nolan, Cabinet Member for Children and Families). Parents evenings should address safety concerns and environmental issues related to driving; also inform parents about how their local council can help them and their children with cycling.

MK City Council should ensure that bold targets for cycling to school are set and supported. To build and maintain momentum towards these targets, and sustain a fully data driven approach, the Council should ensure that a survey like this should be repeated and reported annually. The Council should ensure Highways budget is allocated to improving the safety of redways and roads.



Year 5-6 students celebrate Bikeability Olympics wins, July 2022

⁸ <https://modeshiftstars.org>