



To: Place Directorate

From: Adrian Davis

Date: 10/02/2016

Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: Further evidence of declining independent mobility among children in England

Top line: Children's independent mobility - or the freedom of children to get about in their local neighbourhood without adult supervision - has been shown to be important to their wellbeing and development. Loss of independent mobility has adverse effects on children's well-being and development.

The potential benefits of greater levels of independent mobility include greater level of physical activity among children has been demonstrated through many studies.¹ In the context of concerns about obesity levels in the UK, this is an important finding and hence there are likely to be benefits to be gained from removing barriers to children going outside, with a lack of independent mobility being one important barrier. Studies also document the importance of children's independent mobility in facilitating higher levels of outside-play and social interaction leading to higher levels of sociability and improved mental wellbeing. Children consequently have greater confidence and improved social skills from greater experience, and also wider community benefits such as closer neighbourhood relations, a stronger sense of community, and less fear of crime. Reduced likelihood of feelings of loneliness during adolescence is a further outcome cited. It is worthwhile also considering the intrinsic value in children's play and independence, and that children might therefore be expected to have a right to a safe outdoor environment in which to enjoy it. Enabling independent mobility would also seem to be an important element of delivering the rights of children to rest, leisure and play set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Yet a UK study shows that children have far less independent mobility now than they did in the past.² Findings included that overall, there has been a huge reduction in the independent mobility of primary school children in England since 1971. There has been a smaller decrease in the percentage of English secondary school children being granted some of the 'licences' of independent mobility. English primary school children had less independent mobility than their German peers in 1990 and this remained the case in 2010. German primary school children were granted all the licences of independent mobility¹ in greater proportions and at earlier ages than their English counterparts. In particular, far more children in England than in Germany were accompanied to and from school by a parent or other adult on the day of the surveys in both 1990 and 2010. Far more English children were accompanied by an adult on the journey home from school in 2010 than in 1971. In 1971, 86 per cent of the parents of primary school children surveyed said that their children were allowed to travel home from school alone. By 1990, this had dropped to 35 per cent, and there was a further drop to 25 per cent being allowed to do so in 2010. In 2010, more English children were accompanied on journeys to destinations other than school than in previous years. The average number of weekend journeys undertaken by primary school children in England remained unchanged between 1990 and 2010. However there was a marked increase in adult accompaniment on these journeys, with 62 per cent of the journeys in 2010 being accompanied, compared to 41 per cent in 1971.

¹ See <http://travelwest.info/project/ee-36-childrens-independent-mobility>

² Children's Independent Mobility: A Comparative Study in England and Germany (1971-2010). London: PSI.