

Summary Report

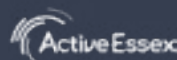
The Value of Free Bikes schemes

Authored by Volterra Partners LLP on
behalf of The Active Wellbeing Society

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Volterra



SPORT
ENGLAND



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Foreword

On a wet Tuesday in Southall, a mum collected a free bike, showed her daughter the brakes, then pointed to the park and said they would ride home the long way. That is how change begins, one journey at a time. A bike turns bus fare into fresh air. A bike links a trainee to a new job across town. It lets a grandad keep up with a granddaughter. It gives people in the hardest hit communities a simple tool that makes life cheaper, fitter and freer.

Sport England's pilots in Birmingham, Essex and Southall set out to remove the biggest barrier to cycling: the cost of a bike. The independent evaluation by Volterra Partners LLP shows what many of us have long believed. Give people a bike and they ride. They move from inactive to active. They cut the risk of early death and long-term illness. They find an affordable way to get around. The numbers are striking. The schemes return more than £12 for every £1 invested, classed as Very High Value for Money in the Department for Transport framework. That is the kind of return the Treasury notices.

This is not just transport policy; it is opportunity policy. Free Bikes help ensure new cycle lanes work for everyone, not only those who can already afford a bike. They widen who benefits from public investment. They help the next generation grow up healthier. They keep money in local economies. They ease pressure on roads and public transport. Small interventions add up to a big national gain.

Read the report, then help us write the next chapter. Let us back Free Bikes, scale what works, and make Britain a place where a child can get to school safely, an employee can reach work affordably, and an older neighbour can stay active with pride. A bike cannot solve every problem, but it can solve more than we think, and it can do so quickly, fairly and at low cost.

The Lord Watson of Wyre Forest

*National Free Bikes Lead Ambassador and
Former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party*



Introduction

Definition

Free Bikes schemes provide people with free bikes, accessories and 'wraparound support' (such as free cycle training and community-led rides), targeted at residents living in the most deprived areas.

Background

Free Bikes schemes address the most significant barrier to cycling: cost.

The health and wellbeing benefits of regular cycling are indisputable. For many, typical active travel initiatives such as cycle infrastructure and cycle training in schools are of great value. However, they ignore the reality that, in our most underserved communities, you cannot learn to ride or experience the benefits of cycling, if you cannot afford a bike.

Those living at the sharp end of poverty often experience poorer health and mental wellbeing due to their lack of access to good housing, job opportunities, green spaces, and resources. These social determinants of health are not easily remedied by simply asking people to 'exercise more'. Deep-seated inequalities require radical and compassionate intervention that gives people the opportunity and agency to change their lives.

By working with local partners and volunteers to provide free cycle training, bike maintenance and led rides, participants feel more connected to their community and develop the confidence to cycle regularly. The evidence shows that this approach to wraparound support, alongside the provision of a free bike, is key to supporting recipients to make the shift from inactive to active.

Purpose of this report

The national evaluation of Free Bikes schemes was commissioned by Sport England to provide strong, objective evidence of impact for a range of national, regional and local stakeholders across multiple sectors.

This summary document, alongside Volterra's full technical report (and appendices), should be used to make the case for future investment in Free Bikes schemes.

About the evaluation

Active Essex, in partnership with The Active Wellbeing Society and Let's Go Southall, awarded a two-year contract to Volterra Partners LLP to carry out a national evaluation of the three Free Bikes schemes: **Big Birmingham Bikes (BBB)**, **Let's Ride Southall (LRS)**, and **Essex Pedal Power (EPP)**.



The national evaluation was conducted between 2023 and 2025, and incorporates:

- Recipient survey responses, focus group interviews, quantitative GPS data from trackers, and available academic literature.
- A leading-edge Health Impact Assessment (HIA) model to estimate the quantifiable preventative health benefits of the schemes.
- Assessment of the scheme design elements that ensure the schemes' success to make recommendations about what can be done to improve delivery and realise greater benefits.

Key findings

Low cost, high impact

For every £1 spent, the schemes generate an estimated **Social Return on Investment (SROI) of £12** (to date) and £16 over the full lifecycle of the bike (approx. 5 years).¹

This makes the schemes 'Very High' Value for Money (VfM) according to the Department for Transport's (DfT) criteria. This creates a strong case to invest now to save later, while also delivering more immediate results for participants.



Innovation in assessing health impacts

The health impact assessment estimates **potential savings for the NHS at £1 million per year**.²

This is an innovation in understanding the health impacts of cycling in deprived communities, estimating the benefits of preventing major health morbidities and weighting these benefits to capture health inequalities.

Inactive to active

Free Bikes schemes are effective for making the shift from inactive to active for communities living in deprived areas. People who are insufficiently active have a 20% to 30% increased risk of death compared to people who are sufficiently active.³

The schemes deliver health benefits which can reduce early deaths and the risk of non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

Targeting people with the most need delivers a greater benefit, as Free Bikes schemes also address other social determinants of health.

¹ 'Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework that measures and accounts for value by combining social, environmental and economic costs and benefits.' The SROI Network, 2012. A guide to Social Return on Investment.

² Volterra Partners LLP, 2025. National evaluation of free bikes: Main report.

³ World Health Organisation, 2024. Physical activity Fact Sheet.

Embracing proportionate universalism on a national scale

Proportionate universalism describes interventions that are 'universal' (i.e. accessible to everyone) but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.⁴ Free Bikes schemes offer significant value as a targeted intervention for residents in the most deprived areas, who are at the greatest risk from the lack of physical activity, but also has **the potential to encourage broader behaviour change on a 'universal' scale** by helping to normalise cycling as an everyday mode of transport.

Environmental benefits

The transition towards net zero requires a seismic shift in the way we travel, from reducing car journeys to increased cycling, walking, and use of public transport. Free Bikes schemes have an important role to play in making this shift possible by removing the barrier of cost and making the case for better cycle infrastructure to meet rising local demand. The provision of **a free bike helps to equalise access to cycling** and ensures that those across the income spectrum can make use of improvements to cycling infrastructure.

⁴Public Health England, 2014. Local action on health inequalities.

Impact overview

“Making it simple and safe to walk, wheel or cycle to schools, shops and workplaces is one of the most effective actions we can take to improve the nation’s health, economy and get to net zero, all in one.”

- National Active Travel Commissioner, Chris Boardman

Free Bikes schemes have extensive benefits across multiple policy areas

These include:

- Increasing physical activity and reducing health inequalities.
- Promoting a mode shift to cycling by making cycling in deprived neighbourhoods more visible and accessible.
- Increasing access to opportunities such as jobs, training and greenspace.
- Transforming wellbeing and boosting community cohesion.
- Supporting the transition to Net Zero.

Free Bikes schemes are high impact, low-cost interventions

To date, the Free Bikes schemes have generated £12 in benefits for every £1 invested. Generally, if ridden regularly and properly maintained, bicycles can last at least five years. Over the lifecycle of the bike (approx. 5 years), this estimate rises to £16 in benefits for every £1 invested.

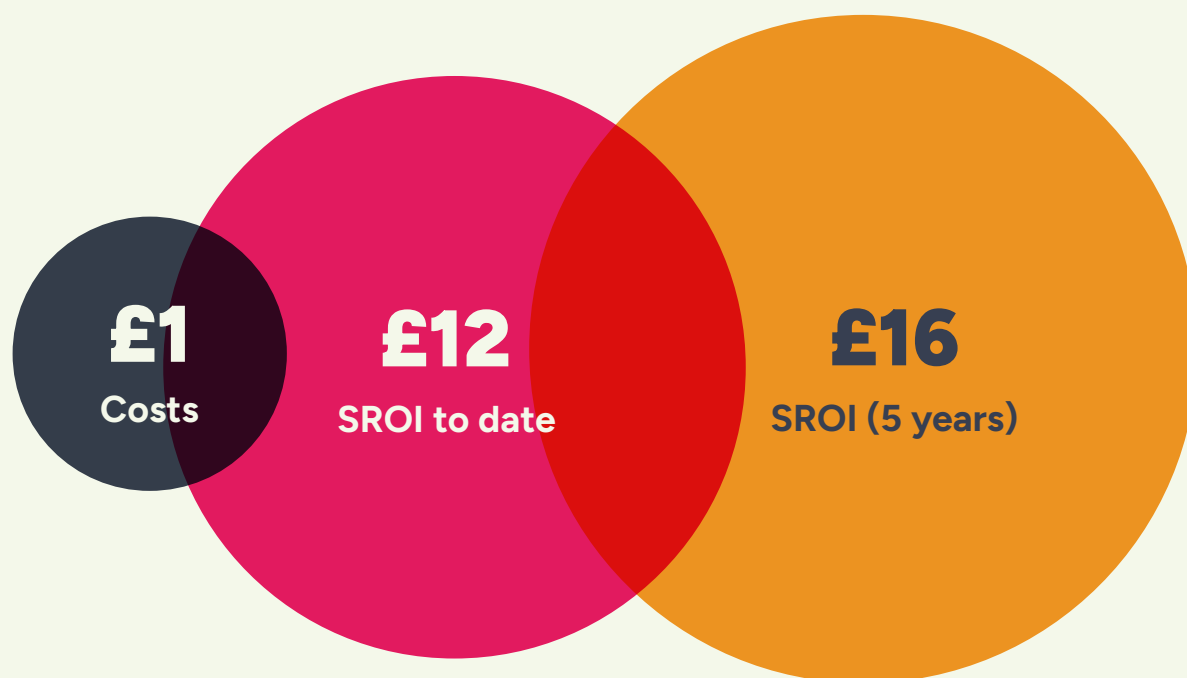
This return is much higher than Active Travel England’s expectation for active travel schemes (£1.5 to £2)⁵, and the Free Bikes schemes classify as ‘Very High’ VfM according to DfT’s VfM⁶ framework. Not all benefits can be monetised, meaning the £12-£16 SROI is likely an underestimation of the true impact of the schemes.

In addition, the schemes can complement and boost the efficacy of existing and future active travel infrastructure projects. Active travel initiatives such as Cycle City Ambition and Cycling in National Park Grant had a combined SROI of 5.5.⁷

⁵ Active Travel England, 2023. Guidance notes for local authorities to support completion of the active travel fund 4 proforma.

⁶ Department for Transport, 2024. Value for Money – Supplementary guidance on categories.

⁷ Department for Transport, 2014. Value for Money Assessment for Cycling Grants.



If these were co-delivered alongside equity-focused initiatives such as Free Bikes schemes, this could “activate” the infrastructure for the new cyclists and improve the overall return on investment of the infrastructure projects.

The schemes generate benefits for both individuals and wider society

The national evaluation categorises the benefits into primary and secondary benefits⁸:

- Primary benefits: direct benefits to individual recipients.
- Secondary benefits: benefits experienced by wider society, including the state.

Figure 1 outlines the total benefits of the Free Bikes schemes, categorised as Primary or Secondary, and whether the benefit has a direct monetary impact.

Systems shift

The Free Bikes schemes impact various local ‘systems’ such as health, transport, the local economy and placemaking. These systems represent the social determinants that impact health inequalities and overall community outcomes. The schemes have further potential to ‘knit together’ local systems allowing participants to be more active, receive better access to opportunities and experience improved health and wellbeing. This also enables local systems to understand community needs to provide a more joined up approach to tackling multiple challenges.

Figure 2 illustrates the various impacts of the Free Bikes schemes (left-hand side of the diagram) mapped to the broad system they affect (right-hand side of the diagram). The wider the band the greater the impact on the system.

⁸ Sport England, 2024. The social value of sport and physical activity in England.

Figure 1: The national evaluation assesses a range of primary and secondary benefits.
Benefits assessed in the national evaluation. Negative impacts are indicated with a '(-)' suffix.

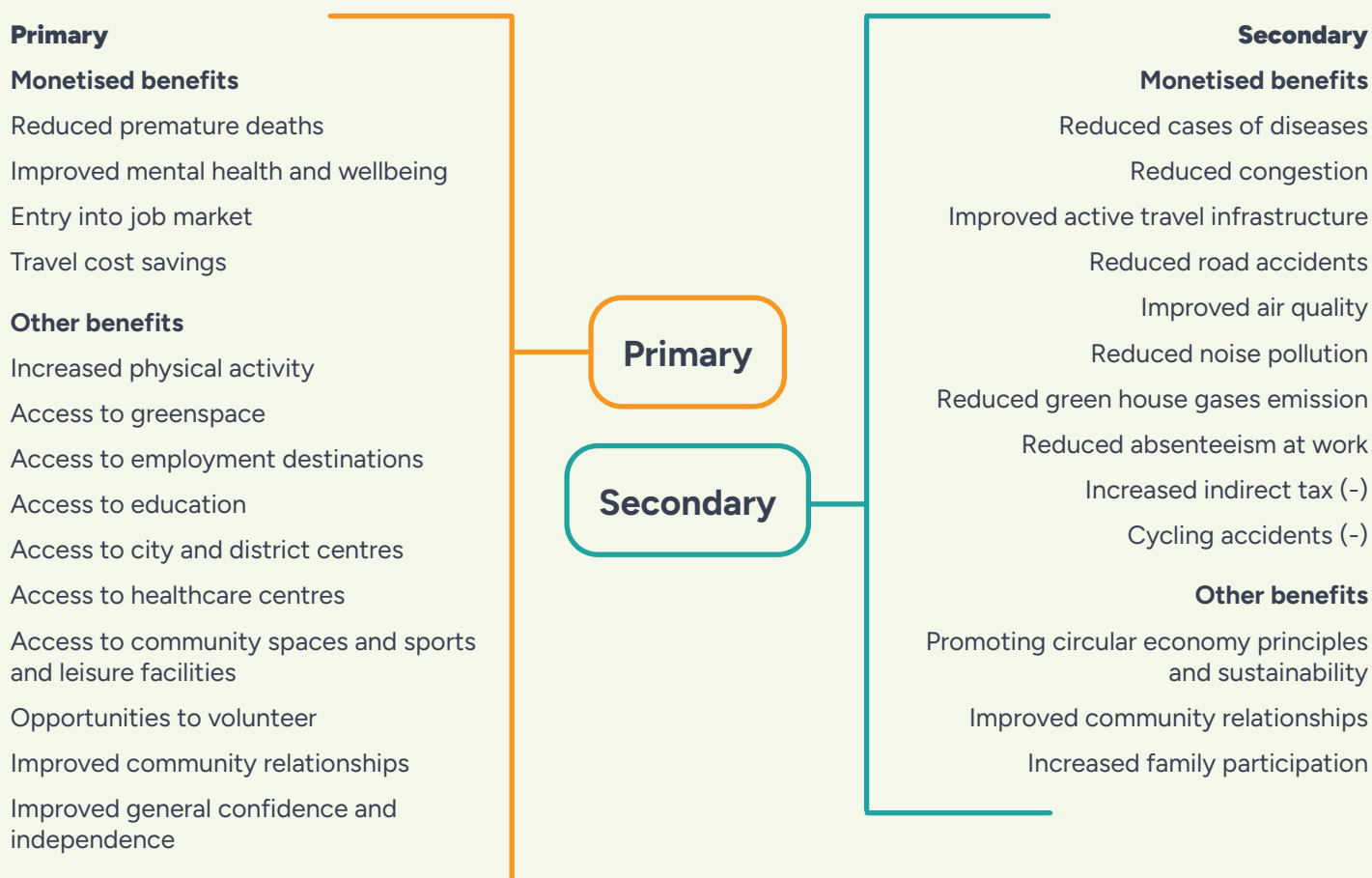
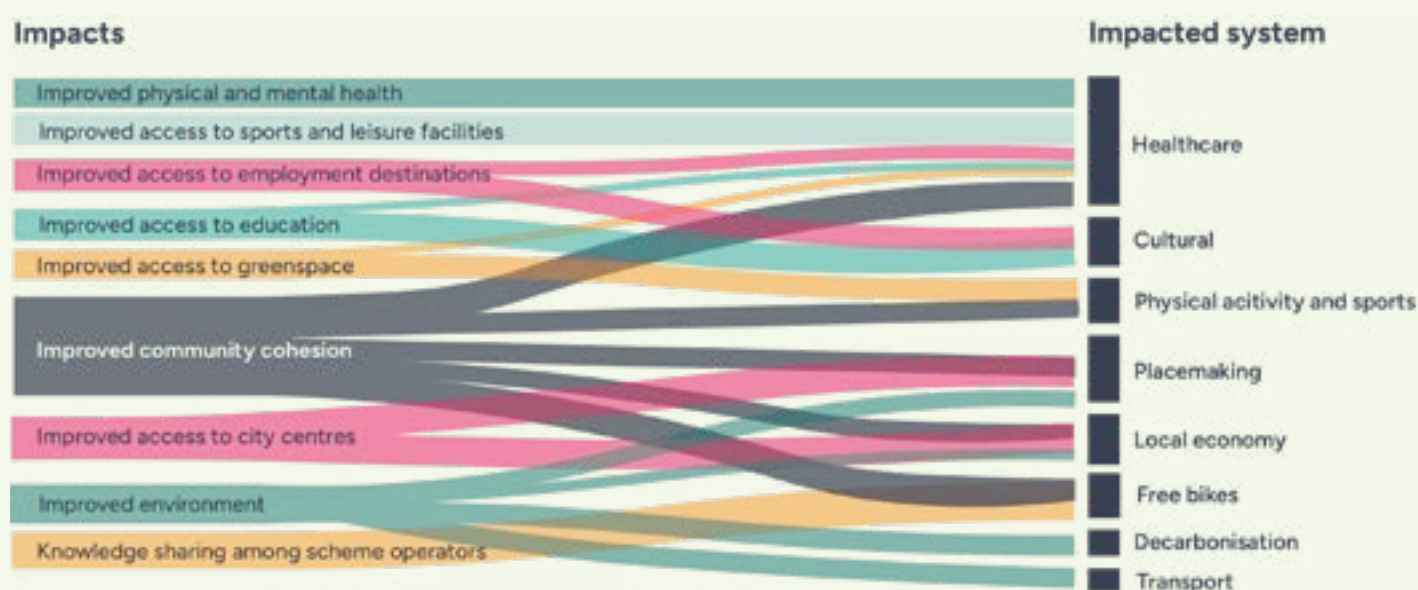


Figure 2: The Free Bikes schemes impact various local systems such as healthcare, social infrastructure and transport.

Mapping impacts to impacted systems and local systems.





Active travel

Key evaluation findings

- 32% of participant journeys previously made by car are now cycled.
- Boost in cycle equity by targeting underserved communities, including women, children and young people. Over 90% of Let's Ride Southall (LRS) respondents are from Global Majorities.
- Seven million car kilometres have been replaced by bikes.
- £3m has been saved in transport costs.
- Journey times to schools halved through the bikes compared to public transport.

Department for Transport (DfT) and Active Travel agenda summary⁹

Active Travel England and Sport England aim to make active travel more inclusive and accessible for people from all walks of life.

- **Active Travel England:** Target 50% short urban journeys to be made by active travel methods by 2030 by improving active travel infrastructure.
- **Sport England:** Reduce physical inactivity, increase physical activity, narrow inequalities, and improve the experience of children and young people, especially in underserved groups.

⁹ Department for Transport and Active Travel England, 2022. The second cycling and walking investment strategy; Active Travel England, 2023. Active Travel England Corporate Plan.

Free Bikes schemes are inclusive, making active travel available to all communities

Cycling is disproportionately more common among middle-aged white men.¹⁰ The Free Bikes schemes increase the diversity of cycling, making it available to those from areas of high deprivation who have historically had lower levels of participation.

This reframes cycling as an inclusive and equitable activity which can be undertaken by 'people like me'. Scheme participants can relate to people from similar characteristics and backgrounds which may help to encourage greater participation.

- The schemes have provided adaptive bikes to participants who experience mobility impairments.
- Residents with long-term illnesses have received Free Bikes, some through social prescribing from their GPs via local healthcare partnerships.
- Older residents have actively participated in the schemes and formed stronger connections within the community, helping to prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- In Essex, children have used the bikes to get to school, encouraging daily physical activity at a young age.
- Global Majority communities have had active involvement in the schemes, giving them the agency to take charge of their health. Over 90% of LRS respondents belong to Global Majority ethnicities.

"I have arthritis so [the bike] stops me having to walk places, helping me to get exercise in a different way. Glad I can now go anywhere up the beach which I could not walk to before."

– EPP Clacton and Jaywick recipient

"I have been on several organised bike trips... they are such a friendly lot. They will help you. On the trips they are kind – those that can go up the hill, go, then stop and wait for me. Sometimes I feel guilty being the only one. I would say to anyone who is suffering anyway to come on these trips. So so kind. Made so many friends. Helped me in so many ways."

– a 77-year-old EPP Harwich and Dovercourt recipient

Free Bikes schemes generate physical activity within physically inactive communities, particularly for those who are historically excluded from active travel

Encouraging uptake among women

Community-led rides helped women, notably those from Asian and Black communities, overcome cultural and confidence barriers. Riding bikes gave several women a sense of belonging and achievement. Across the schemes, women participants accounted for 37% of total trips, higher than the national average of 28%.

"More than men, it was women who came to us to learn how to ride."

– LRS organiser

¹⁰ Department for Transport, 2024. National Travel Survey.

“Traditionally and culturally, women in this area aren’t inclined to take up cycling, but the group aspect of the scheme has given us permission to take it up.”

- LRS Focus Group Participant

Figure 3: Share of female trips in the schemes is higher than national averages.

Free Bikes schemes’ adult trips by gender.

(Note: the national average is informed by the DfT AMAT main mode of trips)



Family engagement

Riding bikes is an effective way to encourage children to spend time outdoors with their friends and family. EPP Harwich and Dovercourt and LRS in particular aimed for greater family participation through the design of their schemes. Many recipients felt motivated to spend more time with their families outdoors on their bike together.

“I have three children and a baby, and we go out as a family. My mental health suffered a lot and I hadn’t been at work properly since my newborn. I came to a mother and baby ride here, and met another mother who lives near me. My little one loves it!”

– EPP Harwich and Dovercourt Focus Group Participant

“It has been so lovely to be able to cycle again after so many years. I know I wouldn’t have been able to afford to get all my children and myself a bike, so I feel very grateful to have been given such a wonderful gift.”

- BBB Focus Group Participant

Free Bikes schemes create routes to other physical activity

In Southall, the scheme is a part of a wider, community-delivered physical activity initiative. LRS recipients report that they take part in other physical activities, such as yoga and brisk walks.

“Now I go for brisk walks in the park, then I go to Sumit’s [one of the Let’s Go Southall organisers] yoga class too. I do a lot of different things!”

– LRS recipient

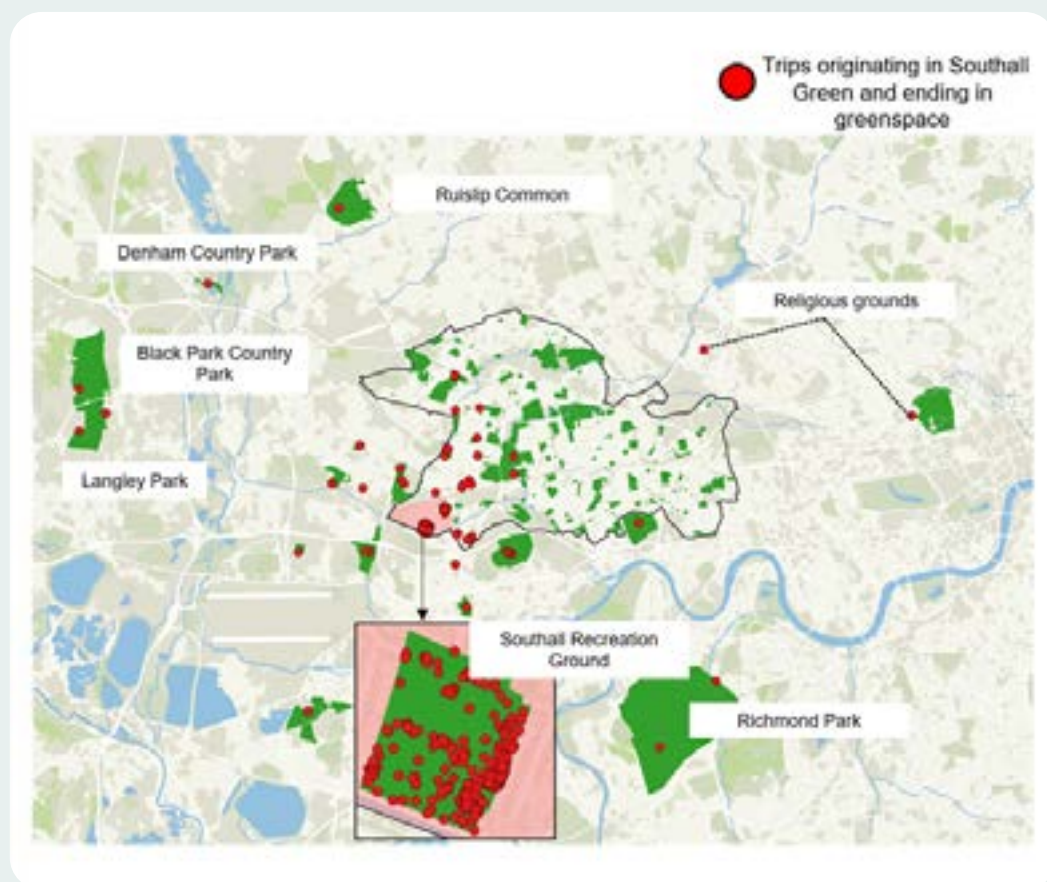
There has also been a shift in physical activity take up in Essex. A greater proportion of EPP participants engaged in sports and fitness activities other than cycling on at least four days in the past week, compared to before they received the bikes (39% vs 33%).

Recipients are also able to access more green spaces as a result of the schemes. Figure 4 shows the trips made by LRS recipients from Southall Green to greenspace areas.

Figure 4: Recipients in Southall Green ward took several trips to greenspaces.

LRS trips originating in Southall Green and ending in greenspaces.

(Map source: Map Tiler; Free Bikes schemes GPS data)



Case study

“My son used to spend all his time on his PlayStation...”

A focus group participant for Big Birmingham Bikes (BBB) described how her son, before receiving his bike, would spend most of his time on his PlayStation. She explained that while getting him outdoors can still be a ‘difficult first step’, now he has his bike she has been able to engage him in outdoor activities through cycling, sharing that he’s ‘quite happy once he gets on his bike’.

Receiving a free bike has helped break down barriers to entry to physical activity for her son, which could have significant long-term impacts on his physical and mental health with continued use of his bike.

To boost national cycle equity, it is essential that the free bikes schemes are delivered alongside active travel infrastructure interventions

Improving active travel infrastructure is important to increasing cycling in deprived and underserved communities. However, infrastructure alone cannot solve the challenge of physical inactivity.

The upfront cost of a bike (ranging from £200 to over £1,000) is a well-recognised barrier to cycling.¹¹ To increase cycling uptake in more disadvantaged communities, enhanced infrastructure must be paired with interventions like the Free Bikes schemes that remove financial barriers and “activate” infrastructure for deprived communities.

The SROI of active travel initiatives can be further boosted by co-delivering Free Bikes schemes to maximise the use of infrastructure while improving access and equity.

32% of participants journeys previously made by car are now cycled

This modal shift from car to bikes is higher than national average modal shift of 24%.¹²

“The bike is now my main mode of transport.”

– EPP Clacton & Jaywick Focus Group Participant

“95% of my travel is now by bike. It’s made short trips so much easier.”

– EPP Basildon Focus Group Participant

¹¹ Volterra estimated range based on bike seller websites such as AutoTrader, Halfords and Cycles UK.

¹² Department for Transport, 2024. AMAT; 24% is the default assumption for modal shift from car to bike in the AMAT.



Reducing health inequalities & inactivity

Key evaluation findings

- The 12,000 bikes given away are estimated to have prevented 58 new disease cases (savings of £1m to the NHS) and 3 premature deaths each year (valued at £4.3m to the individual) by improving physical health in underserved communities.
- Free Bikes schemes support the national prevention agenda by using GPs to prescribe the schemes to patients through the social prescription route, including those outside scheme eligibility criteria.
- Each bike results in a wellbeing benefit to recipients of £10,000 per year based on WELLBY metrics.¹³
- At Basildon University Hospital, two-thirds of staff who received the bikes find it easier to commute due to the bikes.
- People who were previously inactive become active.

NHS and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) agenda summary¹⁴

- Reduction in health inequalities, especially among women living in deprived areas and those from minority backgrounds.
- Prioritisation of preventative care to reduce the burden of disease, affecting conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and obesity.
- Improvement in worker productivity and healthcare workforce capacity.
- Reduction in long wait times for cancer treatment.

¹³ Wellbeing-adjusted life years, or WELLBY, is a way to measure how much an intervention or programme improves someone's overall wellbeing.

¹⁴ NHS England, 2025. 2025/26 priorities and operational planning guidance; NHS, 2024. Priorities and operational planning guidance 2024/25; DHSC, 2023. DHSC's areas of research interest.

Free Bikes schemes allow people who were previously inactive to become active

The schemes give the participant access to a bike. As their confidence grows through cycle training, community led rides and motivational support, the activity of cycling becomes normalised. In the baseline EPP survey (of bike recipients), 81% of respondents had undertaken some form of physical activity in the past seven days.¹⁵ By follow up, this had increased to 94%.¹⁶

Free Bikes schemes support the prevention agenda, with increased physical activity preventing cases of disease and reducing the treatment burden on the NHS

Almost half (48%) of survey respondents self-reported improvements to their physical health because of the schemes. This is a remarkable finding because although health changes can be hard to identify, a large proportion of the recipients could feel them and attribute them to the schemes.

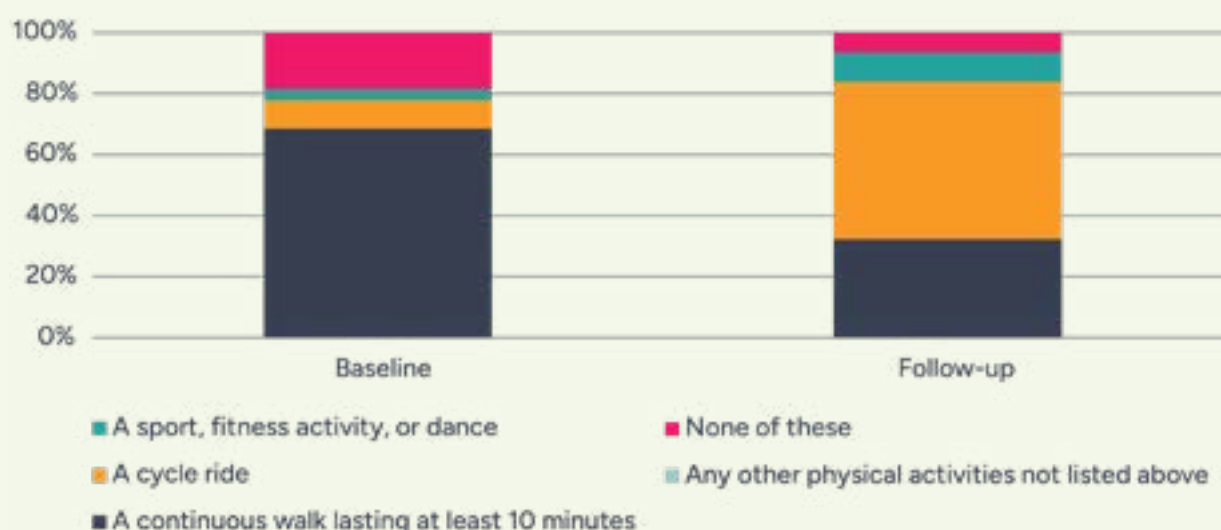
The Health Impact Assessment estimates tangible benefits for preventing cases of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, dementia, breast cancer and depression. Over 12,000 bikes, the schemes could prevent 58 new cases of diseases each year (16% of the total expected new cases in the recipient population), translating to £1.0m of savings to the NHS per year.

“My cholesterol level was always high....Since I started cycling, everything (in my body) has become normal and healthy. My doctor was surprised by my health check-up results – he just couldn’t believe it!”

– LRS recipient

Figure 5: EPP respondents saw an increase in physical activity levels.

Share of survey respondents who undertook different forms of physical activity in the past seven days.



¹⁵ The survey question “In the past 7 days, have you done any of these activities?” presented the following choices – 1. A continuous walk of at least 10 minutes; 2. A cycle ride; 3. A sport, fitness activity (such as gym or fitness lessons) or dance; 4. Any other physical activity not listed above; 5. None of these.

¹⁶ The full evaluation shows a ‘difference in difference’ analysis. In the baseline EPP survey, 19% of those who eventually received Free Bikes and 20% of those who did not, reported that they had not undertaken physical activity in the past seven days. By follow up, only 6% of those who had received a Free Bike reported that they had not undertaken physical activity in the past seven days, compared to 18% among those who had not received a Free Bike. This strong finding could reflect the delivery approach in Essex which is to contact recipients after they have received the bike and encourage them to use their bike, or letting them know they can return the bike for it to be re-issued if they are not using it.

"I was quite ill, and my health was going down very badly. I was losing muscle, because I couldn't walk for long. I got a trapped nerve, but as soon as I get in a cycle, I can cycle for 2/3 hours, no problem. I could not go out because of the trapped nerves, sometimes I could not walk for 100 yards. So, I was putting on weight... getting onto the bicycles now it has actually got me out of the house, doing more exercise and my health is getting much much better."

- LRS Focus Group Participant

"My health has improved, I lost a lot of weight, nearly 10 kilos. And my blood pressure, sugar level and cholesterol, all going very, very low now."

- LRS recipient

Free Bikes schemes have a powerful and transformative effect on the mental health and wellbeing of recipients

- Recipients' self-rated life satisfaction, happiness and feelings of life being worthwhile improved since receiving a bike.
- On a per bike basis, this wellbeing benefit amounts to £10,000 per year for the average recipient, according to WELLBY.

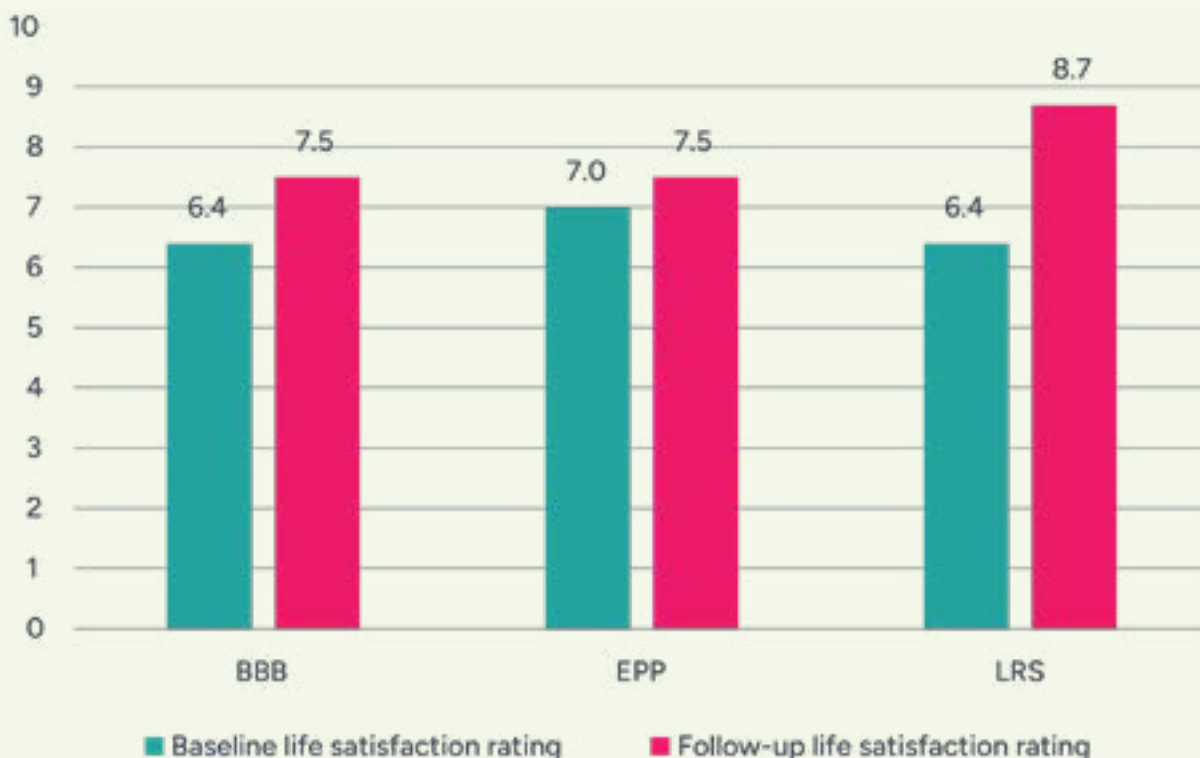
"I've been feeling top of the world these days, because I'm riding three times a week, and it really makes the difference, mentally specifically. I used to be very depressed, very low, and very moody. But because of these exercises, especially bike riding, I'm feeling much better than before."

– LRS recipient

Figure 6: Recipients' life satisfaction after receiving the bikes increased compared to before.

Recipients' self-rated life satisfaction before and after receiving the Free Bikes.

(Graph source: Free Bikes schemes surveys)



Partnerships with NHS Trusts has led to more staff bike commuting and enhanced wellbeing

The Basildon Hospital Scheme focuses on providing staff with Free Bikes to encourage sustainable, healthy travel and improve access to their workplace. An EPP evaluation by Active Essex on the 245 bikes given to the hospital staff showed that:

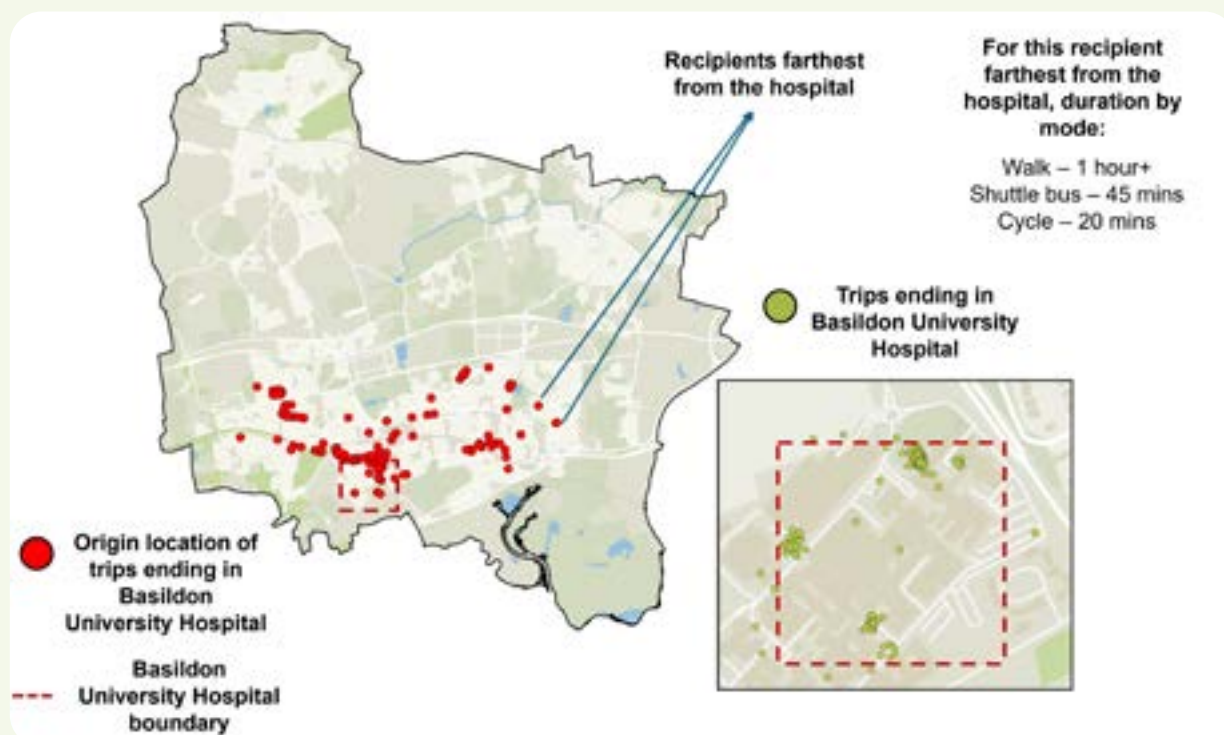
- 56% of the hospital staff recipients self-reported that they exercised regularly, compared to 38% non-recipient staff. Staff are supported to use their bikes, overcoming typical barriers such as fear of traffic.
- Staff car journeys amongst recipients reduced by over 50% per week.

The Free Bikes schemes can support prevention through the social prescription model

The BBB Bikes on Prescription scheme used GP surgery partners to help identify potential applicants and direct them to the scheme. This social prescription route has helped identify individuals whose health would benefit from the schemes even though they were not eligible through scheme criteria. As of 2023, 200 bikes and 9 e-bikes were given to patients identified by GP links.

Figure 7: For the recipient who was the farthest from Basildon University Hospital, it would take over twice the time to reach the hospital by public transport compared to the bike.

Trips ending in Basildon University Hospital.







Empowering communities

Key evaluation findings

- 10% of respondents reported improved community relationships, equivalent to over 1,100 across the 12,000 bikes given away.
- Across all schemes, around 30% reported an increase in family participation, reaching as high as 60% in some cases.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) agenda summary

- MHCLG aims to create a long-term solution to improving social cohesion through work with key local stakeholders and communities.¹⁷

¹⁷ UK Parliament, 2025. Community Development: Question for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Free Bikes schemes make recipients feel more connected to others and improve community relationships

Free Bikes enable people to access more community and leisure spaces. When people spend more time in their community spaces, they are able to create social capital that leads to higher levels of trust and cooperation in the community.

The evidence suggests that positive relational impacts have been experienced within communities in all three schemes. Recipients got to know each other and would often coordinate their own informal bike rides outside of organised led rides. Participants were also aware of each other's personal journeys and made efforts to get more people involved in community activities. This demonstrates the unique strength of the schemes in bringing people together.

"I've felt an improvement in my mood because now I feel part of a community, more connected, and when we go out as a group with them cycling vests, the hi-vis, with the club name on it and people ask about the club it makes me feel proud to be part of the community."

- LRS recipient

"Personally I didn't come to (LRS) to lead. What we do....it's part of the community... feeling a part of it, being a part of it, supporting people, being a cyclist, and supporting and for health and wellbeing...in a community way"

- LRS mechanic

Bringing different groups together builds social trust

For example, older people feel less isolated and more connected as part of a group, and previous cultural barriers to women cycling have been broken down as a result of the schemes. The time spent in the company of others in the community allows many to feel more connected to each other and to improve relationships with one another.

"I've saved loads of money since having the bike. I go out with friends too, so the social aspect has been brilliant. I feel a lot happier and more connected to people in the community."

- BBB recipient

"I've definitely learned that more socialisation is possible because of the bikes. Especially among kids."

- BBB Focus Group Participant

"The thing I appreciate the most is knowing that I have somewhere to meet people. I now go regularly to the Jaywick community garden, which I discovered while on my bike."

- EPP Clacton & Jaywick Focus Group Participant

Access to employment & opportunities

Key evaluation findings

- A third of LRS recipients said that they used their bikes to cycle to either work or education.
- The EPP evaluation carried out by Active Essex showed that 32% of EPP recipients said that the bikes made it easier to access jobs.
- Benefits of over £500,000 in labour supply welfare have been identified.

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) agenda summary¹⁸

- DWP aims to enable people to find 'good jobs', to stay employed, advance their careers and increase their earnings. This includes supporting those with disabilities and health conditions to access and sustain work.
- DWP is focusing on tackling child poverty and hardship, ensuring financial security for all.

¹⁸ Department for Work & Pensions, Evidence and Evaluation Strategy 2025.

Free bikes have improved access to a range of opportunities for recipients

The enhanced mobility afforded by the free bike has enabled recipients to access opportunities such as education, employment, and health and leisure facilities by removing the key barrier of opportunity: cost.

Both the GPS data and survey responses demonstrate that recipients have used their bikes to access schools, jobs, hospitals and shopping destinations. Some previously unemployed recipients have reported finding new jobs due to the schemes.

The objectives of the Free Bikes schemes are heavily centred around improving access to key amenities and opportunities. Access to opportunities strongly influence health outcomes.

Across all three schemes, recipients have used the bikes to access key social infrastructure and opportunities, highlighting the impact the bikes can have on reducing social and health inequalities that are prevalent in the most deprived communities.

Figure 8: Free bikes increase accessibility of district and city centres.

Access to city centre and district centres by different modes of transport (left), and Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath East (SBHE) trips ending in district and city centre (right).

(Source: BBB GPS data 2015-2017; OS Contributors; MapTiler; TravelTime; Birmingham City Council, 2012. Shopping and Local Centres Supplementary Planning Guidance)



The schemes help people take up new employment opportunities

Employment is a wider determinant of health, and recipient testimonials evidence the health benefits from being able to access work.

All three of the pilot schemes resulted in people accessing employment, and for any of these roles that went to previously unemployed people, this represents a benefit of over £500,000 in labour supply welfare. The schemes themselves also directly employ people, as well as providing opportunities for volunteers to gain new skills.

Case study

"I had nothing to do..."

A bike recipient in his early twenties moved to the UK in recent years and struggled to find employment, until he received his free bike through the scheme.

He spoke of having 'nothing to do' before receiving the bike but now has a job as a courier. He explains that his bike is both his work and his hobby, describing how he enjoys fixing up and maintaining his bike, and that his mental health has improved significantly as a result.

"So after I got the bike, the main change is the time spent getting to the town centre. It shortened the journey. Usually, it took 30 minutes, now it takes 6 minutes, works for me."

- EPP Basildon Focus Group Participant

Case study

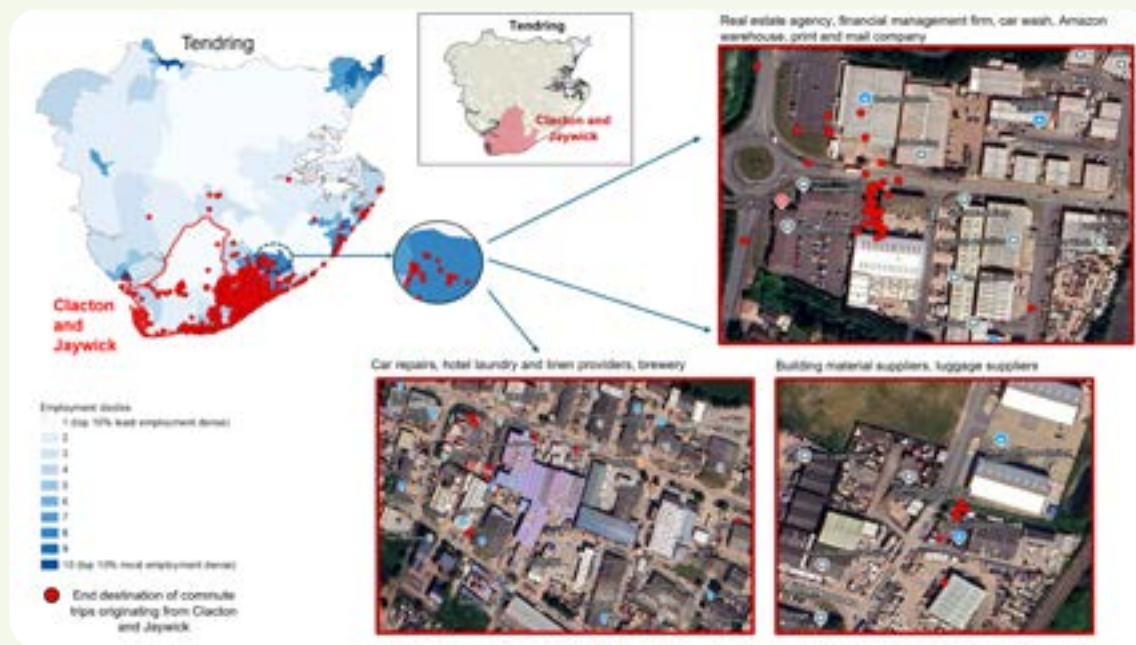
Clacton & Jaywick

Essex has pockets of highly deprived areas, many of which record high unemployment levels, residents who earn relatively low incomes and children living in poverty. Among these areas is Clacton & Jaywick, which recorded the highest economic inactivity rate nationally in 2022 - approximately 47% compared to 21% in the rest of the UK.

The schemes improved recipients' access to jobs opportunities by broadening travel to businesses, industrial estates and retail parks. Figure 9 shows the end destinations of trips that originated in Clacton and Jaywick, in relation to the employment density of different areas across Tendring. Approximately 41% of the commute trips (2,274 trips) originating from this deprived area ended in the top 20% most employment dense areas in Tendring.

Figure 9: Recipients have used free bikes to reach areas industrial estates outside Clacton and Jaywick.

EPP Clacton and Jaywick commute trips by employment density deciles







Scaling up Free Bikes schemes

The technical report has provided clear evidence that a relatively small investment can create large positive impacts. Introducing more Free Bikes schemes across the country could ensure people in areas with the highest levels of deprivation are able to experience the benefits of regular cycling.

UK Government recently announced an expansion of the Pride in Place neighbourhoods programme across the UK. Funding will be available to these neighbourhoods to improve residents' health and socio-economic outcomes. Free Bikes schemes could be part of a suite of interventions to support these neighbourhoods. In an illustrative example of how large the realised benefits could be nationally; two scenarios are presented:

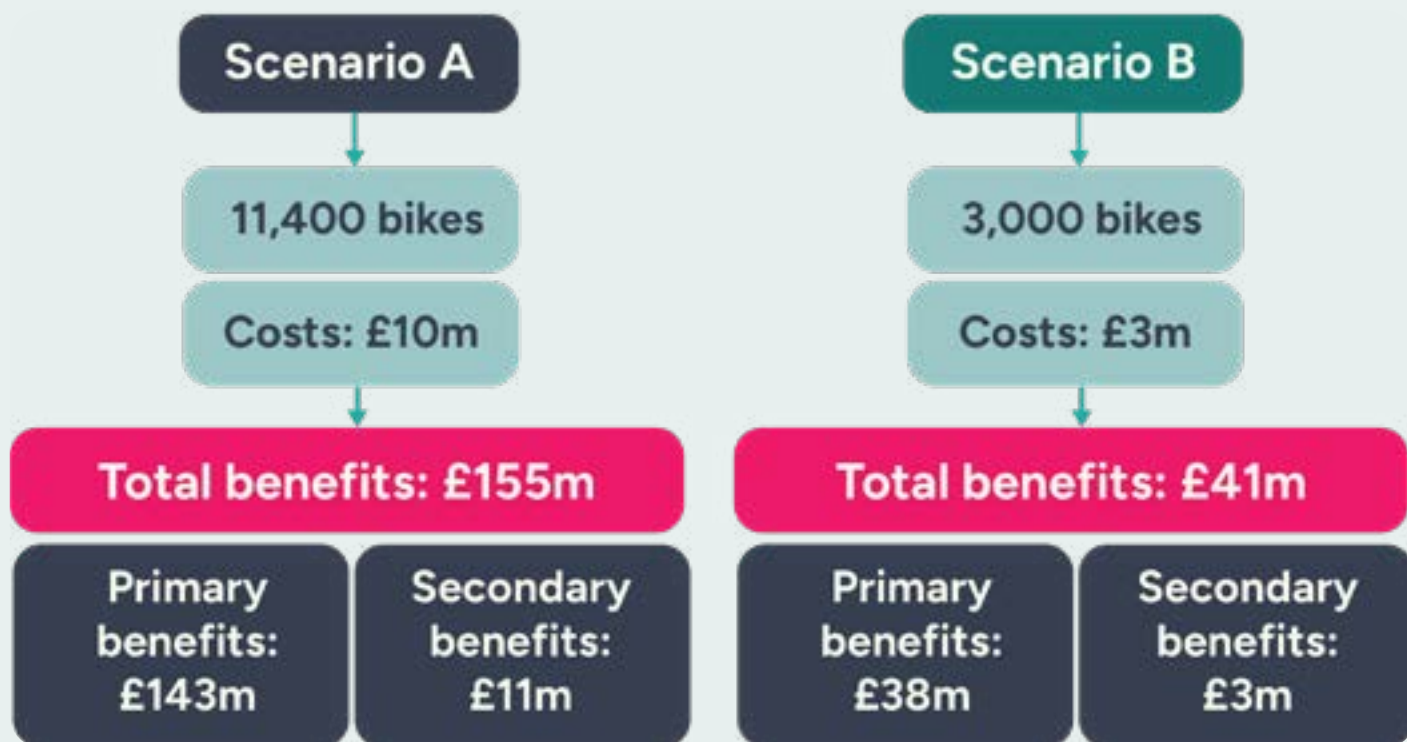
Scenario A

It is assumed that the Free Bikes schemes are rolled out in a quarter of the Pride in Place Neighbourhoods, or 19 locations in total. These schemes are assumed to be a similar size to EPP Basildon (the smallest of the evaluated schemes), at 600 bikes per scheme.

Scenario B

It is assumed that the Free Bikes schemes are rolled out in a slightly lower number of Pride in Place Neighbourhoods than Scenario A, at 15 locations in total. These schemes are assumed to be a third of the size of Scenario A, at 200 bikes per scheme.

Figure 10: Indicative benefits for national rollouts of Free Bikes schemes could range between £41m and £155m. Scenarios for Free Bikes schemes scale-up.



Note: The average costs and benefits per recipient are obtained from the national evaluation of Free Bikes schemes. The benefit per bike captures both the positive and negative benefits of the schemes. The number of bikes given out and the benefits are based on the full benefits of the existing schemes, i.e., based on the complete life of the schemes over which benefits will be fully realised. Total benefits may not add up due to rounding.

Pride in Place Neighbourhoods are just one example of areas that could benefit vastly from Free Bikes schemes. A rollout of the Free Bikes schemes, complemented by essential infrastructure improvements, is a transformative opportunity. This initiative could fast-track the UK towards a 'cycling nation' status while fostering a healthier, more inclusive cycling culture.

These schemes are aligned to Government Missions and funding priorities

Government Mission	Free Bikes schemes Impacts (based on 12,000 bikes)
Kickstarting Economic Growth	• Across all schemes, the AMAT identifies over £2.7m of absenteeism benefits over all the schemes' lifetimes. Essentially, because of physical activity from the schemes, workers are less likely to call in sick, resulting in less lost labour and economic output.¹⁹ • To date, the Free Bikes schemes have generated £12 in benefits for every £1 invested. Over the entire lifecycle of the bike, this rises to £16 in benefits for every £1 invested. • Free Bikes schemes improve access to Labour Markets for employers and can improve recruitment and retention rates for lower paid employees. • 32% of trips mode shift from cars to bikes, thus freeing up local roads for the movement of goods and services.
An NHS Fit for the Future	• Self-reported improved physical health in 48% of survey respondents. • 58 new disease cases prevented (savings of £1m to the NHS) and 3 premature deaths prevented annually. • A wellbeing benefit of £10,000 per year per bike based on WELLBY. • Connectivity to Basildon University Hospital improved for two-thirds of hospital staff recipients.
Safer Streets	• Over 1,100 recipients are estimated to have improved community relationships, and 60% recipients stated the ability to cycle with family. • Both these impacts build community trust and increase visibility of community cycling, which contributes towards a sense of local stewardship.
Break Down Barriers to Opportunity	• Improved access to work for 32% of recipients. Schemes can boost employability by removing the barrier of access to transport for local jobs. • Journey times to schools halved by bike use compared to public transport. • Increases participant confidence and upskilling, which enables them to take part in further volunteering and career opportunities.

¹⁹ Volterra Partners LLP, 2025. National evaluation of free bikes: Main report.



Delivering a Free Bikes scheme

Why a Free Bikes scheme might be appropriate for your area

A Free Bikes scheme is ideal for:

- **Areas where there are high levels of physical inactivity.**
 - › The schemes would improve physical activity in previously inactive populations.
- **Areas with high levels of health, economic and social inequalities.**
 - › The schemes would benefit areas with high levels of deprivation and other forms of inequalities like low social cohesion and poor physical health outcomes.
- **Areas where disposable income of residents prevents them from purchasing a bike or embracing other forms of active travel in their lives.**
- **Areas where cycling participation is lower than average.**
 - › The schemes increase cycle equity.
- **Areas with high transport barriers and limited access to opportunities.**
 - › The schemes improve access to opportunities by providing free transport.
- **Budgets where spending needs to be targeted carefully.**
 - › The benefits of the Free Bikes schemes are 12-16 times their costs.
 - › These schemes are suitable in the current context of local government financial constraint, where resources need to be targeted at areas in with the greatest need, but also as a potential 'invest to save' solution.

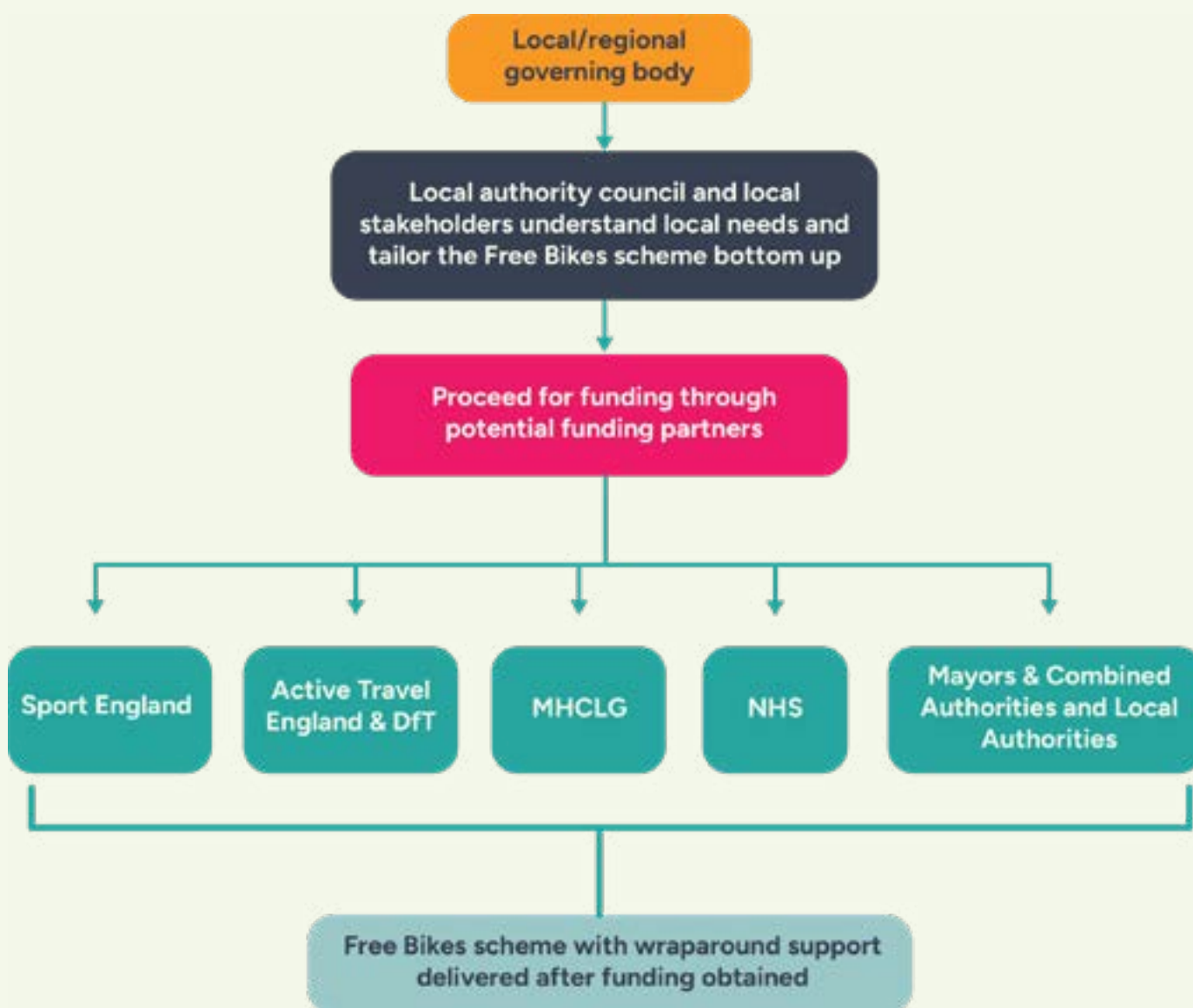
How do I secure funding?

A roadmap to delivery

There are several sources of active travel and physical activity funding available at a national, regional and local level.

Local authorities and local partnerships can collaborate to identify local needs and adapt proposals for Free Bikes schemes to their local circumstances.

Figure 11: There are multiple funding pots that could be used for obtaining funding for future Free Bikes schemes. A roadmap to obtaining funding and establishing the Free Bikes schemes in an area.



What are the essential costs?

The schemes have used funding across a range of programme elements, including:

- Upfront costs to set up and establish the schemes;
- The bikes themselves;
- GPS trackers;
- Staff costs;
- Cycle training, equipment and accessories;
- Other operational costs such as cycle hubs/facilities hire and van giveaway costs; and
- One off costs like cycle infrastructure provision.

Not all of these costs are essential for successfully rolling out future schemes. For example, while GPS trackers provide useful insights into bike usage and can inform infrastructure planning, they are not fundamental to delivering the benefits of a Free Bikes scheme.

Engagement with recipients confirmed that an effective scheme requires more than just the provision of free bikes. Training, wraparound support, staff and marketing were also seen as crucial components. When asked if the bike, wraparound support or community base was most important, respondents unanimously agreed that all were essential:

“It’s the combination of all three that makes it work.”

- EPP Colchester Focus Group Participant

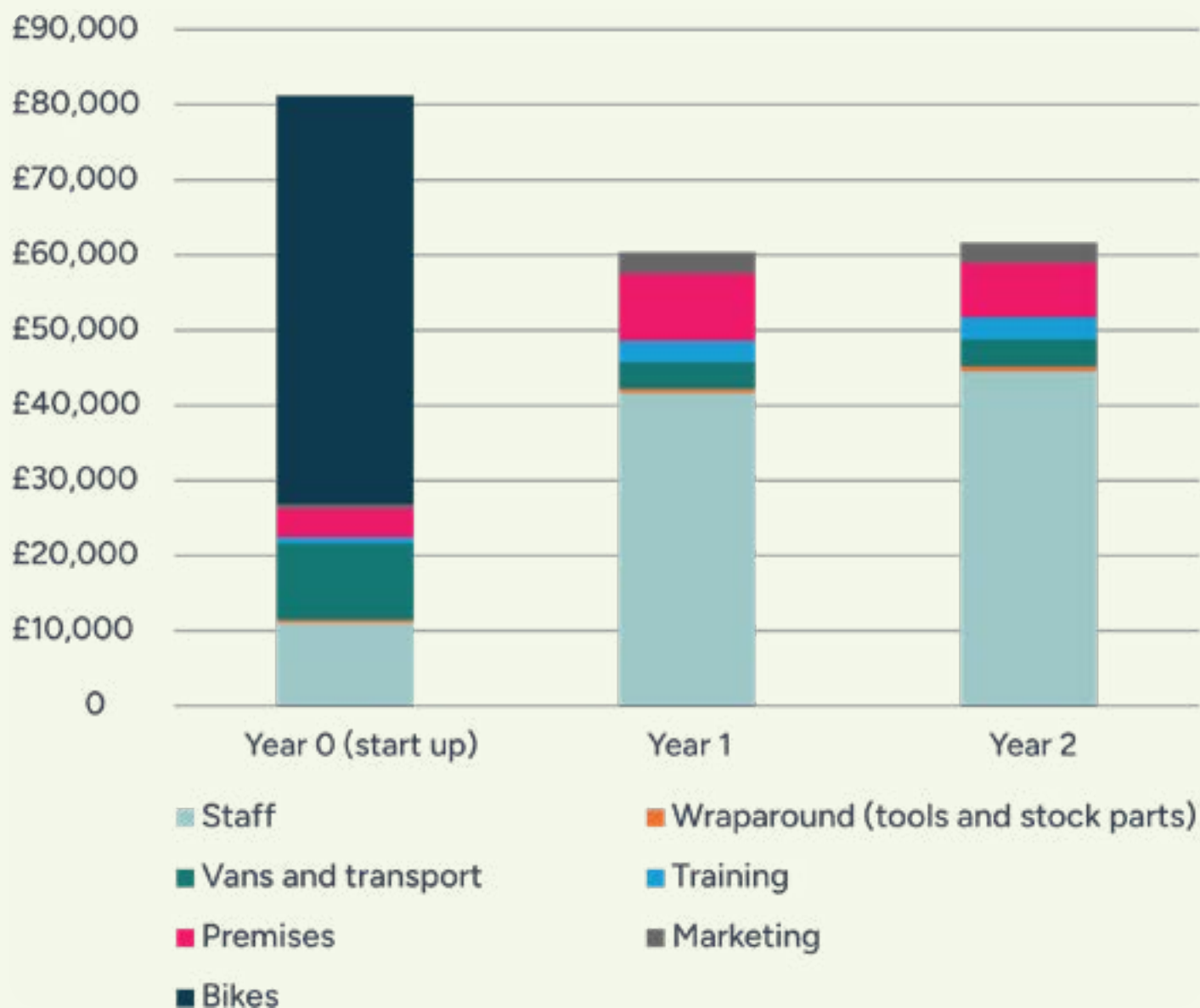
As a broad rule of thumb, during the evaluation period the essential costs were estimated at around £1,000 per bike participant. This cost is indicative only and does not include in kind contributions from partners (such as providing premises for operations and storage) which would reduce costs.

To illustrate how this cost could be broken down over a scheme’s lifetime, the existing examples of EPP Basildon, EPP Colchester and EPP Harwich and Dovercourt can be used, since these schemes involved a similar number of bikes delivered over a similar timeframe.

Figure 12 illustrates the costs of an indicative Minimum Viable Product (MVP) scheme with 200 bikes being given away, covering one start-up year (Year 0) and two operational years.

Figure 12: A 200-bike scheme would cost £200,000 – equivalent to £1,000 per bike. Start-up costs of an indicative MVP scheme include just £27,000 fixed costs and £270 per bike.

Costs of an indicative MVP Free Bikes scheme of 200 bikes.



This scheme of 200 bikes would cost £200,000. The start-up costs (in year 0) amount to around £80,000, of which £27,000 are fixed (such as staff, transport and premises). The remaining start-up costs are the purchasing of bikes (200 bikes at £270 each, totalling £54,000). Overall, this equates to approximately £400 per unit of total start-up costs. The ongoing operational costs in year 1 and 2 (£60,000 per year) are assumed to vary on a per-bike basis, mainly covering staff, premises and marketing.

This MVP represents only the core, essential components of a scheme – that is, the elements most directly responsible for generating the observed benefits. By contrast, the £12–£16 SROI figure reported in the evaluation was calculated against a broader set of costs, some of which (such as GPS trackers) support monitoring and learning but are not as necessary to deliver benefits to participants. Because the MVP strips the scheme back to its most critical elements, the costs are lower while the benefits remain tied to these essentials. As such, the true SROI of an MVP scheme could be higher than that observed in the evaluation, but this cannot be explicitly modelled.

Considering the evidence that is available through this evaluation, it is unclear what the fixed start-up costs would be for a ‘minimum’ scheme of even smaller scale than this, and hence whether that smaller scheme would represent value for money.

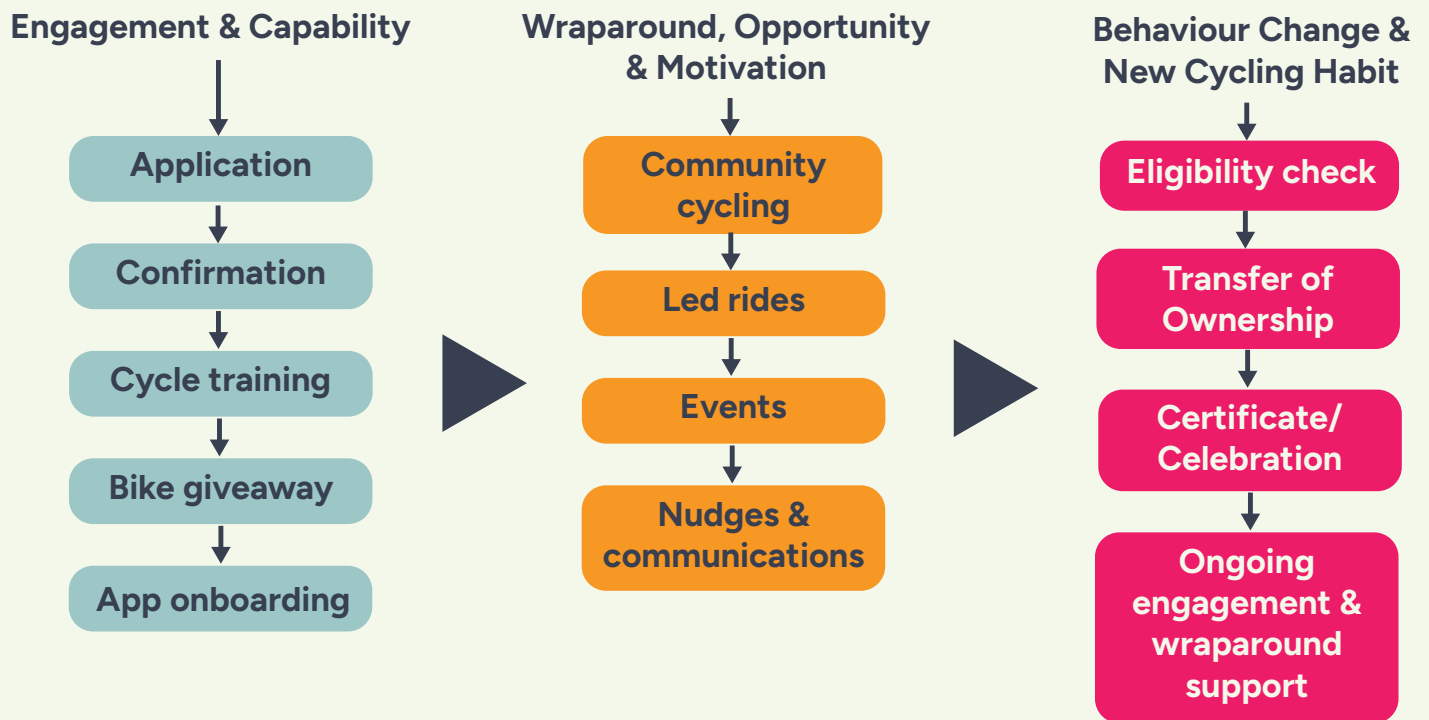
Self-sustaining schemes delivered by and for the community

Each Free Bikes scheme has built delivery capacity within the communities they have served and have adopted a strong volunteer model. LRS adopted a promotional system where recipients become volunteers and then managers in the scheme. BBB has actively worked with Cycling UK to form community led rides, where experienced recipients become volunteers and ride leaders. EPP recipients now volunteer at bike giveaways, deliver training, bike building and maintenance.

What is a good scheme design and how do I maximise its success?

- Flexible eligibility: Use of deprivation and affordability metrics to prioritise those most in need, with room to include other individuals who don’t meet this criteria. This allows for the Free Bikes schemes to target residents who may be underserved across a variety of socio-economic outcomes.
- Local tailoring: Adapt the model to each area’s priorities (e.g. access to health services, access to schools). This will mean the schemes are tailored to the area’s unique challenges.
- It’s about more than just the bike: it is imperative to provide a Free Bike along with the wraparound support. Without training, taking up cycling would not be possible for some recipients. The community-led rides are crucial to sustained cycling behaviour for many. Several recipients noted the importance of the provision of locks to keep their bikes safe.
- Social prescribing: Partner with GPs and NHS services to embed cycling into patient care. This is a credible and easy way of getting more people into active travel.
- Community-led sustainability: Develop local delivery teams and volunteer networks to build trust and ensure the schemes are sustainable in the long term.

Participant journey



Wraparound support







Conclusion & recommendations

Conclusion

By directly removing financial and accessibility barriers, Free Bikes schemes provide a bespoke and highly impactful intervention to support people in deprived and underserved communities.

The evaluation demonstrates that these schemes deliver benefits across multiple policy agendas. They enable healthier and more active lifestyles for people who are less engaged with cycling, and achieve a higher-than-average mode shift from car to bike. Their inclusive design successfully engages historically inactive communities. The schemes support the prevention agenda by improving physical and mental health outcomes at an individual and community level, delivering cost savings to the NHS through reduced demand.

Free Bikes schemes also contribute to wider government priorities, from tackling transport challenges, to enhancing community cohesion and boosting access to economic and social opportunities. They foster belonging, empowerment and personal agency, helping people to live healthier and more independent lives.

Overall, the schemes represent a transformative, high-value approach with significant potential for national scale-up as an 'invest to save' intervention, offering substantial and wide-ranging social returns.

Recommendations

Embed the evidence into policy

Government, national agencies, the NHS, Mayoral Combined Authorities, and local authorities should adopt Free Bikes schemes as an evidence-based intervention with proven social and health returns.

Position as place-based innovation

Free Bikes should be understood as a distinctive and evidence-led component of place-based strategies that can deliver substantial outcomes.

Strengthen system-wide collaboration

In particular, closer partnership with the NHS would enable cycling to be embedded within patient pathways, maximising both preventative and treatment benefits.

Co-design future schemes

Future schemes should draw on lessons learned and engage existing operators to co-design schemes that maximise returns.

Consider alongside infrastructure interventions

Free Bikes schemes should be considered with behavioural and infrastructure initiatives to ensure equitable access to cycling networks and to maximise the return on cycle infrastructure investment.

Contact

For more information about Free Bikes schemes, their impact, and how to deliver a scheme in your area, contact The Active Wellbeing Society at **partnerships@theaws.org**

The Active Wellbeing Society is a community benefit society and co-operative, working towards a future free from inequality, so that everyone can be happy, healthy and active. For more information about our work, go to **www.theaws.co.uk**

For a digital version of the summary report and the full technical report, scan the QR code below:



The Value of Free Bikes Schemes: Summary Report was
Authored by Volterra Partners LLP on behalf of The Active
Wellbeing Society and Sport England.

 The Active Wellbeing Society

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