

## **Walking for Everyone: opportunities for making the most of journeys on foot in Buckinghamshire**

*Susan Claris, Transport Planner at Arup and Vice President of Living Streets*

The principal benefits of walking are linked to the key challenges facing the planet today – addressing climate change, improving physical and mental wellbeing and reducing social inequality. The events of the past twelve months have clearly highlighted how walking is of vital importance to maintaining societal function during periods of rapid change or disruption; not just for some, but for everyone.

From over 70 years of practice at Arup, we know that a walkable place is a better place, and that the more we walk, the better the place, in every respect. Our *Cities Alive: Towards a Walking World* report describes the multitude of benefits of walkable cities. These can be broadly represented by four categories:

- **Social:** including health and wellbeing, safety, placemaking, social cohesion and equality.
- **Economic:** including city attractiveness, the local economy, urban regeneration, and cost savings.
- **Environmental:** including virtuous cycles, ecosystem services, liveability and transport efficiency.
- **Political:** including leadership, urban governance, sustainable development and planning opportunities.

*Towards a Walking World* highlights the need to seize the opportunity to place people back at the heart of the places in which we live and drive a human-focused approach to the design of the built environment. This theme was continued in our publication *Cycling for Everyone*, which investigates the barriers and challenges that affect the cycling choices of key demographic groups likely to be most disadvantaged and how these can be overcome to make cycling more inclusive for everyone.

Our recent experience on the High Wycombe Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) identifies that the attractiveness of cycling and walking as transport modes has been historically constrained by the town's hilly topography and an over reliance on the private car. Unfortunately, this constraint has often been wrongly perceived as a barrier to successful investment in active travel in the town.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for an increased focus on local living and local trips, which is not going to change in the short to medium-term. Early stakeholder engagement showed that there are currently relatively low levels of walking and cycling in High Wycombe, but there is significant untapped demand. Unlocking this demand will help achieve various benefits, including savings to the NHS from a more active and healthy society and increased spending within the local economy as a result of increased footfall.

The bold vision and ambition for High Wycombe is to identify streets to be transformed into better places where walking and cycling are encouraged and enjoyed by people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. The LCWIP proposes a range of active travel interventions and measures that will set out the infrastructure required to tackle the ongoing challenges of climate change, housing growth, air pollution and the growing public health crisis of physical inactivity. It will assist in providing healthier, happier and greener communities in High Wycombe and safer streets for everyone.

With the particular characteristics of polycentric counties such as Buckinghamshire, and one that has a significant share of its population that falls into older demographics and those with young families, facilitating inclusivity through something as utilitarian as walking is key. A future consideration of how the successful approach to walking and cycling planning that is being pursued in High Wycombe can be rolled out across Buckinghamshire, to ensure a consistent approach to safe, accessible and well-connected active travel infrastructure and reduce car dependency as the county grows has never been more important.

Historically, across the nation, the importance of walking and cycling has been overlooked by policy and decision makers. However, the £2 billion funding for cycling and walking announced by the DfT in May 2020 supported by 'Gear Change' is a bold step change toward positively influencing the way our places and streets will function. There has never been a greater public appetite for active modes of travel and it is crucial that we maximise the contribution it can make to the vibrancy and prosperity of our towns and villages.