



Bicester Healthy New Town Local Stakeholders Workshop

Health Route Briefing Note



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Background

The Bicester Healthy New Town Programme has identified the need to tackle obesity and social isolation to create a healthier population. Oxfordshire Sport & Physical Activity (OxSPA), the County Sport Partnership for Oxon, reports that 23% of people are inactive and 38% of people don't get enough exercise. The consequences of this is that inactivity is a factor in 40% of long term medical conditions costing the UK £20billion a year and a cost of £14m to Oxfordshire Local Authorities. Increasing levels of physical activity is therefore a priority.

The NHS has launched the *Couch to 5k* initiative, and more recently, the *Active 10* app to help get people more active, and in an effective way to help prevent the onset of long-term conditions. Walking / running is accessible as there is no cost to participation and suitable for a wide range of ages. It can be done alone or in groups and at any time of day and as such can meet the needs of a wide range of individuals. This project supports this by identifying safe walking/running routes close to homes and marking them to encourage participation: primarily this is done with a continuous NHS-blue line, but additional way-marking signage (pictured) assists with informing residents of the purpose of the blue-painted line.



Much of the routes are also suitable for cyclists, but some public rights of way used within the routes are prohibited to cycling, however we still encourage use of the Health Route in this way: cyclists simply have to dismount and push their bike along such pathways, or use an alternative route around those sections.

Routes, where possible, pass through green-spaces so as to increase awareness of their locations and benefit, local amenities (including adventure playground areas, ponds and shops) as well as variety within the route for participants, and be a minimum of 5km in length. They are circular, so although we have marked a suggested START / FINISH point, and km update markers from there, it doesn't matter where a resident picks up the route, or indeed, which direction they choose to follow it. Although it is 5km in length, the update markers allow for easy distance measuring for those feeling that 5k is too much initially, and a number of pathway shortcuts allow for shortening of the route: they also provide an easy point-of-reference, and we have seen social media communications that "suggest we meet at the 3k mark"...

The project represents a *preventative healthcare initiative*, with potential significant cost savings to the Clinical Commissioning Group / NHS through the reduction in long-term medical conditions needing treatment (such as those linked to obesity: Type II diabetes where obesity is believed to account for 80-85% of the risk. Over the next 20 years, the number of obese adults in the country is forecast to soar to 26 million, leading to more than a million extra cases of type II diabetes, heart disease and cancer¹).

¹ [UK fat alert: 26 million will be obese by 2030](#) - Jeremy Laurance, published August 26, 2011

Impact

Whilst it is difficult to quantify the impact of the Health Routes without further resource and expertise to do this, it is clear from anecdotal evidence gathered from social media that the project is having a significant impact to a large number of local residents.

One such resident, Samantha, has been a great advocate for the project. Following the installation of the initial route in May around Langford Village, she posted on Facebook:

"Really wish you'd do one around Glory Farm / Launton Meadows too! Would be really good if each housing estates had one..."

Once all three routes were marked out, she responded to a post on the @HealthyBicester page:

"We love them! I have been using them as part of my new daily/weekly fitness routine over the last 9 weeks and I have lost 1 stone 4.8lb so I will use them till they are worn out! They are a fab idea! I've got friends all over the country and there are many of my friends jealous their towns don't have them!"

We then arranged a telephone interview with Samantha:

Samantha is 30 and is mum of an 8 year old boy. She works as an administrator and, doing a desk based job made her become very inactive because she could be sitting for the whole day. She also has a long term medical condition, is an ex-smoker and was recently diagnosed with anxiety.

Her son heard about the health route at school which is close to Langford village and he repeatedly asked his mum to try a loop, but kept postponing this walk.

On 17th July (she remembered the date specifically) she decided that it was time to change her lifestyle. She walked the blue line in Langford with her son and it was very painful. So, she took up the challenge of walking the blue line at least three times a week with her son, so that they could have some regular activities to do over the summer.

Then, she decided that she wanted to use the health route for her own time as well as a family activity. She bought a Fit Bit™ and ever since she is measuring her performance. She now can walk the route in 45 minutes and doesn't miss her session even when it's raining. But she isn't quite happy yet. So she has recently started the Couch to 5K programme because she aims to be able to complete the route in 30 minutes. She has never run before and even though it's hard she is carrying on.

"My life has so much improved since the health route is part of my routine and this change came at no cost at all" says Sam. "I am so glad to live in a place that gives me the opportunity to make my life better and I feel it's the best place for my son to grow".

The reach of FaceBook posts about the installation of the routes and promotion following this is now well in excess of 50,000 people, with one post (pictured) about the completion of the Bicester West route being shared 15 times, reaching more than 17,000 people (greater than any other post on the @HealthyBicester page, including paid-for 'boosted' posts), receiving 140 likes in the first day, and over 60 comments.

The project has significantly increased the number of followers of the @HealthyBicester social media accounts, allowing us to easily engage with more residents on future project elements.



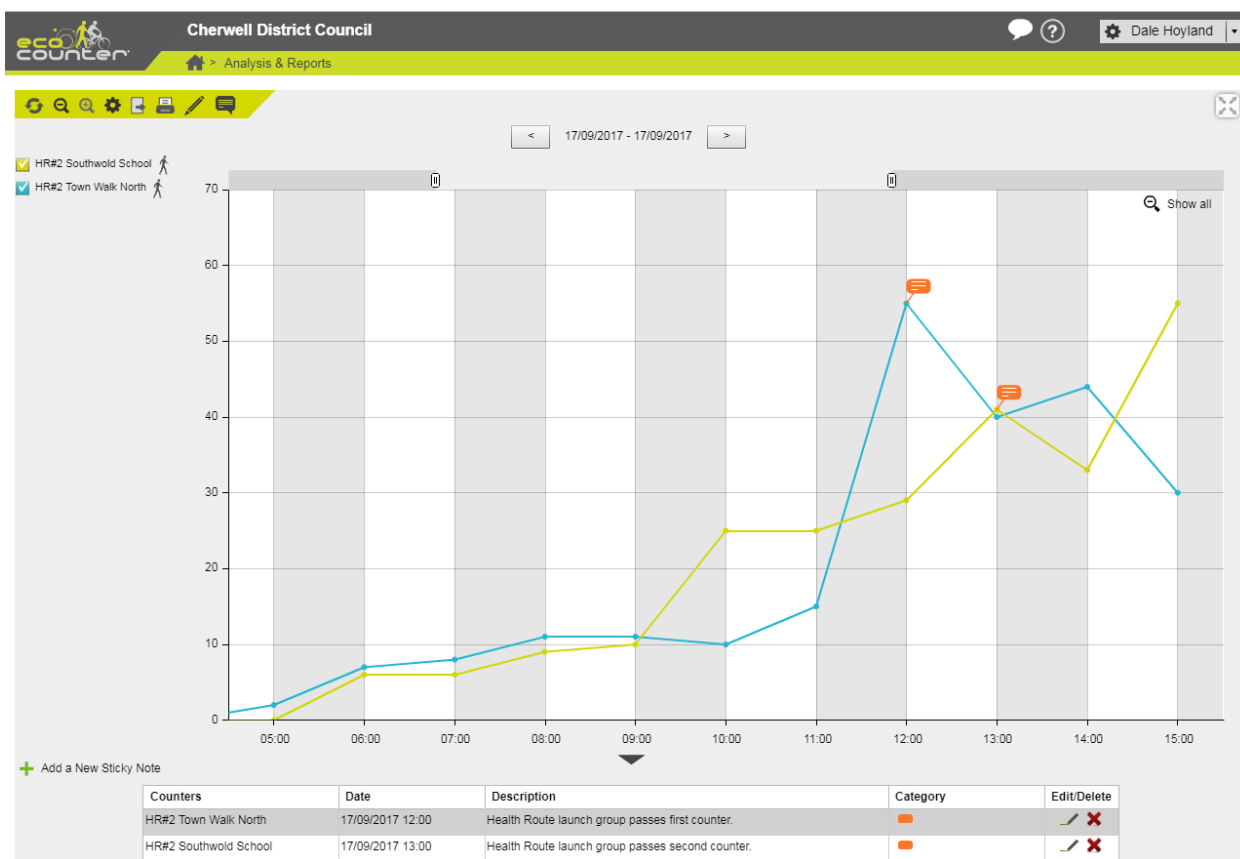
One tool to allow us to monitor usage of the routes are a number of beam-break electronic 'pedestrian counters' which are installed around the routes. For the latter two routes, Bicester West and Bicester North-East, these were installed a couple of months ahead of the line being in place, to allow us to have an idea of the background pedestrian traffic along the routes, and to therefore measure the increase once the route had been marked out.

For the Bicester West route, the daily average footfall prior to installation of the Health Route was 557 people: this increased to 708. This equates to an extra 1,000 people weekly that might reasonably be attributed to the new Health Route (although it is acknowledged that some people would otherwise have been out and about walking / running, but now have altered their route to follow the blue line).

On the North-East route, we arranged an official launch, tagged onto an existing 'Sunday Funday' event. We know that at midday, over 40 people set off on the 5k circular Health Route following the official launch, led by Cllr Sean Gaul and his family. This data is mirrored when looking at the pedestrian counter information, with a peak of 55 people passing through at midday, followed by 40 people at 1pm and 44 at 2pm. The counter at Town Walk North is located ½ km into the route.

The counter at Southwold School, located 2½ km along the route, recorded 41 people passing at 1pm, 33 people at 2pm and 55 people at 3pm, as shown in the graph below.





Issues

- Vandalism:- We have had one of our pedestrian counters stolen from its monitoring point in Bure Park Nature Reserve, and attempts made to others (see photograph). A number of our waymarking signs have been damaged or removed.
- Safety concerns:- It is clear that some have reservations about using the route at dusk / in the evenings due to some of the alleyways and park areas feeling unsafe. We initially consulted with Thames Valley Police at the route planning stage, who informed us that the greater the traffic along a pathway, the less the crime levels, and to aid the feeling of safety, PCSO's would patrol the route when possible so as to have a greater presence.



All of the routes (with the exception of a stretch along Jubilee Lake in Langford Village, where an alternative route has been indicated) are lit by streetlamps.

We encourage residents to join up with friends, family, neighbours, both to increase social interaction and use of the routes, and also to help reduce any feeling of being unsafe.

- Line removal:- Essential works, primarily gas pipeline replacement by SSE as the District Network Operator (DNO) have resulted in extensive patching in Bicester. We are currently working with the DNO to ensure that the Health Route marking is reinstated following completion of such works, and in the meanwhile, are installing additional signage to help maintain the resource during such works.



- Line fading:- The team had anticipated that the line would last for between 12 and 24 months without significant loss of the marking integrity, and are therefore disappointed that this isn't the case. The Langford route, installed in May 2017 is looking patchy in places, and concerns have been voiced by local residents. We are now working with the contractor, Wilson & Scott (Highways) Ltd, to look into more permanent painting methods (such as thermo-tape and road-highway quality paints) in order to ensure longevity of the resource.

- Leaves on the line(!):- This is a seasonal issue, however, in places, the line is already becoming completely covered. We are planning a number of communications around this to encourage kids to go and kick the leaves off a section of the line, and promote that leaves on these lines do not need to stop the use of it (but that it might make the ground slippery!)

Additionally, we are investigating a road-sweeper to follow the routes to clear debris off the line.





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