

Cycling UK Cymru briefing – Senedd election 2026

Cycling as part of prevention in health

Preventing ill health is not only good policy for the health and wellbeing of the nation it can also reduce pressure on NHS Wales. To get more people living active and healthy lifestyles the next Welsh Government must commit to proactive prevention policies including increasing active travel across Wales.

Cycling UK's manifesto asks

The next Welsh Government should deliver:

- Increased investment in schemes that enable people to walk, wheel and cycle – i.e. active travel.
- A renewed commitment to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, wheeling, cycling and public transport, backed by measurable targets and regular reporting.
- A clear delivery plan to get more people active in green and blue spaces, including through better access to the rights of way network and wider natural space.

Context

In December 2025 the Chief Medical Officer for Wales made an urgent plea for a [prevention-first approach](#) to reduce pressures on the NHS, and stressed the need for action across government and society, including encouraging healthier lifestyle choices.

Public Health Wales has highlighted the importance of [prioritising and investing in prevention](#) and says 'Increasing active travel is a key priority in Wales, contributing to the achievement of all seven of Wales' [well-being goals](#)'. It has included [investment in safe cycling routes](#) within its five public health policy priorities to make a difference for prevention.

In Wales, 30% of adults do very little regular physical activity – only [63% of men and 54% of women](#) are physically active.

Evidence and Impact

- Need for prevention: [75% of deaths](#) in people under the age of 75 in Wales are preventable.
- Prevention costs less than treatment: Public health interventions in general offer a [£14 return for every £1 invested](#).
- Economic cost: Physical inactivity doesn't just affect people's health and wellbeing it costs NHS Wales £51 million each year, and [£314 million](#) to the

overall economy. In 2015 it cost the NHS £millions to treat the effects of physical inactivity – coronary heart disease, £12m; cerebrovascular disease, £10m; diabetes, 12.8m. High rates of obesity are also putting pressure on the NHS.

- Health benefits of cycling: The health benefits of cycling are well documented. Regular active travel can cut the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and depression. A BMJ 2017 study found that cycling to work reduces the risk of heart disease by 46% and cancer by 45%.
- Economic return: For every £1 spent on cycling and walking schemes, £5.62 worth of benefits are achieved on average – this includes health benefits. Outdoor health interventions in Wales provide a similar return on investment.
- Inequality and health: Physical inactivity is related to social disadvantage and additionally, people in the most disadvantaged areas have lower access to greenspace which is positive for health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Increasing cycling in Wales is a high-value preventative-health strategy: it reduces the prevalence and severity of major chronic diseases, lowers NHS service demand and generates strong economic returns. By aligning Welsh active-travel investment with NHS prevention priorities and measuring health outcomes, Wales can both improve population health and reduce long-term pressures on NHS Wales.