

# Child Miles

## Project details

**Full project title:** Child miles

**Sponsor:** Department for Energy and Climate Change Local Carbon Frameworks

**BSMC team:** [Alan Tapp](#)

## Project summary

### Background

#### **Choosing primary schools: Why the grass is often not so green elsewhere**

Choosing the “right primary school” for your kids is one of those things that have become a major part of modern middle class life. Nowadays parents treat their kids’ education like a long term game of chess, creating agonies for themselves: do we go for the nearest school that will allow our little treasure to mix with friends locally? Or the one further away that word has it ‘has better teachers’ (and we privately think, a better class of kids to mix with), but means taking your kids every day in the car?

This is a big deal. Despite the obvious fact that the majority of parents want to send their children to a good school locally, YouGov reports an incredible one in three of GB parents choose a primary school which is not the nearest to them. This, as we all know, generates immense traffic problems and frustration nationally. After the bliss of August traffic, welcome back to the school run everyone.

#### **Can anything be done about it?**

In 2011 Dorset County Council teamed with the Bristol Social Marketing Centre at UWE to see if there was scope to encourage local school uptake, the agenda being to reduce traffic and increase exercise levels.

Using a programme of qualitative research and a YouGov national survey(2) to help them, the team examined the decisions of parents in Dorset and across Britain. The reality was sobering, with few parents willing to adjust their school decision based on reducing car use, or on the benefits of exercise. Instead, a kind of ‘professional parenting’ has taken over, with many parents determined to secure educational advantage for their children – even if that means driving across town for half an hour every morning.

So, can anything be done about this ever increasing school-run traffic jam? Well, how secure is this parental belief that the school across town is better than their local one? We found that parents all too often relied on hearsay, and possibly poorly informed opinions of some other mums. The qualitative research suggested detailed knowledge of, for example, Ofsted reports was sometimes lacking, and often a ‘story’ about such and such a teacher being ‘not very good’ spread like wildfire amongst anxious pre-school parents.

The long term answer seems to lie with local schools stepping up to the plate in how they present themselves locally: understanding what local parents think; recognizing the importance of good presentation; making sure open days, web sites and the like communicate how much the school cares about their kids and about high standards, or even stepping in to cut off inaccurate word-of-mouth. Schools may be instinctively mistrustful of too much slick "marketing" (a word that schools instinctively dislike) –but getting this right would have a massive social benefit - school holiday levels of traffic all year round? And... we might avoid condemning our children to spend their childhood in the back seat of a car.

## **Notes**

The research was funded by the Department for Energy and Climate Change Local Carbon Frameworks as a pilot project to investigate innovative and practical methods for reducing carbon emissions associated with travel

The total sample size for the YouGov survey was 653 parents with children aged 6 months to 6 year. All parents were very involved in the choice of primary school and did not/were not only considering a private school. . Fieldwork was undertaken 29th June - 5th July 2011. The survey was carried out online.

Professor Alan Tapp was interviewed about the project on BBC Radio 5 Live Drive, on 5 September 2011.