

Active Travel

Michael Johnston, Vice President, Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce

More and more Scottish companies are waking up to the very substantial benefits of increased active travel – an emphasis on physical activity such as cycling and walking rather than motorized transport.

For Edinburgh business, the benefits are broad. They come from better employee health, cost reductions through lower energy costs and, perhaps less obviously, through a strengthened employment pool and better brand reputation all leading to improved competitiveness and commercial opportunities.

While motorized transport will, by necessity, remain a cornerstone of the city's economy, a broader and more integrated transport system with an increased emphasis on green infrastructure – basically, foot and cycle paths – opens up employment opportunities as a result of less congestion and easier, quicker commuting. With more than 50 per cent of British car journeys covering less than 5 kilometers, it is in cities where the quickest wins will come from a shift to more active travel.

The Chamber of Commerce network estimates that a switch to regular green commuting will cut by one day the amount of sickness suffered by an average employee. Alongside increasing physical fitness and reduced levels of obesity, employees who walk or cycle enjoy better mental health. The wider economic cost of mental illness in England alone has been estimated at £105 billion a year through direct cost of services and lost productivity at work while the World Health Organization predicts depression will be the second-most prevalent cause of ill-health world-wide by 2020. So, active travel presents potentially huge cost savings.

We are very lucky in Edinburgh to have a large active transport network but there is still more that can be done. In Norwich, it is estimated a planned three-kilometer foot and cycle track could save £1 million, including £210,000 for the NHS. So, while green infrastructure requires considerable investment the return on capital can be large for worthwhile projects.

As well as substantial employee health benefits and the national imperative to achieve carbon reduction targets, an increase in emphasis on sustainable business and a more people friendly, less polluted city environment will bring increasing benefits to Edinburgh companies.

A green cityscape, with plentiful open space and good transport links, that is people friendly attracts the young. Young enthusiastic talent is a critical element in the employment pool. Attracting the brightest and best talent builds strong innovative companies as well as bringing in new and growing spending power to the local economy. Edinburgh's world-class and growing cultural sector is extremely dependent on the young.

Similarly, 'greenness' is a key ingredient in building a positive reputation. Edinburgh is operating on a global scale and is competing for business investment, talent and visitors against cities around the world. Each offers a unique brand so it is vital Edinburgh's proposition is strong. Breathing space is already one the best cards we can deal with Edinburgh Castle, Holyrood Park and the sweeping vistas across the River Forth already internationally recognisable.

Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce, Scotland's largest chamber and a major player in the UK wide British chambers network, is the key voice of city business. It prides itself on speaking up for the sector and is the go-to organisation for government, politicians and influencers wishing to engage with Edinburgh's business community – the wealth creators.

Currently, Edinburgh Chamber is taking a pivotal role in supporting the creation of a long-term City Vision and is leading on the business engagement of the multi billion pound City Region Deal. It is also the lead partner delivering the Regional Developing the Young Workforce programme.