Reviewer's report

Title: Feasibility of an incentive scheme to promote active travel to school: a pilot cluster randomised trial

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Reviewer: Deirdre Harrington

Reviewer's report:

This paper reports on the feasibility stage looking at the use of an incentive scheme to encourage active transport in primary school children in the UK. The team were interested in the recruitment rates of schools and pupils, return rate of data capture methods and how these methods compare. The team must be congratulated on the work in this paper especially as, as the text suggests, this work was done by one PhD student - no easy task. This paper is also well written.

The paper does contain some valuable information about undertaking this type of work in schools. However, I believe there are enough other school based trials in the literature that would have given the team this information (i.e. recruitment rates, return of documentation). Of course the logistics of the study methods are also important to assess the feasibility of but these are not central to the paper.

The fact that there was such a low recruitment of schools (3.3%) has been acknowledged by the team in the discussion. The approach they took for recruitment was surprising considering, based on studies mentioned (Owen; Van Sluijs; Lloyd), other studies have undertaken the recruitment personally or through a head teacher network. Why didn't the team consider these approaches that have been shown to be successful in the past? It is stated that head teacher groups contact details were not available to the team but presumably some details that SUSTRANs gave them were available. Did the team consider partnering with a local SUSTRANS representative to help with recruitment?

Line 64 - The authors state that "An existing systematic review has found limited evidence for the effectiveness of ATS interventions" what were the reasons for this and how does the proposed RCT aim to overcome any of the barriers or problems identified?

Line 68 - The authors state that "Some data suggest that incentives (e.g. rewards)" would be useful. Is there any evidence on what types of incentives might work? Monetary versus items? In the present study the team have used xxx but where is the evidence that this type of intensive scheme is going to be enough/work/appropriate? I think a more pertinent research question would be to explore the different types of incentive schemes and whether would might be more successful than another.
Nice addition of the TXT message reporting. Is there any data or anecdotal evidence of what the parents thought of the variety of methods?

Do the team have any thoughts on whether a £5 voucher for returning then device and then being entered into a draw for £5 if they engaged in ATS seems like a fair payment i.e. the pupils needed to do considerably more to just be entered into a draw for £5 versus getting £5 for simply returning the device.

Thank you for the justification of why £5 was chosen for the incentive scheme. The rationale is nicely written and is a valuable addition. However, it would seem that being entered into a DRAW for that amount of actually is quite small and maybe not an incentive at all. What were the odds of winning if all the children engaged in ATS? The odds obviously increased if less children engaged in ATS. Just a crazy theory but I wonder would this occur to children and that it was actually not in their interest for their peers to also engage in ATS?!

Table 1 - a high proportion of children already engaged in ATS - discuss implications of this in terms of generalisability. Parents already see the value of ATS and perhaps are more likely to return ATS trips?

Return of the ATS numbers from parents is an important number and will help with future planning of trials.

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