



Power in the City

Transcript E01: Talking about Walking

Intro

Britt: Hi, and welcome to Power in the City. This is a podcast about the everyday and on the ground ways that people are responding to the climate emergency.

[guitar music - blues with a walking rhythm]

Mix of voices from the episode: I think I started it for enjoyment at first, just a bit of chill time. It gives me time to kind of think about things and I think it's really good for wellbeing, I genuinely do.

You can't really trust the weather in Oldham. And then you've gotta have like 20 different coats as well just in case you get caught by the rain.

For many people it's just a way to find out a bit about where we live, you know? So that's one side of my walking.

Hannah: The first season is based in Oldham and has five episodes. My name is Hannah.

Britt: And I'm Britt. - Hannah, do you actually know that Oldham is not a city?

Main episode

Hannah: Hi Britt

Britt: Hi Hannah.

Hannah: Hi, how are you?

Britt: I'm alright, thank you. I'm really excited that we are recording our first episode.

Hannah: I know it's great. How are you feeling about it?

Britt: I feel fine, I feel ready to tell stories, like it's been a lot of time listening to people.

Hannah: So tell us what this first episode is going to be about this week.

Britt: Yeah, so this week's episode is about walking. So when Hannah and I started working on this podcast, we asked ourselves what might be the most basic, most simple, most common zero carbon or low carbon activity that people do. And we immediately thought: walking! Or better walking and wheeling, which then also includes all the people that move at around the walking speed, but for whom walking itself is difficult.

So our fellow researcher, Melissa and I went out to talk to people in Oldham about walking. We wanted to find out why people choose to walk and what they get from it. And we wanted to know what might make walking easier and what might make it hard. We were collecting walking stories, really, and you will hear that we ended up walking many miles and got to explore many places in Oldham Borough. Some of which even Melissa, who's a local, had never actually been to.

[loud car noises over a female voice, which is hardly audible]

Female voice: I think there might be a path just over there, but that's taking probably double the time and that is just too much out of my day.

Britt: This is Kate. She has taken Melissa on her daily walk to work.

Kate: Um, because I do like, as I say, like the 24,000 steps a day, and that's just normal now, Monday to Friday. If my routine changed and I needed to go to a different school for the day to help out or whatever, I would walk there. An alternative if I couldn't or if there was like, I dunno, like a really busy dual carriage way that I had to cross or something I probably wouldn't think it was worth it. But yeah, generally walking is the first way for me to get about.

Hannah: And she does 24,000 steps .

Britt: It's impressive, isn't it?

Hannah: It's amazing.

Britt: Kate lives in Shaw, which is a town just about two miles outside of Oldham and only about three miles from Rochdale. She works as a teacher and she walks to the school and back every Monday to Friday, all year round.

Kate: Um, well, I think I started it for enjoyment at first, just a bit of chill time - I'm a mom of two. It's my time, I put my headphones in and it just settles me into getting ready for work.

Britt: The walk takes her between 45 minutes and one hour, depending on the day of the week,

Kate: on a Monday, generally slower. And then by Thursday I'll be quicker.

Britt: Melissa asked Kate about the benefits she gets from walking and Kate says it makes her feel good to use her body every day...

Kate: Like keeping me pretty trim. It's brilliant. Because like I say, it's just my normal mode of transport, it's not like going to the gym. I mean, I'm not a gym person at all, but I've done it before and it was hard for me to get motivated to even go there. I don't feel like that with this. It's just your normal routine to get up and walk to work.

Britt: It is less stressful than taking the car...

Kate: Like, especially in rush hour, there's loads of schools around there. They all come out at the same time so that you've got the stress of parking at my work, which isn't great. Um, yeah. So you're taking all that stress out of your day before it's even begun.

Britt: It saves her family money...

Kate: We were a two car household and now we've gone down to one, so it's been a massive save.

Britt: And she enjoys being close to nature...

Kate: I know what flowers to expect when they're coming out. And on a particular day, at the start of this year, the snow had been coming down in the night and it was totally undisturbed till I got there, and that was spectacular. So I did actually stop and take a picture and have a moment where I took it all in and you just, it's on your doorstep, but you just don't appreciate it.

Hannah: I love the bird song in that clip. It's so different to all that traffic we heard in the first clip that you played.

Britt: I know, right? Kate has perfected her route over the years and wherever it's possible and if time permits, she will take pathways just off the big roads. But it does remain unavoidable for her to cross a couple of big roads and to walk alongside the traffic. So when we ask her what would make her walk even better, she says:

[traffic noise]

Kate: Just a clear route between the towns that doesn't involve going right next to a road, especially one like this where the cars have to come so close to you. Um, further down here when I'm walking on a really wet day, like when it has been raining a lot in the night, I can't even avoid getting soaked before I get to work because of where the puddles are in the road. And then the bushes are overgrown, so you're forced to walk right next to the traffic and if the cars go in it, you're just absolutely drenched. I mean, it does give you a laugh, but... for you and the driver! But yeah, that's not great when you're just about to do an eight hour shift at work. ,

Britt: She says that when she's walking along those big roads, she often feels glad that at least she's not adding to the problem.

Kate: With all these vehicles that as they're going past you, you know, you get a sense of achievement that you're actually not making it any worse.

Britt: And she has over the years found all kinds of weird and wonderful off-road paths. And sometimes she wishes she could tell more people about them.

Kate: So you could obviously walk the roadway. But why would you? And it's a shame 'cause so many people must do it and don't realise that this is just the parallel route.

Britt: So many people we spoke to said that, you know, the amazing thing in the Oldham area is that you can all of a sudden find yourself in nature, even in the middle of town.

Hannah: Yeah, I was really struck by that when visiting Oldham. You think you're visiting one town, but all the time the town seems to turn into these green spaces and then back into some kind of industrial spaces. It's quite an unusual place.

Britt: Yeah, it is. I mean, so Oldham town itself is actually the largest of several small towns in the borough of Oldham, which over time obviously have grown together to appear as one urban area, but there's still bits of green spaces tucked between them. And also like a couple of slithers of green corridors still remaining that wind through

the entire area. And when you get to the Eastern outskirts of Oldham town, you can all of a sudden find yourself walking around a bend or up a hill, and you're presented with the most stunning views of the Pennines and especially the Peak District Moorlands.

Male voice: My dad used to walk and take us walking loads and we were always mucking around, playing and having fun. And we always used to go: 'Where are we going, Daddy?' He'll go: 'I'll tell you when we get there.'

Britt: So this is Bryn.

Bryn: I'm Bryn Chapman. Uh, I live in Delph.

Britt: Delph is a village in Saddleworth, in the Eastern part of the borough at the foot of Denshaw Valley in the Pennines. The mainly rural parish of Saddleworth was formerly part of Yorkshire and is now the very outer Eastern border of the Greater Manchester metropolitan area. Large stretches of Saddleworth belong to the Peak District national park, and are very popular with walkers.

Bryn: I'm 56 and, uh, I'm a hairdresser. I've got a little salon just up the road from where I live and it's pretty much the countryside.

Britt: And it really is. So Delph is like a very picturesque village with sort of stone cottages and, you know, you feel like you're in Yorkshire basically. And a couple of former small textile mills, it's got a little co-op and a school and a pub, you know. I took a cab to get there from Oldham Town Center, and it literally took us less than 15 minutes to get there. I actually had an excellent chat in the cab with the driver who told me that he likes to walk around the block when he gets home from driving. Apparently always exactly the same two mile walk around the same block to unwind. But anyway, um, back to Bryn.

Bryn: Well, I grew up in the early seventies really in this village. My dad drove a car, but my mom didn't drive. So most of us, if we wanted to get around, we went out walking. We lived in a council house.

Britt: This was a council estate on the outskirts of the village of Delph.

Bryn: And mum just went everywhere on the bus or walking. So the shopping, everything was done, you know, by us, which involved me sometimes and my mom and my brother sometimes. We've got a brother called Gareth. We'd get a shopping list every Saturday and have to go to the shops. And back then if you got halfway down to Delph and realised you didn't have a bag, you'd have to go back. 'Cause the

shops didn't supply you with any bags back then. Thank God. You just went back and were like: 'I've forgotten me shopping bag!' And go back again. So that's how life was, yeah.

Britt: So we went for a two hour walk with Bryn through the Denshaw Valley following the river Tame towards Denshaw, climbing right up to Friamere past a church with some stunning views of the whole valley. And we mainly walked on small pathways and Bryn knew everyone by name.

Bryn: Hi John. You okay?

Britt: And he knows everything about those paths.

Bryn: Actually, if you walk over that hill, you're in Diggle in no time.

Hannah: Did he say Diggle?

Britt: Yes, he said Diggle. So Diggle is another village in Saddleworth. Delph and giggle. What great names. Anyway, he knows the area like the back of his hand. And apart from a short stint of living in LA of all places, which is really not very known for its outstanding opportunities for walkers, he has lived and walked here all his life.

Um, I also asked Brin what he loves so much about walking, and he said he mainly likes being out in the fresh air. He even chose an indoor job so it wouldn't spoil his enjoyment of the outdoors. And like with Kate, it's about time.

Bryn: It gives me time to kind of think about things and I think it's really good for wellbeing. I genuinely do. Cause you know, you just think things through and work out problems and you can think about. Things you can sing along to a tune you might like in your head.

[Bryn is playing a song on his guitar]

Britt: Bryn also plays comedy gigs. This is a song that he played for us about the pitfalls of taking his daughter to the local pound shop. But, um, anyway.... so I asked Bryn about urban walking as well, which he also does a lot of.

Bryn: What I love about the city is people, you know, 'cause I'm a talker and I like to talk and I like to chat to people and say hello and pass the time of day. And in cities you've just got masses of different people and, you know, different cultures and everything.

Britt: He told us that walking for him is a good pace to be able to stop and have a chat or to explore or come across things you might not notice otherwise. Like a particular building maybe, or a bit of history.. And finally I asked Bryn what the main thing is that he needs for a place to be walkable.

Bryn: The only thing that makes it work is there has to be somewhere to walk. That's the only credential really.

Britt: Seems pretty obvious, doesn't it?

Hannah: Yeah. I mean, you can't walk if you haven't got anywhere to walk.

Britt: But, it's not actually that obvious.

Bryn: Change isn't always for the better, is it? And I think that before you change, you have to think how this is gonna affect the generations to come. And we've kind of gone down a route. Even I, back in the day didn't realise, but you know, the cities need footpaths and they need to be accessible for walking. And we did everything to make them accessible for cars, didn't we? That was cool when only three cars are going in, but now 1,003 are going in, it suddenly becomes... or 10,003 are going in.

So I think politically we need to, people need to try and think further ahead. So cities need to, they need to build footpaths and be less intense on traffic. You know, transport links, public transport in general. That was a thing when they got rid of rails and fed everything onto roads. That was a massive mistake. You know, we suffered from there, really. My friend was actually working when they were doing the Metrolink, he was a builder guy and he was digging up the tarmac and he said: 'I'm getting to the old tram tracks.' It's like, how crazy is this?

Yeah. Because of course there were tram lines all over the different towns that make up the Greater Manchester area now, and they got discontinued in the 1940s and then the Metrolink had to be all newly installed in the early two thousands. Was it Hannah?

Hannah: Yeah, it's so fascinating that you can just kind of dig into the road and suddenly you find these other histories of what the future was gonna look like that never materialised and then came about in another form. So the old metro tracks disappear, and then the new ones get built on top.

Britt: We got really interested by that actually, and we decided to find out a bit more and so we went on a 'day out' or more like on a 'day in' to the back rooms of the Oldham local archives.

Britt (interviewing): Roger, are these your walking boots?

Roger: Yes. I walk into work.

Britt: You do?

Roger: What I do is, I sort of park up at... um, well what it was actually is that during lockdown we were working from home and because of that, I noticed my fitness levels were decreasing rapidly. So when we started back to work, I decided I was going to drive sort of third of the way and park where our outstore is and then walk in the next 20 minutes. So it's 20 minutes here and then 20 minutes back.

Britt: This is Roger.

Roger: My name is Roger Ivans and I am the Local Studies Officer at Oldham Local Studies and Archive. And my job is to manage the archives and all the local history collections we have here at Oldham Local Studies and Archives. We collect items, we preserve them and we make them available to people to look at and use.

Britt: We are sitting in Roger's little back office in the archives. There are files everywhere and photocopies of articles pinned to the wall alongside family memorabilia. Right next to the paper bin under his desk are his walking boots, and on the tabletop, Roger has stacked several large historic maps ready for our conversation.

Roger: Just like myself walking to work, people have always walked through the landscape. How people did this in the past really is quite difficult to say in some respect because obviously we don't know. So we are left really with what evidence there is usually on maps.

Britt: So we are looking at these old maps together whilst Rogers is describing how footpaths would have been winding through the landscape around Oldham since early settlements and many of those walking paths will then have turned into more travelled routes.

He talks about the Roman Roads built during the Roman occupation for their legions and goods, and which up here round from Manchester all the way up to York and are still traceable actually today in some places in Oldham.

Roger: And we can see this, particularly if you know Failsworth, you can see the routes of the Roman road along Oldham Road in Failsworth.

Britt: He also talks about the pack horse route that connected the different settlements.

Roger: So if we go back to before the Industrial Revolution, Oldham consisted basically of four townships. So you have Oldham, Chatterton, Royton and Crompton. And the main parish church was based in Oldham, which meant that people would have to travel into Oldham from the surrounding townships for things like baptisms, marriages and burials.

Britt: And of course for trade.

Roger: With the industrial revolution, of course, suddenly there's an urge to increase traffic, to increase the size of vehicles, so that you can carry more. And obviously the old pack horse roads become just too small to take the amount of traffic.

Britt: In general, the industrial revolution is a major turning point in transport, as in most other aspects of local and ultimately global development, all on the back of extracting and burning fossil fuels. And one of the centres of this new development is here in little sleepy Oldham, which in the space of less than half a century turned from a few wet and windy farms to the biggest cotton producing town in the world.

Roger: Obviously with the development of the cotton industry, particularly railways could bring more stuff in, which meant that the town gradually ballooned between the 1840s and 1880s really. And what we see during this period, and consequently is a greater use of the roads.

So we can just imagine a sense that we get people using bicycles. We can imagine people beginning to use trams. The tram network begins to be set up around about 1900 and then omnibuses or what we call buses today, and then from around 1900 onwards we get cars.

Britt: Are you still following?

Hannah: Yeah, it's really interesting to see how people started off walking, you know, would walk between these villages and then they gradually got squeezed out by these different forms of transport and now we're trying to walk in between them.

Britt: Absolutely. And of course with developing the population came leisure facilities, like theatres and cinemas like, you know, in the town centres as well as shops, which would increase footfall in the centre as well as travel into it.

Hannah: So when are we talking about now? Is this after the Industrial Revolution?

Britt: Yeah. This is sort of at the end bit of it,,like late 19 hundreds onwards. So the Oldham Library on Union Street, where we actually are with Roger was built then, for example. This is also the time that the concept of walking for leisure started to become even a thing for working class people. You know, rather than it being purely a mode of transport and upper class people being the ones that sort of meander around for a bit of good time. Walking was also actually, I found out, a working class sport.

Hannah: Is this the thing called Pedestrianism?

Britt: It is. It's like competitive walking with betting systems and all of that kind of thing. Um, so, so people, let's say, you know, walked from Bolton to Oldham. Backwards!

Hannah: Bolton to Oldham is really far.

Britt: They walked across the entire country apparently. And they did things like, you know, walking backwards or, I dunno. It's kind of another research rabbit hole that I wandered down. But anyway, let's get back to Roger's history of Britain in under 10 minutes.

Roger: During the 1930s, we get far more car use or car production and people being able to afford to buy cars and with that the greater use of cars. And therefore people begin to think about town planning and in particular how we can accommodate cars within the infrastructure of towns. And this then links into the motorway network, which I think was heavily influenced by Hitler's motorways in Germany. And the idea of having a national motorway network and plans for this actually began in the 1940s during World War II. And part of this, we can see, influenced Oldham in the fact that we have something called the Southern Internal Bypass.

Britt: So the idea here was really to accommodate car use and to make it easy to bypass Oldham Town Center, but then during the 1960s/70s,

Roger: But then with the idea of consumerism in Town Shopping Centers, there's this concept of actually bringing people into the town centre. So what we see in Oldham is the dual carriage way that enters into the Oldham Town Center.

Britt: So this of course means you now need infrastructure, like multi-story car parks, which Oldham, as you know, has plenty of.

Roger: And also having things like the bypass, it sort of cuts off big sways of the town from the town centre, making it much harder, more difficult for pedestrians to actually walk safely from Glodwick or from Chatterton to actually physically walk into Oldham because you suddenly got to cross this great big dual carriageway.

Britt: And things like footbridges and subways develop, but for many reasons we talk about later, these are not always particularly useful.

Roger: And so do you get sort of these pockets of population really, which are not able to interact with each other easily.

Britt: Hmm. What are you thinking about Hannah?

Hannah: It's reminding me of when I first went to Oldham and how hard it was to kind of compute this town and really understand it because you'd drive along the roads in a car and you would feel totally disconnected from the neighbourhoods which were on either side. It's quite hard to kind of get to grips with what the town is and what it must feel like to live there.

Female voice: Because it's a 40 road there as well. Mm-hmm. So it is quite dangerous. But there is an underpass, you know, like I said, there is a subway there but people ignore it. Cause it's too far down for them to go to when the house is just literally across the road.

So when they come out from B&M or Aldi, they'll just cross the busy road and there's no traffic lights because it's an A road.

Britt: This is Ruji.

Ruji: My name is Ruji Surjan.

We're currently in Westwood in Oldham. Westwood is a neighbourhood in the Coldhurst ward, and the A road that Ruji is referring to is Chatterton Way, then turning into Oldham Way, which separates the inner city neighbourhood from the town centre like I was describing before, no?

Ruji and I have our conversation in the Millennium Center, which houses several community organisations and serves as a hub to various communities.

[voice of a woman talking in the background]

Ruji: I'm gonna have to just pause for a second if that's okay.

Britt: Ruji is on reception duty and our conversation is interrupted many times by people entering with needs or questions. We're sitting reception right next to the fish tank, which you might be able to hear in the background.

Ruji: So I'm currently the manager of the Westwood and Coldhurst Women's Association, which is a charitable organisation, based in Oldham. We primarily work with, uh, Bangladeshi young women and young girls. Although over recent years, we've had a mix of different people from different backgrounds coming. And some of the activities that we run are like some classes, healthy cooking classes, girls group, which will start soon here. trips, activities, and lots of events. And a few years ago we celebrated our 40th anniversary. So it's a very, very established organisation, which I'm very proud to be part of.

Britt: I've come to talk to Ruji because she also is a local councillor in Coldhurst Ward, a role which seems to have naturally grown out of her community activism over the years. I wanted to find out from Ruji what she perceives the barriers to walking to be in Coldhurst in particular. But as it is with the best conversations, maybe quite similar to the best walks, we started off with one topic and ended up talking about all kinds of things and discovering really interesting stuff.

Ruji: So I remember my first pair of boots that I got, I think it was like 70 quid, which was, you know, I saved up for it. And my friends were laughing at me. They were like, 'Why are you wearing men's boots?' You know, and I was like, 'shut up!'

Hannah: More walking boots. They are like a character in their own right!

Britt: Yeah! But we'll get back 'round to her walking boots later. I had asked Ruji about barriers to walking and sure enough she talked about the big A roads that Roger mentioned, and she says that on so many occasions she has witnessed someone swinging a leg over the barrier and wandering straight across the dual carriageway or even the roundabout, which is of course completely unsafe.

But, as Ruji points out, also somewhat understandable. But also within the actual neighbourhood where walking distances are actually really short, like to the schools or to the mosque or to many, many great local shops, still the way that the town is designed to favour cars, creates problems.

Ruji: Some of the residents have said that part of the reason why they don't walk is because it's not safe for them to walk. Especially parents, not just the women, but

also the men have actually said that they don't, for example, feel safe pushing a pram along the pavement because there's loads of parked cars. So pedestrian walkways are restricted. And you know, for them, particularly for parents anyway, when they go to pick up their kids from schools, they just feel safer to take their car, not realising that they are adding to the situation in terms of congestion and traffic, et cetera.

Hannah: That feels really familiar. I think it's the same where I live and I think, yeah, it must be a massive problem over the whole of Greater Manchester, this battle between pedestrians and cars and constant ongoing fight between them.

Britt: Yeah, I read that actually over 250 million car journeys per year in Greater Manchester are under one kilometre long and in Oldham half of all journeys are neighbourhood trips of under two kilometres, so they could be walked in like under 20 minutes. And actually half of those are being walked, so that's not actually that bad.

But then a third are done by car. So then in a place like Westwood, you know, with traditional terraces it's all on street parking and it's so close to the town centre that people do just park there during the day. So that all adds up to the problem.

And then Ruji talks about, of course, The Oldham weather...

Ruji: You can't really trust the weather in Oldham. Um, and then you've gotta have like 20 different coats as well, just in case you get caught by the rain.

Britt: Sounds familiar? You can dress for the weather of course to an extent, but, on top of that, Oldham is also quite hilly.. It's right on top of a hill and walking up and down that hill can be really hard, you know? Especially if you maybe have health problems or you're differently abled.

Another big problem Rui points out to me is the availability and affordability of public transport options.

Ruji: I think for young people, what the main issue is for them is affordability and the kind of public transport that we expect is not delivered here. So the frequency of buses isn't regular and the cost of the buses is quite expensive as well.

Britt: So Ruji already mentions in our interview that a solution might be found at Greater Manchester level for this.

Hannah: Yeah. It was actually reminding me of the recent announcement by the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, that there's a new structure for bus fares in the city where they're much cheaper than they were before.

Britt: Yeah, exactly. And that's definitely something that Rui has been advocating for, and that's really helpful. Or a step in the right direction at least for her community. But then they of course also have problems with routes and the frequency of the buses, if they go at all.

Ruji: So we actually don't have a high school within the Coldhurst area, although one is being built at this moment in time, although that's gonna be finalised in 2023.

So a lot of the local students from the area, they have to walk 40 minutes to get to their school. And a lot of the kids, they complain about it, but they can't do anything about it cause there's no regular buses and the buses that do go down there, they don't stop directly outside the school. They have to walk another 5, 10 minutes to get to the bus stop.

Britt: Ruji says in the summer, that's not too bad. But in the winter, walking back from school in the dark is just not very safe. So many young people walk in larger groups.

Ruji: And from the other perspective, local residents around those schools have complained about gangs of youth walking together. So on the one side we're trying to encourage kids to walk and on the other side, the perception is that the 'antisocial young people are causing havoc on the streets'. But actually they feel safer walking in groups of 10, 15, 20 of them, especially in the winter days.

Hannah: Hmm.

Britt: Yeah, so Ruji is touching on something here that is fundamental to the conversation and practice of making our cities more walkable, I think, and that's like 'who is encouraged to take space', right?

The day that I visited Ruji in Westwood, I also invited Morag Rose to join us in the conversation. Morag is a geographer and activist and artist, and both her research and her arts and activist practice evolve around walking. She founded an organisation called the Loiterers Resistance Movement.

Hannah: Hang on. The what?

Britt: The Loiterers Resistance Movement.

Hannah: I'm none the wiser . Could you explain what that is?

Britt: So, uh, in, in her words, it's an open group that is interested in walking as a tool to engage with place, claim the right to be in the city and to engage without spending money.

Hannah: Wow.

Morag: So I might have made it sound like quite a heavy political thing. It isn't. It's actually quite fun and lots of people come along with very different political views and for many people it's just a way to find out a bit about where we live, you know? So that's one side of my walking.

Britt: They meet every first Sunday of the month since, uh, 2006 in a different place, somewhere in Greater Manchester, and then off they go.

Morag: We're not just gonna walk from A to B, like, I never know where we're gonna end up. Um, we use ways to direct where we're walking that helps you have a kind of imaginative relationship with the city and maybe spot things you wouldn't normally see, or to kind of spark stories or ideas. So that might be something like we're, um, throwing a dice or we are following a particular theme, or we are headed in a certain direction or looking for traces of animals or things of history.

Hannah: Sounds amazing. How do I find out how to go on one of these walks?

Britt: Well, all you have to do is to go into the show notes of this episode and you'll find the link.

Hannah: Oh, great.

Britt: So, um, as I was saying, Morag has come out to Oldham to talk with us and I have arranged to meet her at the train station and she's a little worried how far it will be to the Millennium Center as she has a disability, which means that walking can be hard for her. I realise that I had made an automatic assumption that because she chose walking as her work, she must find it easy. I feel a bit embarrassed about my carelessness and also quite humbled.

Morag: So sometimes walking is quite painful for me, but I just think it's important to be out in space. I think that's how we become part of a city, really. Or, or part of a place. Yeah, I think it's just a really good way of breaking down some of the barriers and, um, exploring and it never, I was gonna say, it never gets boring because there's

always something new to see, but that doesn't mean that it's always great. You know, sometimes it might be cold or I might be tired, or I might be aching. But I feel like it's always worthwhile. And this thing about saying, actually, I'm here and I'm still doing this thing. One area of my research is about walking and accessibility, particularly for women. I think it's really important to consider the barriers to walking for all kinds of people. Um, and thinking particularly about women. Of course, women isn't just one thing. You know, we are a group with many different elements to our identities, but actually something that is common across all women are experiences of street harassment. It might often be amplified, for example, by race or age or being trans, but most women will have limits on where they feel safe to walk because either they've experienced harassment or they've been warned about it or somewhere just doesn't feel safe because it's dark or they don't know where they're going.

So there's all kinds of limits. They're often also amplified by people with disabilities or with a kind of illness that might limit where they're walking. So I'm quite interested in how we can make walking available to everyone.

Britt: I ask her how we could do that, and she says that, of course, improving the physical conditions and considering accessibility in design is really important. So, you know, this might mean better public transport and safer roads, but also things like benches to rest on and public toilets that are safe. She says that these improvements are beneficial for everyone.

Morag: So, you know, apart from the fact that not all disabled people are using a wheelchair, you might think about making a place that's wheelchair accessible also means that somebody with a push check can get there. Or somebody with a suitcase or somebody with a temporary, you know, temporarily broken leg or who's just feeling a bit tired would actually feel better in that space.

Britt: She emphasises that some barriers are less tangible.

Morag: But there has been a cultural shift as well. That means that actually it's not acceptable to harass anybody. And that we have a culture where everybody feels welcome and able to take up space in the city. And the other important element there actually is about class as well. Do you feel welcome somewhere if you can't afford an expensive coffee or if you don't drink alcohol or, you know, if you're not there to spend money? So there is quite a lot of factors that can stop people walking.

Britt: Morag points out that just because maybe the infrastructure of the past was more favourable towards pedestrians, she doesn't harbour any nostalgic feelings. For example, many women in her research have told her that safety has improved immensely over the last 30 years or so.

That is, by the way, also a notion that Ruji supports from her experience.

Hannah: Is that Ruji with the walking boots?

Britt: Yes, Hannah, I'm really pleased you remember. So, back to the walking boots. Ruji has a background in environmental science and a master's in country site management. She has volunteered for the RSPB which, Hannah, is?

Hannah: The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Britt: Thank you. And she loves hiking. She often found herself to be, as she says...

Ruji: ... the only sort of Asian slash female slash Muslim woman.

Britt: And because she thinks hiking and walking is...

Ruji: ...just awesome, you know, you can't beat it, can you?

Britt: She has over the years encouraged her family and many of her female friends to give it a try, and she's organised hikes and walking experiences for young women and girls from her community. Her adventures of getting lost in the fog and driving a minibus full of girls through the Scottish Highlands could make for an entire podcast season.

Hannah: I can imagine.

Britt: Ruji tells us that she has definitely experienced a cultural shift in her community.

Ruji: So for me anyway, personally, like I said, over the last 15 years, I've seen a massive shift in terms of people walking and it is a very positive thing. Now I'll see a lot more families and a lot more different diverse communities coming, you know, and a lot of them might not be educated in terms of the countryside code, but we're supposed to educate them. And I think, you know, going back to it, that behavioural change, education, encouraging the young people and just being kind of lenient with them when they get things wrong.

Cause not a lot of them might know what the kind of unspoken rules in terms of being out in the countryside are and it's up to us to educate them as people who are interested in walking and looking after the green environment, to be honest.

Hannah: It's really interesting, isn't it, hearing from Ruji and she's talking about these very kind of specific experiences that people have of walking. And we've talked already to some people who've discussed the general terms of what's good for being a pedestrian, but she's reminding us that what feels good might be different depending on your history, your cultural background, where you live and where it's possible to walk.

Britt: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, um, that's really important for people who plan urban environments or rural environments to understand, right, that even though many of those principles are transferable, every context is different. Let's say for example a street crossing, right? Like as a really simple example, where do you put that street crossing? Only people locally will really know where the desire paths are, where people actually do want to cross the road. And you can only find out about that by really properly listening to people. You can't really do that through surveys.

You actually go into the community, listen, spend time with people, you know, tap into the existing networks. And really importantly, I think also listen to people who maybe don't necessarily immediately shout the loudest or people who like, you know, have particular needs around walking or wheeling. So that we can design for them, which then as Morag said makes it more available for everyone.

But I actually have gone to talk to somebody who understands these principles quite in depth, because I wanted to learn a bit more about it. This is Richard Lambert, he is the director of a social enterprise called Fare City, like the 'bus fare' City and they promote accessible, equitable, and sustainable transport options.

So I ask him about those principles and he actually says to me that first and foremost, if we want people to walk more, it needs to be an attractive and easy option.

Richard: I think walkability should be really focused around people. Because if you think about it, we are making decisions about, okay, do I walk for this journey or do I get in the car, or do I get on the bike or do I get on the bus or the train, or do I scoot?

So actually a key thing is that us as individuals, we need to be attracted to choose to walk. So that's one aspect. And another key lever for that is it needs to be an easy option as well. It shouldn't be a hard thing to do.

Hannah: Except that it often is a hard thing to do. So the question is, how do we then achieve that?

Britt: Yeah. And I think Kate and Bryn and Morag and Ruji and actually many other people we spoke to touched on most of the principles already.

Hannah: So you mean like prioritising pedestrians being a kind of key thing?

Britt: Yes, exactly. And that can be done in different ways. So one is definitely about space and giving more space to pedestrians or also people on bikes. This can be by fully pedestrianising areas and also restricting traffic either permanently or temporarily through closing roads for traffic or through congestion charging. So road pricing basically. And then relocating space for walking and also for bikes and of course, public transport.

Or the slightly softer option is to reduce speed and traffic, giving more of the actual road to people. There's research that people are more likely to walk and cycle if there's less and slower traffic around them, which makes a lot of sense. Um, you know, remember Kate walking by the big road? It's loud and stinky and it feels pretty unsafe.

Hannah: Yeah, it didn't make me want to walk there.

Britt: No. So you can also build in more traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, for example, or lengthen the red period for cars to sort of slow the car traffic. Um, that's also an option.

Hannah: So those are quite specific things, but presumably there's also some more fundamental things about offering alternatives to people. Like how are you actually gonna get to work, for example.

Britt: Yeah, absolutely. You know, like at the moment everybody's on the road and then if we just stop that, like there has to be some sort of a real, um, alternative for people and that's very much what Richard touches on when he talks about making it the easy option.

So I need to be able to get to where I need to go in a convenient and affordable way, that's about frequent public transport connections and affordable prices, but it's also about shortening the daily journeys we have to take to do the stuff that we need to do, for example. So, this is like Brin's mom, right? Her story of being able to get to the shop, like a shop that also offers her what she needs to buy.

Hannah: Yeah. Or like I can imagine the same about getting to your local doctor's surgery or getting to your kid's school.

Britt: Exactly. And Richard in our conversation touches on something called the 15 minute.

Richard: There's been a big movement over the last few years of this idea of 15 or 20 minute cities, both within the UK but also globally, around actually how can we create more mixed use areas where we don't just have residential areas separated off from where your schools are, where education, recreation, commercial areas are? Actually, let's see how we can create much more mixed use areas and create this idea of a walkable neighbourhood, but also making sure that you can then from those areas, connect to other areas of the city or to connect to your next town or your next village by using public transport as well. So those are kind of other ways that would reduce that need, for example, to walk a long distance where you might get very wet at the end of the journey because actually your journeys are gonna be a lot shorter.

Britt: Yeah. And with that also comes that element of enjoyability, accessibility and comfort. So it's nice to walk somewhere where there's greenery or interesting stuff to look at. And like Morag points out, we need places where we can just sit down for example, in spaces that also offer room for all kinds of people and activities.

Hannah: Yeah. I'm thinking of the sound of walking with bird song in the background and how appealing that would be. So. What needs to happen then in order to actually make this a reality?

Britt: Yeah, so some of it is already happening. So for example, we were talking before about the capping of the bus prices to two pounds across the region. I think it's about one pound for children and day tickets are five pounds.

This is part of a wider strategy driven by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and their arms-length public company Transport for Greater Manchester.

Hannah: And I also heard something as well about an initiative called the B Network. Have you come across that?

Britt: Yeah, that's the one actually. It's an overall strategy to encourage people to leave their cars behind and travel in more sustainable ways. It actually started off with a connected network for or a plan for a network for walkways and pathways, you know, with Chris Boardman? The cycle guy who supported the development of that.

And it now also includes a plan for what's called integrated travel, which is really following the London model where public transport infrastructure is either directly publicly owned or under strong public control. And that means that in the local case,

Transport for Greater Manchester specifies the services to be provided, for example, which route and which frequencies. And then they contract the routes out to private bus providers.

Hannah: So you don't get the situation where the only routes that are served are the ones that make the bus companies loads of money.

Britt: Exactly, that's the one. And it would also mean that, for example, you don't have to anymore buy lots of different bus tickets when you change buses or something.

Hannah: Oh, that's amazing. It drives me crazy when you've got a ticket for one company and you can't use it on another.

Britt: Yeah. So ultimately, if this all comes to pass, it will mean that ticketing is integrated across all public transport. So that would then also include the trams and the buses.

What they're also planning to do is then to build into that the bike hire service, e-bikes higher service that they're developing. So you could actually, I think, buy a ticket or a day ticket and then you can take the tram and then the bus, and then at the end take a bike or a scooter and make it all the way home basically, or all the way to your work.

Hannah: It sounds ideal. Definitely an example of making things easy and making it the simplest option.

Britt: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, and this is of course where it becomes a bit more complex, they say they foresee a standardised fair with a daily price cap. They were gonna bring in this price cap next year, but then they forwarded it because of the cost of living crisis. Of course these things still need to be economically viable. So it'll be very interesting to see if they can make it possible to subsidise fairs in a way that they're affordable to people.

Hannah: Yeah. And see if it gets more people onto public transport.

Britt: Exactly. But you know, think about the German example of the 9 Euro tickets that people took everywhere. Like the stations were full.

Hannah: Yeah. It's interesting. So all this work to introduce more public control must then be making it easier to integrate these transport routes with walking routes as well?

Britt: Yeah, absolutely. Because all of these things sit together, right? Like, where do I get off the bus? And then when I get off the bus, where's my next path to walk somewhere? And then with that comes signage and crossings and all of those things. So then these need to come together and ideally be looked at as a whole rather than a sort of piecemeal.

That original plan includes over 75 miles of like segregated cycling and walking routes. So separated from each other. And I think about 1,400 new crossings and the signage.

Some of those are those side street zebra crossings, which are like super practical, but a very simple thing actually to do. And other interventions are much more comprehensive. So like what they call filtered neighbourhoods.

Hannah: So is there anything like this actually being planned for Oldham?

Britt: Yes, absolutely. You can see on the five year transport delivery plan for Oldham that several of these Bee Network interventions are in planning or already funded.

And as part of the town centre regeneration, the council are delivering a project called 'Accessible Oldham', which will improve streets, offer footpaths and also improve public areas to make the centre more accessible for pedestrians and cyclists.

Hannah: That's so interesting. It will be really fascinating to come back, particularly with that history that we've just heard earlier in the podcast of how this town has changed over time, and see what kinds of changes these interventions will actually be able to bring about.

Britt: Yeah, absolutely. And I look forward to you know, visiting Oldham in like two years and three years and five years and see how the town changes over time. And at the same time, I also think we don't have to wait for this infrastructure, and Oldham is definitely not waiting for that infrastructure.

You know, people are actually out and about walking.

Hannah: As we've heard.

Britt: Exactly. And like, you know, doing things. People open up their alleyways and make them into throughways for walkers. There are lots and lots of walking groups and walking maps and guides created by citizens and groups that improve existing

pathways. And I think we will also see temporary road closures for schools soon. If you want to join in, we have collected lots of links in the show notes for you. Let's end this episode with a couple of those people.

Chris: Uh, well I'm Chris, um, we'll cross the road here, watch the cars! I write guide books and some of those have been local. The first local one I did was the Saddleworth Discovery Walks Guide Book. But the Oldham one, there's lots of countryside in Oldham, but people don't recognize that and don't see that. So I wrote the book. Consists of about 20 walks, so that people can see what Oldham has to offer.

Women walkers (Pharmacy Short Walks): Um, the rain doesn't put us off, Um, the snow hasn't put us off, has it? No, we've carried on coming all through the winter. It's like a sort of reliable, it's there every week, like a reliable friend, you know,

Melissa: You've got two routes on one map. I think that's really cool.

Mike: We were aware of course, that you've always gotta be aware these days of, uh, people's disabilities and make sure whatever you do, you can match it.

Phillippa: One of the things I do with Wednesday walkers, I teach OS online mapping.

Andrew: So for me it comes back to being proud of where you live, and also being proud to be able to say, yeah, I wanna make a difference and I want to see where I live look clean and tidy, and if it looks clean and tidy, other people might start saying, 'Well, if they can do it, I can do it'.

Britt: This is Kate again. Remember who you met at the beginning of the episode?

Kate: So one of my colleagues, they live on the other side of Hollinwood Lake and they've started walking to work because I think they've seen, oh, actually Kate can do a full day's work after doing that, and it's not a big deal. So they've started to walk to work. And at first it's always a little bit difficult, but you do get used to it. Like I say, my Monday's always hard, but then by the Thursday, it's just the normal way of getting to work.

[guitar music - blues with a walking rhythm]

Hannah: Well, I think I'm gonna go and dust off my walking boots..

Britt: You do that, Hannah.

Hannah: That was great. I've learned a lot about walking today, so thanks Britt.

Britt: You're welcome. Bye.

Hannah: Bye.

Outro

Thank you for listening. Do you want to get involved? Tell us about a great idea or initiative that gets people walking or wheeling in your place. Just drop an email to powerinthecity@carbon.coop. We'll do a shout out for you in one of our next episodes.

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You can find a list of all episode contributors and lots of additional information and links in the show notes.

Tune in for the next episode on the 8th of December. It's about climate change.