



Policy statement

Building physical activity into our daily lives

Introduction

Regular physical activity substantially reduces our risk of becoming overweight and obese, and protects us against heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some kinds of cancer.¹ Yet a significant proportion of adults, young people and children are not reaching the daily and weekly targets for physical activity.^{2,3} Building activity into our daily lives is an effective way of increasing our levels of physical activity. It also has potential to address health inequalities as the activities are free and accessible to all.

Policy statement

Many of us are not physically active enough. This can directly affect our health and increase our risk of developing chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease. Fitting activity into our daily lives - by walking or cycling instead of taking the car, or making use of the local park – are easy ways for everyone to get more physically active.

Walking and cycling to and from school helps children to reach the recommended levels of physical activity and develop good habits that may last into adulthood. All schools in the UK should have a travel plan encouraging safe active travel, and take necessary action to enable as many students as possible to participate

Walking and cycling to work is also a good way for many adults to fit exercise into their daily routine. Employers should make this an easy option by providing changing facilities and secure bike parking. The BHF's *Health at Work* programme includes advice and ideas to help promote healthy eating, wellbeing and physical activity at work.

The way that towns and cities are designed can influence how physically active we are. Safe, well-lit streets, facilities within walking distance, and good public transport can all help us to get more active. We need a fair provision of high quality, easily accessible parks and green spaces in all local areas.

Walking and cycling are accessible, affordable and convenient forms of travel and activity. Reducing the default speed limit to 20mph in residential areas would encourage people across society to participate in active travel and reap the benefits associated with an active lifestyle.

Programmes to improve local environments and promote physical activity should target all groups in society. How far these programmes reach all groups should be specifically monitored to make sure they are effective.

Please see our *Couch Kids* report or *Children and Physical Activity* policy statement for more detailed information on physical activity.

¹ Foresight, Government Office for Science (2007) 'Tackling Obesities: Future Choices'

² Department of Health (2009) 'Be Active Be Healthy'

³ BHF (2009) 'Couch Kids'

Background

The Chief Medical Officer in England recommends that adults should aim to achieve 30 minutes of moderate activity on five days of the week, and 60 minutes every day for children and young people. But many people are not reaching these targets and are missing out on the health benefits of an active life. These include a reduced risk of becoming over-weight or obese, and developing chronic conditions such as heart disease.

Opportunities for physical activity are not limited to sports and formal recreation. They exist everywhere - where we work, learn, play and live. Incorporating physical activity into our everyday lives is 'a basic foundation for healthier lifestyles.'⁴

Participation in active travel and everyday physical activity is influenced by the built and natural environment in which we live, by our social environment and by personal factors, such as gender, age, ability and motivation.

Active travel

Active travel is any means of getting from A to B that involves being physically active. Walking and cycling are the main forms of active travel. But using public transport can also contribute to our levels of physical activity, as people who take public transport are likely to walk further than car users – for example, walking to and from bus stops.

The UK has some of the lowest walking and cycling rates in Europe. About two thirds of journeys made in England are less than five miles, but more than half of these are made by car.⁵ Whilst around 2% of trips in England, Wales⁶ and Scotland⁷, and 0.8% of trips in Northern Ireland⁸, are cycled, this figure is 26% in the Netherlands.⁹ And only around 10% of people walk to work across the UK. However, there are signs of improvement and the need for active travel has been recognised in several government documents and programmes.

Reducing car speed to encourage active travel

To help as many people as possible become more active we need environments that encourage cycling and walking, and allow people to integrate this into their daily lives. International research suggests that reducing speed limits to 20 miles per hour in residential areas could encourage people to walk and cycle, and become more active.^{10,11}

People often list traffic, vehicle speed, and safety as barriers which prevent them from walking and cycling more often. Parents report that traffic related dangers are one of the main reasons that they prevent their children from walking or cycling to school.^{12,13}

⁴ Department of Health (2009) 'Be Active Be Healthy'

⁵ Department of Health & Department for Transport (2010) 'Active Travel Strategy'

⁶ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) 'A walking and cycling action plan for Wales 2009-2013'

⁷ The Scottish Government (2009) 'Scottish Transport statistics: No 28 – 2009 edition' Accessed at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/18095042/162>

⁸ Department for Regional Development Northern Ireland (2003) 'Walking Northern Ireland: An Action Plan'

⁹ Department of Health & Department for Transport (2010) 'Active Travel Strategy'

¹⁰ Pucher, J Buehler, R (2008) 'Making cycling irresistible: lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany' Transport reviews. 28(4): 495-528

¹¹ NICE (2008) 'Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity'

¹² Department of Health & Department for Transport (2010) 'Active Travel Strategy'

Reducing vehicle speed in residential areas to 20mph would help people feel safer whilst walking and cycling, and could lead to improvements in levels of physical activity. Targeting 20mph zones in deprived areas could also help reduce health inequalities,¹⁴ by encouraging residents at a higher risk of developing health problems to become more physically active.

- Walking and cycling are accessible, affordable and convenient forms of travel and activity. We believe that reducing the default speed limit to 20mph in residential areas would encourage people across society to participate in active travel and reap the benefits associated with an active lifestyle.

School travel plans

Active travel to and from school is an excellent way for children to become more physically active. Children who exercise are also more likely to continue this good habit into adulthood, reducing their health risks.

The proportion of children cycling or walking to and from school in the UK has decreased in the last three decades. On average, around 46% of children in England walked to school in 2005/06, compared to 61% in 1975/76. Around 49% of children in Scotland,¹⁵ and 29% of children in Wales currently walk to school.¹⁶

But there are initial signs that this downward trend in walking is starting to change.¹⁷ School Travel Plans (STPs) are developed in consultation with teachers, parents, pupils and governors, with the aim of decreasing car use and enabling more children to walk and cycle to school. The plans should contain clear objectives, details of any measures, and a timetable for introducing them. For example, a school may decide to provide lockers and changing facilities, start a 'walking bus' scheme, or provide road safety training for walkers and cyclists.

In April 2009, 81% of English schools and 78% of Scottish schools had a STP.¹⁸

- All schools in the UK should have a travel plan encouraging safe active travel, and take steps to make it easy for as many students as possible to participate

Health at work

Fitting physical activity into the working day can be difficult. But active travel to and from work is a good way for many people to get active and work towards the 30 minutes a day target.

In 1999 a tax exemption was introduced to allow UK employers to loan cycles and safety equipment to employees as a tax free benefit. The 'Cycle to Work' scheme¹⁹ gives employees the chance to buy a discounted bike and employers can benefit from a healthier workforce. The scheme also encourages employers to be more cycle friendly by providing secure bike parking and changing and locker facilities.

¹³ World Health Organisation (2006) *'Promoting physical activity and active living in urban environments'*

¹⁴ Department of Health (2010) *'The Marmot Review'*

¹⁵ The Scottish Government (2009) *'Scottish Transport statistics: No 28 – 2009 edition'* Accessed at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/18095042/162>

¹⁶ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *'A walking and cycling action plan for Wales 2009-2013'*

¹⁷ BHF (2009) *'Couch Kids'*

¹⁸ Department of Health & Department for Transport (2010) *'Active Travel Strategy'*

¹⁹ <http://www.cyclescheme.co.uk/>

The BHF's Health at Work²⁰ programme includes advice and ideas to help promote healthy eating, wellbeing and physical activity at work. This covers active travel as well as other activities which fit in and around the working day – such as activity classes, walking, and sports. Health at Work also holds seminars where people can find out more about how to introduce healthy changes in their workplace.

- Walking and cycling to work is also a good way for many adults to fit exercise into their daily routine. Employers should make this an easy option by providing changing facilities and secure bike parking.

The built environment and access to green spaces

Our health is influenced by the nature of the physical environment and the communities where we live. For example, living in poor housing, in a deprived neighbourhood and with a lack of green space can have a negative impact on our health.²¹ Some of these factors can impact our heart health because they affect the amount of physical activity we take part in.

The way that towns and cities are designed - such as street layout, land use, the location of recreation facilities, parks and public buildings, and the transport system - can all influence how physically active we are. Evidence shows that people who can easily access parks, green spaces, workplaces and shops are more likely to be active.²²

Green space has been shown to improve mental and physical health – and reduce health inequalities.²³ A report by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment found that people are using parks and green spaces more, but that access to these varies. People in the most deprived areas have a poorer provision of parks than more affluent areas. People from minority ethnic groups also tend to have less, and poorer quality, local green space.²⁴ Some groups of people also use green space less frequently than others - particularly people aged over 65, people with disabilities, women, black and minority ethnic people and children and young people aged 12-19.²⁵

- More high quality, easily accessible parks and green spaces are needed in disadvantaged areas
- We need physical activity friendly communities - with safe well-lit streets, places to secure bikes and safe cycle lanes, public facilities located within walking distance of the communities they serve, and good public transport provision
- Programmes to improve local environments and promote physical activity should target all groups in society to help tackle health inequalities. How far they reach all groups should be specifically monitored to make sure they are effective.

The policy context

²⁰ Accessed at http://www.bhf.org.uk/Thinkfit/who_are_we/all_about_health_at_work.aspx

²¹ Department of Health (2010) *'The Marmot Review'*

²² Department of Health (2010) *'The Marmot Review'*

²³ Department of Health (2010) *'The Marmot Review'*

²⁴ The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2010) *'Urban Green Nation: Building the Evidence base'*

²⁵ Department for transport, Local Government and the Regions (2006) *'Green spaces, better places: Final report of the urban green spaces taskforce'*

Several government documents include a commitment to increasing levels of active travel and improving health through changes to local environments.

England

- **'Foresight, Tackling Obesity report'** (2007) recognises that we live in an obesogenic environment in the UK, with motorised transport and sedentary lifestyles. The report notes that tackling this requires a broad and integrated approach, with action from government, industry, communities, families and society.
- **NICE guidance on 'Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity'** (2008) makes recommendations for schools, planners, architects, transport agencies, and local authorities, to improve the environment to encourage physical activity and help improve health.
- **Department of Health's 'Be Active Be Healthy'** (2009), outlines a commitment to improving parks and spaces for informal recreation, developing walking routes and infrastructure improvements for active travel.
- **'Healthy Weight Healthy Lives: One Year On'** (2009) includes a commitment to offer greater opportunities for active travel and to share examples of best practice amongst schools.
- **The Marmot Review** (2010) devotes a chapter to developing healthy and sustainable communities and places. The report focuses especially on changes to local environments to help improve health across the social gradient and tackle health inequalities.
- **The Department of Health and Department of Transport's Active Travel Strategy** published in 2010 promises to make key destinations more accessible by active modes of travel and encourage take up of active travel.
- In March 2010 the Westminster Government announced plans for an **'Urban Challenge Fund'** to support local authorities in improving health and environment in local communities. One of the key aims of the fund will be to improve road safety and increase numbers of people walking and cycling.

Northern Ireland

- **Northern Ireland Cycling Strategy** (2000) aims to create a pro-cycling culture through improving safety and facilities for cyclists, and raising public awareness.
- **Walking Northern Ireland: An Action Plan** (2003) includes plans to increase the number of people walking for leisure, for health and to promote walking amongst visitors.
- **Fit Futures: Focus on Food, Activity and Young People** (2009) makes recommendations aimed to reduce obesity in children and young people, including the 'safer routes to schools' initiative.

Scotland

- **Healthy Eating Active Living 2008-2011** sets out a commitment to create healthier places to live, work and play. The document offers support for sustainable travel towns and activities targeting key demographic groups such as teenage girls.

Wales

- **Creating an Active Wales** (2009) sets an objective to develop and maintain an environment that makes it easier and safer for people to become more physically active. This includes providing quality green space and play areas, making streets safe, and providing pedestrian links and cycle paths.

- **The Welsh Assembly Government's Walking and Cycling Action plan** (2009-2013) seeks to ensure that walking and cycling are prioritised in policies, guidance and funding. The plan aims to help improve the health and well being of people in Wales through increased physical activity.

A large variety of activity programmes have been established with the aim of increasing the number of people participating in active travel, including but not limited to:

- The 'Walking for Health' scheme run by Natural England²⁶ which aims to get more people walking in their own communities, particularly those who take little exercise or who live in areas of poor health. In 2009 the Department of Health agreed to fund a four-fold expansion of the scheme over three years.
- The Walk Once a Week campaign by Living Streets²⁷ encourages parents and primary school pupils to walk to school at least once a week throughout the school year. There are currently over 200,000 pupils taking part. In 2010 the scheme received an £800,000 boost to expand the scheme into areas with high levels of overweight and obesity.
- In 2005 the Department for Transport established Cycling England to promote cycling. The organisation has created a number of Cycling Cities and Cycling Towns²⁸. These areas have on average seen cycling increase by 27%, and a 10% reduction in people classed as inactive.
- The Rural Safe Routes to School programme in Northern Ireland coordinated by Sustrans, aims encourage more children to walk and cycle to school. The scheme achieved a 15% reduction in car journeys.²⁹
- Lets Walk Cymru is run by the Sports Council Wales, and aims to get more people out and using natural green space. Since 2003 over 30 projects have been established across Wales.³⁰
- Sustrans' Active Travel Cymru project is working with the Sports Council for Wales to support workplace and community cycling initiatives across Wales.³¹
- Sustrans is running three active travel initiatives in Scotland called 'Getting Active, Getting There!' These aim to increase walking and cycling, reduce traffic congestion and improve the health of communities.³²
- The Scottish Government is funding seven local authority initiatives as part of the 'Smarter Choices, Smarter Places' project.³³ The authorities will improve public transport systems and walking and cycling infrastructures.

²⁶ <http://www.whi.org.uk/>

²⁷ http://www.walktoschool.org.uk/content/wow_scheme.php

²⁸ <http://www.dft.gov.uk/cyclingengland/cycling-cities-towns/>

²⁹ Sustrans' website. <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/>

³⁰ <http://www.wv2h.org.uk/>

³¹ Sustrans' website. <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/>

³² Sustrans' website. <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/>

³³ Scottish Government website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Transport/sustainable-transport/home-zones>