

Introduction

Official guidance is now clearly directing local authorities and others to make the environment more activity-friendly and therefore healthier. Action to prioritise walking and cycling will be a key factor.

Creating a healthy environment

In January 2008, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published its guidance *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*, which lists a number of recommendations, most of them related to active travel. This is the first ever national, evidence-based guidance on how to improve the built environment to encourage physical activity and improve health.

NICE calls for a major shift of priority in town planning away from motor vehicles, to “ensure pedestrians, cyclists and users of other modes of transport that involve physical activity are given the highest priority when developing streets and roads.” The Department for Transport, local authorities and town planners must work together to maximise potential for people to be “physically active as a routine part of their daily life.”

The NICE recommendations are clear and address issues including children’s play and building design, but walking and cycling are centre stage. NICE recommends strategies and measures including:

- the re-allocation of road space to support physically active travel, e.g. wider pavements; more cycle lanes
- ensuring planning applications prioritise and encourage everyday active travel

- restricting motor vehicle access by narrowing or closing roads
- ensuring access to public paths and open spaces by active travel or public transport and improving their attractiveness and safety
- the use of road-user charging and traffic calming schemes.

Together, these recommendations are intended to help people lead a healthier, more active life through a built environment reshaped to allow more walking and cycling. Their practical implementation has the potential to improve urban quality of life and also tackle climate change.

UK obesity strategy

The government’s strategy on tackling obesity was launched on the same day as the NICE guidance above. *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: a Cross-governmental Strategy for England* supports the creation of a healthy society – from early years, to schools and food, from physical activity to planning, transport and the health service. The strategy aims to reverse rising levels of obesity and overweight by encouraging people to be more physically active, with new measures including the creation of ‘Healthy Towns’, workplace health initiatives and new public health campaigns.

Introducing the document to the House of Commons, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said “we must do nothing less than transform the environment” to increase our opportunities to lead an active life. The strategy calls on the government, businesses, local communities and other organisations to create urban and rural environments where walking, cycling and other forms of physical activity are the norm. The health benefits of active travel are reaffirmed in the strategy, as are its potential for replacing sedentary modes:



Creating the environment for active travel

“Promoting walking and cycling as viable alternatives to car use for [local] journeys could have substantial benefits – not only for promoting healthy weight, but also for climate change, congestion and the wider environment.”

A fatter future?

Obesity could be costing the UK £49.9 billion a year by 2050, predicts the Government Office for Science’s Foresight report, *Tackling Obesity: Future Choices* published in October 2007. Using sophisticated computer modelling, it estimates that over half of all adults and a quarter of under-16s may be obese by the same year.

Such startling obesity levels would mean an associated rise in diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, stroke, cancer and coronary heart disease with which the condition is linked.

The report highlights a strong connection between obesity and the environment in which people live: “Although personal responsibility plays a crucial part in weight gain, human biology is being overwhelmed by the effects of today’s ‘obesogenic’ environment, with its abundance of energy dense food, motorised transport and sedentary lifestyles.” As a result, more people are becoming overweight simply by living a modern-day lifestyle.

Foresight offers five key anti-obesity policy recommendations, again dominated by the built environment’s influence on health. Within this list it recommends “increasing walkability / cyclability of the built environment.” Other measures include restricting the availability of obesogenic foods and targeted health interventions for the

most at-risk groups. Reversing today’s obesity epidemic calls for a significant commitment over the coming 30 years. Foresight draws a parallel with climate change to convey the scale of this challenge.

Building healthier towns

The National Heart Forum, Living Streets and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, working with other experts have jointly published *Building Health, a Blueprint for Action*. The report calls for a re-evaluation of all local travel-related infrastructure, from streets and parks to cycling and bus routes. Cross-government action is required to help local authorities overhaul this provision and make it easier for people to travel in sustainable, healthy ways.

In addition, *Building Health* calls for new government guidelines to place health and physical activity at the core of all local transport and development strategies: “The Department for Transport should require local authorities not only to adopt the policy of prioritising pedestrians and cyclists... but also to produce an assessment of whether they have delivered that aspect as part of their annual plan.”

Other proposals aim to enhance the built environment for pedestrians and cyclists through practical, target-led strategies with monitored outcomes. These include the adoption of strategic plans for promoting walking and cycling, and subjecting all new planning developments to a ‘health check’.

Conclusion

All of these approaches make clear the importance of transport and planning in promoting healthy living. Cross-government working is essential to create healthier built environments that free people to travel actively for most journeys.



Further reading

Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity:
www.nice.org.uk

Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives, a Cross-Governmental Strategy for England:
www.dh.gov.uk

Foresight: Tackling Obesity - Future Choices:
www.foresight.gov.uk

Building Health, a Blueprint for Action:
www.heartforum.org.uk

Active Travel

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