



A Leaner, Fitter Future

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Name of organisation participating: **Sustrans**

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Please provide your answer in the space provided below each question

1	<p>Strategic relevance What level of priority for action do you as an organisation attach to the issue of overweight in children?</p> <p>Sustrans regards the growing problem of overweight and obesity in children as a critical health and social issue. It is a factor in the increasing prevalence of many health problems, both among children and in the adults they will become. Equally, it is an indicator of an increasingly unhealthy, socially divisive and environmentally destructive way of living our lives, founded upon mechanisation and a lack of physical activity.</p> <p>Road traffic has almost doubled over the last two decades, severely restricting mobility for pedestrians and cyclists, and discouraging “active travel”. By 2010 traffic volumes are forecast to increase by 25% on current levels. More people driving will make the road environment yet more hostile to pedestrians and cyclists, and further undermine walking and cycling.</p> <p>This change in patterns of travel is leading to increasingly sedentary lifestyles. This is already having a serious impact on the population’s physical and mental health. Insufficient physical activity is already implicated in the incidence of overweight and obesity amongst children. Recent research suggests that 15% of all pre-school children are overweight and 5% are obese. <i>(Prevalence of overweight and obesity in British children cohort study. BMJ, 319, p.1039, Reilly, Dorosty, and Emmett, 1999)</i></p> <p>In 1986 nearly 60% of school journeys made by children aged 5-16 were on foot and only 16% were driven. By 1999 the proportion of children walking had fallen to 49% while 28% were driven to school. During the same period cycling to school fell from 3.5% to 1%. <i>(National Travel Survey 1999/01. Travel to School in GB, Personal Travel Factsheet 2, DfT, 2003.)</i></p> <p>Children need to take part in regular physical activity to stay fit and to develop active lifestyles for their future health. However, levels of physical activity are in decline. <i>(Young people’s physical activity patterns as assessed by heart rate monitoring. Journal of Sports Sciences, 16, S9-S16, Armstrong, 1998)</i></p> <p>Sustrans believes that the environmental, health and safety problems caused by our overuse of private motor transport must be addressed. As regards physical activity, we strongly advocate that more must be done to encourage and facilitate the incorporation of healthy physical activity into the daily routine, by promoting active forms of travel.</p>
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	<p>Sustrans believes that more of the money spent on transport, and much more of that spent treating the consequences of an insufficiently active lifestyle, including overweight and obesity, should go to practical projects encouraging children and adults to incorporate physical activity into their daily routine – by travelling actively.</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>Causes a).What is your own analysis of the primary causes of the recent increase in overweight in children in the UK?</p>
	<p>The rise in overweight is predominantly an issue of decline in energy expenditure due to increased mechanisation (<i>Physical activity mediates a healthier body weight in the presence of obesity, British Journal of Sport Medicine, 34, Pescatello and Van Heest, 2000</i>), due not least to the decline in active forms of travel. Physical activity has an important role to play in weight control and in countering overweight and obesity. (<i>Exercise in the prevention of Coronary Heart Disease: today's best buy in Public Health, Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 26, Morris, 1994</i>) Overweight and obesity is one of the most important avoidable risk factors for a number of life threatening diseases including heart disease, diabetes and joint problems.</p> <p>Significant benefits to health could be achieved by interventions that encourage children to participate regularly in physical activity - especially in their travel choices. Sustrans would like to see the closest integration of policy and strategy on overweight and obesity with those on social inclusion, accessibility and sustainable development. Not only is it possible, in our view, to achieve gains across this range of policy objectives; it is important to recognise that only by combining the efforts of people in sectors such as planning, development and transport with those of the health and education sectors can the problem of overweight and obesity be effectively addressed.</p> <p>Parent participation is of great importance; we need to ensure that parents are aware of the importance of physical activity for young peoples' health, encourage their children to lead an active lifestyle and set a good example. This of course means that we need to address the behaviour of adults as well as children.</p>
	<p>b). Below are listed several factors that are often alleged to be a cause of overweight in children. Please discuss the level of significance of each of these:</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● high-fat foods <p>NA</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● high-sugar foods and drinks <p>NA</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'snacking' habits <p>NA</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● larger portion sizes and 'supersize' marketing <p>NA</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'fast food' <p>NA</p>

- marketing to children

We think it likely that the marketing of products and services associated with inactivity to children or using children to influence adult behaviour – such as by the car industry – may have contributed to the problem of overweight and obesity. However, marketing can equally be a force for good.

Sustrans would like to see more intensive marketing of physical activity and active forms of transport to children and parents. Active, on-going promotion is needed of healthy and active behaviour, using promotional and media campaigns and individualised marketing techniques such as those used by Sustrans with the TravelSmart pilots in the UK. These pilots have shown around 9% of journeys switched from the car to healthier modes (*TravelSmart; changing the way we travel, Sustrans, 2002*).

Health promotion marketing should accentuate the positive – enjoyment, health benefits etc. rather than, as is all too often the case, focussing on safety equipment required.

- changes in family meals patterns

NA

- food and drink in schools

NA

- poor understanding of nutritional issues

NA

- television

NA

- modern sedentary lifestyles

The key elements that have contributed to the decline in physical activity of many children include an increase in television viewing, computers for entertainment, and the lack of safe play areas (and safe access to them). Just as important are the barriers to active travel; a dangerous and hostile road environment and the failure to enforce traffic law, the location of services away from where people live and the inadequacy of public transport services and walking and cycling routes, and so on.

Equally important are cultural changes. Many schools still ban cycling to school; many employers (and schools) insist on dress codes or impose other working practices which unnecessarily penalise employees who walk or cycle to work. Cycle parking is often absent at workplaces, shops etc.

- reduced opportunities for sport/physical exercise

The inadequacy of provision for sport is being addressed, and Sustrans welcomes that. However, sport is a subset of physical activity and is not likely to be the answer for everyone. The incorporation of physical activity into people's daily lives, by choosing active forms of travel, is likely to be much more widely acceptable across the population at all ages. However, this form of physical activity has been made progressively more difficult by a number of physical and cultural changes, including land-use zoning, the increase in traffic and failure to enforce traffic law, the inadequacy of walking and cycling routes and so on. Increased provision for sport is to be welcomed, but it will not substitute for action to resolve these problems.

- **Other – please specify**

Sustrans would like to see emphasis on environmental changes to encourage and facilitate active forms of travel, such as additional and improved routes for cycling and walking, for leisure and for daily trips to work, school, shops and other services. The location of services where access is only easy by car promotes a sedentary lifestyle and helps to 'lock in' car dependence. This also promotes social exclusion.

A good example (of cycling and walking) should be set by leaders in politics, the health sector and other areas. Adult role models are particularly important to young people. Ministers in other countries manage to walk and cycle to their offices, and not just in National Bike Week.

3 Solutions

a). What is your own analysis of the primary targets for action to halt the increase in overweight in children?

Sustrans does not argue against the importance of diet and nutrition, but we do think environmental changes to promote active travel are crucial.

Sustrans' flagship project, the National Cycle Network, currently provides over 7,000 miles of cycling and walking routes throughout the UK. The creation of the Network has considerably increased opportunities for people to make journeys by bike and on foot, and as with other long-distance transport networks, the majority of its usage is local. During 2001 the Network carried 60 million journeys. 2002 data shows usage to have risen to over 97 million journeys with like-for-like growth of 13%. We expect this growth trend to continue.

Safe Routes to Schools (SRS) was originated by Sustrans in the 1980s, at which time it was entirely orthodox for a school to ban cycling and encourage car journeys to school (through provision of large car parks, drop off areas etc). All English and Welsh highway authorities now have a SRS component in their Local Transport Plan and the Department for Transport, Scottish Executive and Assembly for Wales have established networks of travel plan co-ordinators. We provide information to schools throughout the UK who are either implementing SRS schemes or beginning the process of implementation. Sustrans regards the school journey as of critical importance in establishing travel habits, good or bad, for the future.

Sustrans' Active Travel programme was established in 2001 to collaborate with the health sector. We work with the Department of Health, NHS Estates, the Department for Transport, NHS trusts and other bodies to encourage and assist the development of travel plans within the NHS. Active Travel also researches the health impact of measures to facilitate active forms of travel, promotes cycling and walking as health enhancing physical activity, and is now addressing the role of the NHS in accessibility and social inclusion.

There is also now a growing volume of evidence that children who travel actively to school have higher levels of academic achievement. (*State study proves physically fit kids perform better academically, California Dept of Education; www.cde.ca.gov/news/releases2002/rel37.asp*). Sustrans believes that both healthy and unhealthy travel patterns can be established for adult life. The health implications of school travel are clearly significant.

All of these areas of work are important. We need much more support from the health establishment at every level, to accelerate the pace of environmental and cultural change so that daily physical activity, through active travel, becomes a completely natural choice.

b). What actions are you as an organisation currently engaged in regarding overweight in children?

Each and every component in the work programme described (briefly) above helps to tackle the problem of overweight in children, directly, through parental behaviour and in terms of cultural and policy change.

In April 2003, there were 2085 schools known to be working on School Travel Plans and 3325

	<p>schools involved in Safe Routes to Schools projects (DfT review of Local Authority annual progress reports, 2003). Many of these schools are supported with information or served by cycle routes developed by Sustrans.</p> <p>We are working on the development of Home Zones in residential areas and other such urban redesign such as self-enforcing 20mph zones around schools (as highlighted within the DfT Road Safety Strategy p. 51) with partner authorities around the country.</p> <p>A Home Zone is a street or group of streets designed and laid out so that car users don't have priority over other users, with cars travelling at little more than walking pace. The design enables people to use the streets as social space, meaning that children can play outside, neighbours can socialise and the local community can take control over its own environment. Sustrans is working in partnership with the Children's Play Council and Transport 2000 to encourage the development of Home Zones in the UK, both in existing communities and in new housing developments.</p> <p>Sustrans has recently submitted a response to the House of Commons Obesity Inquiry, contributed to the policy think tank on obesity of the Royal College of Physicians and Faculty of Public Health, and via our communication programme informs thousands of health, transport and planning practitioners of best practice in the active travel field.</p>
	<p>c). What other actions could you contribute to a concerted multi-sectoral assault on the problem?</p>
	<p>We believe that closer collaboration is crucial between Education Departments, Health Departments and Transport Departments at both national levels. Transport and Education have historically had little cross-departmental collaboration, although the signs are that this may be improving. Education Departments, including at the national level, usually perceive that they have no responsibility for transport and physical activity, although some of their policies have clear implications on these, e.g. after schools clubs, design and location of new schools, discretionary school transport grants etc. Sustrans can help develop liaisons and partnerships, and may be able to deliver elements of such a coordinated approach more easily than official departments.</p>
	<p>d). What specific actions by <u>other</u> stakeholders would you like to see?</p>
	<p>We would like to see the way children get to school contributing to overall assessment of school performance (note that this would give bias towards schools in poorer areas).</p> <p>In general Sustrans would like to see far more emphasis on active travel e.g. walking to school. Walking is free and easy to do, and an easily accessible form of physical activity, which does not require attendance at sports facilities. Walking to and from school for many children would incorporate physical activity into the daily routine to improve health, and inculcate walking as a healthy habit for local journeys.</p> <p>A larger share of health budgets should be allocated to the promotion of health, and in particular of physical activity. We would like to see the health sector take the issue of physical activity promotion seriously (as judged by staffing and other resource levels) and much more active engagement on the promotion of walking and cycling across the population for local journeys (1.5 miles for foot and up to 5 miles for cycling).</p> <p>Home Zones in residential areas and other urban redesign such as self-enforcing 20mph zones around schools (as highlighted within the DfT Road Safety Strategy p. 51) should be made a priority.</p> <p>Walking and cycling should be allocated shares of national and local transport budgets in line with their proportion of journeys made; at the moment they are seriously under-resourced. This should apply to revenue as well as capital resources; many local authorities do not have the staff to spend their way through their capital allocation for cycling and walking. Walking and cycling schemes rely to a much greater extent on revenue funding support than do conventional "heavy" transport schemes.</p> <p>Measures are needed to make the street environment safer and more pleasant for pedestrians</p>

	<p>and cyclists and a place for children to play.</p> <p>The perception of traffic risk is a major impediment to walking and even more so to cycling, for many people, and our failure as a society to reduce the incidence of death and injury among cyclists and pedestrians suggests that the individual risk assessment is well founded. Not only the danger, but also the noise and hostile atmosphere engendered by fast-moving motor traffic discourage physical activity by inhibiting cycling and walking in both urban and rural areas. We need the existing traffic law to be fully enforced, in line with the recent recommendations of the transport committee report on road traffic speed.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>Barriers How do you perceive any real or potential barriers to effective action by your own organisation?</p>
	<p>Central and local government is still reluctant to introduce measures, to support physically active transport, which may be perceived as anti-car. In the UK road space is often limited and the politics of road space – who gets what and whether the vulnerable modes get protected space - is critical. Recent ministerial announcements on investment in road expansion sadly bear out our concerns on this; 10% of the proposed spend could revolutionise the outlook for physically active travel across the UK.</p>