

Our Ref: EB1378

Physical Activity Strategy Working Group
Health Promotion Team
Room C4.22
Castle Buildings
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

29 September 2004

Dear Sir or Madam:

Re: Physical Activity Strategy and Action Plan Consultation

Sustrans greatly welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Physical Activity Strategy and Action Plan. Our comments below relate to our area of expertise - transport - and in particular the promotion of health through sustainable, physically active travel. Over 2/3 of users of the National Cycle Network report that the existence of the Network has led them to be more physically active.

Sustrans works through practical projects to change the physical environment so that sustainable, physically active ways of travelling are more accessible. We have over 25 years' experience in creating environments for physical activity, such as the UK National Cycle Network programme, and in changing the transport culture to make physical activity possible, as with our national Safe Routes to Schools programme and the successful UK pilots of TravelSmart individualised travel marketing.

The successful delivery of the strategy can only be achieved with adequate resources being made available for its implementation. As part of this strategy the DHSSPS should move spend upstream, and invest today in encouraging healthier lifestyles, so as to spend less tomorrow. This investment needs to be substantial and founded on cost estimates in terms of healthcare and loss of productivity of a population becoming more obese and less active and healthy.

The role of officials outside the health sector and non-government partners should not be underestimated in delivering the health message. Often these agencies are already working in the frontline with the target audience and may be best placed to deliver at a community level.

Should you require clarification or further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Eamonn Brown
Sustrans, NI Schools Coordinator

Consultative Document

A Five-Year Physical Activity Strategy and Action Plan

Response to the Questionnaire from Sustrans

Aim of the Strategy (Chapter2)

Q1 – Do you agree with the overall aim of the strategy set out in paragraph 2.1? If not, what do you think the overall aims should be?

Answer - No.

The aim should be amended to read – “To promote the benefits of regular **integrated** physical activity - to encourage everyone in Northern Ireland to participate in daily activity **as part of their everyday life**, with particular emphasis on those who are inactive.

Q2 – Do you agree with the key objectives set out in paragraph 2.5 and how will it be met? If not, why?

Answer - No.

The focus seems to be on promoting planned sport or recreation, which usually require life style changes that are unsustainable. The Health and Social Wellbeing Survey 2001 highlighted this, with 79% of the respondents indicating either; they were too busy, or not having enough time, as the main barrier to physical activity. One of the greatest opportunities exists within transport with many of our regular journeys over a short distance. At a UK level 25% of trips made by car are under two miles and almost 60% under five miles. The objectives should include creating a physical environment conducive to walking and cycling.

Suggestion, new objective as follows

- Remodelling the physical and cultural environments so as to make it easier for people to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives, through transport, at work and education, in leisure and recreational activities.

Q3 – Do you agree with the priorities set out in paragraphs 2.7 and 2.8? If no, why?

Answer - Yes and No.

The priorities of the strategy must extend beyond ‘promoting participation’ to enabling participation through daily activity. For example the continued high levels of smoking are a good illustration that education and exhortation cannot alone bring about the behaviour change we need.

We would like to raise a concern that the wording used, “participation in physical activity” should be clearly defined as referring to lifestyle physical activity of all kinds. Even today, many practitioners may read this as specific to sport and active

recreation, and may fail to plan for the effective promotion of physical activity through travel choices or at the workplace.

Q4 – Do you agree with the targets specified in paragraph 2.10? If not, why?

We would like to register our concern about the baseline figures quoted. In England, only 34% of adults reach the WHO recommended physical activity levels, and we fear that the situation in Northern Ireland is unlikely to be significantly better. The measure used here appears to be total sedentarity, meaning the people by WHO standards that are insufficiently active are not clearly identified as being at risk. We would urge that targets be set for an increase in the proportion of the population, and subsets, reaching WHO recommended levels.

The NI Physical Activity Strategy Action Plan 1998-2002 stated “Research shows that 8/10 women and 7/10 men in Northern Ireland do not engage in sufficient physical activity”, and this is clearly a better measure.

Many people in Great Britain now feel that a target of 1% per annum growth in population physical activity levels, from a solid baseline, is more SMART

Suggested amendment to section 2.11

These targets are likely to be best achieved by promoting physical activity ***across the whole life course, and in a number of settings including travel and transport to all destinations, leisure and interests (eg gardening), sport, community and care centres***. It should be noted that targets set in other Government strategies will contribute to the achievement of the physical activity targets set out in this document.

Action Plan (Chapter 3)

Q5 – Do you agree with the proposed actions 3 to 12 under “Policy development to create a supportive environment” set out after paragraph 3.3? Are there other actions you consider should be included?

Answer – Yes.

However, one lead agency should be identified to champion each action. The use of ‘ongoing’ as a target date is insufficient, key annual milestones should be used to demonstrate progress towards the five-year target.

Additionally, the Government is a major employer in Northern Ireland and should lead by example in terms of increasing opportunities for physical activity through travel. The development of travel plans for all Government Departments and their Agencies, promoting sustainable, active and healthy travel should be a key policy development. The benefits would be wide ranging from reducing congestion to creating a healthier workforce, allowing them to become part of the solution rather than the problem.

Commitment to the continued development, expansion and marketing of the National Cycle Network (NCN) should be included as an action in this section. The NCN is

leading the growth in cycling in the UK. In 2003, the NCN carried 126 million trips by cyclists, walkers, and other users. This represents a year on year growth of 10% in the number of cycle trips, over and above the growth generated by continued expansion of the Network. More than 2/3 of users claim to be more physically active thanks to the existing network in their locality.

Dr Brian Gaffney, Chief Executive, Health Promotion Agency has stated “The development of the National Cycle Network provides many new opportunities for people to improve their health through cycling and walking. This will contribute to and strengthen the Northern Ireland Physical Activity Strategy...”¹

Actions should also be extended to include the NI Roads Safety Strategy. Progress towards its targets will help create a cycle and walking friendly environment.

*Q6 – Do you agree with the proposed actions (13 to 15) under “**Raising awareness**” set out after paragraph 3.5? Are there other actions you consider should be included?*

Answer – Yes.

It would be worth researching how many people continued to be involved in physical activity after the Cash Grant Scheme projects were completed. Obviously, sustained physical activity is our objective rather than short-term involvement.

*Q7 – Do you agree with the proposed actions (16 to 18) under “**Improving knowledge and skills**” set out after paragraph 3.7? Are there other actions you consider should be included?*

Answer – Yes.

There is a need to extend it to include School Travel Advisors and Work Place Advisors as the focus continues to be planned sport, leisure and recreation.

Additional action should be to provide training to frontline health officials on physical activity and active travel.

*Q8 – Do you agree with the proposed actions (19 to 20) under “**Research and evaluation**” set out after paragraph 3.9? Are there other actions you consider should be included?*

Answer – Yes

Q9 – Do you agree with the subsidiary targets to assist in monitoring progress set out after paragraph 4.6?

Answer – Any significant and sustained growth in physical activity levels is likely to require a much broader focus than “sport and other physical activity”. We suggest

¹ Comment by Dr Brian Gaffney, Sustrans Active Travel (publication title) “The National Cycle Network is the largest environmental intervention in the UK promoting public health...”

this wording be changed to “physical activity of all kinds”. The 1% per annum target, as mentioned above, is now widely accepted as SMART. We do however have concerns about the baseline figure used here; we urge you to check its accuracy, and in particular that all baselines refer to the WHO recommended levels of activity.

The House of Commons Health Committee, in its report on obesity, stated:

“If the government were to achieve its target of trebling cycling in the period 2000-2010.... That might achieve more in the fight against obesity than any measure we recommend in this report”.²

The subsidiary targets for walking and cycling could link directly to their respective NI strategy documents published by the Department for Regional Development. Cycling³

- Quadruple the number of trips by cycle (on 2000 figures) by the end of 2015.

Walking (targets are by 2012)⁴

- To increase the number of short walking journeys (less than 1 mile) by 20%; and
- To increase the average distance walked per person per year by 10%

Equality Implications

Q10 – The process of equality impact assessment is a relatively new field of work for most statutory organisations. A separate document detailing the Equality Impact Assessment is provided with the Strategy and Action Plan. Do you agree with the assessment as set out in the document?

Answer – Yes

Q11 – Do you think the Strategy and Action Plan will have an adverse impact on any of the groups identified in paragraph 3.1 of the Equity Impact Assessment document? If yes, please state the group or groups and any adverse impacts that you feel the proposals are likely to have on them.

Answer – No

Q12 – Please state how such adverse impacts could be reduced or alleviated in the proposals

Answer – No comment

² The Health Select Committee’s Report on Obesity, May 2004.
www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhealth.htm

³ Department for Regional Development – Northern Ireland Cycling Strategy, June 2000

⁴ Department for Regional Development – Walking Northern Ireland, An Action Plan, December 2003

Q13 – If you feel the adverse impacts cannot be alleviated within the current proposed actions, what alternative actions do you think could be considered to reduce the differential impact on the group or groups?

Answer – No comment

Human Rights

Q14 – The Strategy and Action Plan are intended to contribute to the promotion of rights. Do you think that the Strategy and Action Plan promotes human rights?

Answer – Yes

Q15 – Are there any aspects where potential violations may occur? If so, please indicate whom this impacts upon.

Answer – No

Q16 – Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the Strategy and Action Plan that you feel would improve the promotion of equality of opportunity and/or good relations or human rights?

Answer – The ability of children to make independent local journeys has diminished significantly over the last 50 years. This has had a major impact on Children's rights and health.

We consider the Strategy should have addressed the issue of children's independent mobility more robustly.

“Evidence shows that children today expend about 600Kcal less than their counterparts 50 years ago and contemporary British children, even in the pre-school years – spend much of their time seated. Another example is that of car use, which has grown considerably faster for children than the rest of the population. In 1964 around 37% of travel by children was in a car; it was more than 70% in 2002.

This decline in physical activity has been exacerbated by the failure of successive governments to provide an environment in which physical activity can be incorporated into everyday life.⁵

⁵ Dr David Ashton, The Imperial College School of Medicine – excerpt taken from the Guardian, 03:03:04 as quoted by Sustrans in Health for All Children, Guidance on Implementation in Scotland.