

Ref:EB1385

Fit Futures Secretariat  
Investing for Health Team  
C.4.22  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3SQ

30 September 2004

Dear Sir or Madam:

**Re: Taskforce on Obesity in Children and Young**

Sustrans greatly welcomes the opportunity to reply to the questions set by the Taskforce on Obesity in Children and Young People. Our comments below relate to our area of expertise - transport - and in particular the promotion of health through sustainable, physically active travel. Over two thirds 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 any strategy can only be achieved with adequate resources being made available for its implementation. 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.

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

Yours sincerely

**Eamonn Brown**  
**Sustrans, NI Schools Coordinator**

## Prevention of Overweight and Obesity in Children and Young People

### Request for Stakeholder Views

#### Response to the questions from Sustrans

1. *What do you consider to be the major issues that need to be taken into account in tackling the issue of overweight and obesity in children and young people?*

Sustrans believes that the prevalence of obesity is a consequence of the way we have planned our physical environment and transport systems, which encourages sedentary lifestyles. Significant benefits to children and young people's health could be achieved by interventions that encourage people to participate regularly in physical activity – especially in their travel choices.

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

The focus for policies and measures to increase physical activity has until now largely been on planned sport and recreation. This focus needs to change, so as to concentrate on the integration of physical activity into everyday life.

2. *What is being done already by your organisation to prevent children and young people from becoming overweight or obese?*

Sustrans' focus in Northern Ireland has been on the Safe Routes to Schools initiative and the National Cycle Network. We also have a UK-wide programme, Active Travel, working with the health sector to support measures encouraging physically active travel as a healthier alternative to motor transport.

Safe Routes to Schools (SRS) is a concept promoted by Sustrans as far back as 1980. The aims are to enable more children to walk and cycle to school. The current Sustrans SRS project began in England as a three-year study in 1995 supported by the Environmental Action Fund of the Department of the Environment. Since then the programme has been rolled out across the UK

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

and is now supported by a range of official funds, charitable trusts, lottery and Sustrans supporters.

In Northern Ireland, Sustrans has developed the initiative in partnership with the Northern Ireland School Travel Advisory Group (STAG), which is led by the Department for Regional Development. The focus of the work has been the development of School Travel Plans in six pilot schools over the last four years. It is clearly evident from this work that many children want to travel independently, but current infrastructure and practices, within and outside the school gate, create barriers to making walking, cycling and bus travel a realistic option. Since the introduction of cycle parking at St Brigid's College (one of the NI pilot projects) cycling has increased from four pupils a day to almost forty.

Sustrans' flagship project, the National Cycle Network, currently provides over 8,200 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. 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 two thirds of users claim to be more physically active thanks to the existing Network routes in their locality. While the Network caters for usage by all members of society, it is worth noting in the context of this consultation that 26% of users on the traffic free sections are under 16.

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.

3. *What could be done by your organisation to more effectively assist efforts to prevent increases in levels of overweight and obesity in children and young people?*

As a charity, Sustrans need much more support from government 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. Our practical programmes are themselves direct and effective solutions to declining physical activity, but also serve as demonstration projects giving clear evidence of what works. We call for support from all the relevant sectors, including transport, health, environment and education.

We believe one of the most important initiatives would be the roll out of a province wide Safe Routes to Schools project. This initiative would promote the benefits of 'active travel' to young people and children and establish these

habits, which would then be carried over to adulthood. We believe there is a need to employ dedicated School Travel Advisors to support schools in developing and implementing their School Travel Plan as well as liaising with government agencies. Sustrans has prepared a business plan for the roll out of the schools initiative and we would welcome the opportunity to present it to the task force.

In England, the Department for Transport will in October announce a significant financial commitment to the extension of the National Cycle Network to link to schools, across the country. A similar approach in NI would be appropriate.

4. *What would others need to do to maximise your organisation's contribution to the prevention of overweight and obesity in children and young people?*

As stated in your cover letter, the problem is not one of consuming more calories than previous generations; but a decrease in physical activity. Even with our best intentions, attending regular planned sport or recreation is not often manageable due to “modern living”. The school journey as stated is one of the greatest opportunities we have to increase the levels of physical activity our children and young people take on a regular basis. In order for this to happen, Government agencies need to remodel the physical and cultural environments to make them more conducive to walking or cycling to school.

Supporting the implementation of the following Sustrans initiatives would maximise our contribution;

- Commitment to the continued development, expansion and marketing of the National Cycle Network
- Commitment to the roll out of the Sustrans Safe Routes to Schools Programme; and
- The establishment of an Active Travel programme in NI to collaborate with the health sector.