

# Public Health White Paper

## Sustrans submission to Welsh Government consultation on Public Health White Paper

May 2014

### Summary

Sustrans is a leading UK charity enabling people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day. We work with families, communities, policy-makers and partner organisations so that people are able to choose healthier, cleaner and cheaper journeys, with better places and spaces to move through and live in.

Sustrans is a leading actor in the promotion and facilitation of health and active lifestyles, with particular expertise in the area of active travel.

We have consistently supported the Welsh Government's work towards a Public Health White Paper and, we hope, legislation to implement it.

In this context, we are proud to have worked with the Welsh Government right through the process leading to your legislative commitment to active travel through the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013. This is a world first, and we see it as world class.

However, we have identified the following points that we would like to be addressed:

- Promoting and enabling physical activity should be given their own prominence and not just be contained in the section on obesity
- With no specific questions on physical activity in the consultation questionnaire, other organisations, individuals and bodies will not provide valuable insights through the consultation.
- We would welcome the opportunity to work with Welsh Government officials to determine how existing plans (for example Creating an Active Wales) could best be integrated with the White Paper.

It is a fundamental flaw in the Public Health White Paper and consultation, in that it looks at physical activity only as a part of tackling obesity. This is wrong: physical inactivity is in itself a major public health issue, which is costing Wales over £650million a year.<sup>1</sup> While there are links, obesity and physical inactivity are separate public health issues – it is perfectly possible to be of a healthy weight and suffer from issues linked to lack of physical activity.

Sustrans believes that with with no specific questions on physical activity in the consultation questionnaire, there is a real risk that bodies outside the health sector, but which contribute much to physical activity, may not provide their valuable insights through the consultation.

This is a particular concern because so much of the practical work to promote physical activity is executed by bodies outside the traditional world of public health, who may be dissuaded from submission as there is no natural point of entry to the process.

Sustrans believes issues relating to physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles should be given greater prominence as the legislation moves forward. Together with other organisations we have asked Welsh Government to take corrective action on this specific part of the consultation, for example by highlighting the issue at consultation events.

We are very keen to work with Welsh Government officials to determine how existing plans (for example Active Travel Action Plan and Creating an Active Wales) could best be integrated with the White Paper. We will also want to work closely with Government to develop solutions and approaches to increasing population wide physical activity throughout the life course in Wales.

We believe that a focus on increasing physical activity fits with the concept of ‘prudent healthcare’, ensuring that health funding is used to enable people to take responsibility for their own health.

## **Introduction**

Sustrans is a leading actor in the promotion and facilitation of healthy, active and sustainable transport options. We have worked for over 35 years on this, with public health sector organisations as well as partners in other fields, such as transport, planning, education and leisure.

We have contacts in and some understanding of the wider issues around public health and non-communicable diseases. However in this submission we have concentrated on active travel – walking and cycling for day-to-day transport purposes – although some of the principles may have wider relevance.

Policies and measures to bring about a shift to active travel, particularly from private motorised transport, offer a number of public health gains all at once. These include reductions in local toxic air pollution, climate change emissions and noise, reduced road danger and fewer casualties, and – perhaps above all – physical activity as part of the daily lifestyle.

Our work on policies and practice, with public health sector partners, at Welsh and at UK level, has focused primarily on physical activity. We regard this as one of the priority areas for public health policy – the impact of physical inactivity on premature mortality is comparable to that of smoking, for example. A physically active lifestyle is an important contributor to reducing the toll of cardiovascular disease, many forms of cancer, type 2 diabetes and some forms of mental ill-health, as well as improving bone strength and falls resistance, important themselves in terms of the social care as well as healthcare burden on the economy.

Therefore, we question why the only references to this serious public health issue are hidden away within the section on obesity, and not given their own prominence. This would, in our view, be an ideal opportunity to cement the prominence of the ‘Creating an Active Wales’ plan and broaden the pool of those responsible for delivering on its aims.

We are only answering one of the consultation questions, primarily because the other questions focus onto specific areas raised in the White Paper, and our main concern relates to the omission of physical activity from these questions. As in our Green Paper response, we feel a Public Health Bill in Wales provides an ideal opportunity to widen the responsibility of public health issues away from those who work directly in the sector.

Encouraging people to travel on foot or by bike for everyday shorter journeys, fits with the concept of prudent healthcare and preventing ‘avoidable harm’ in health, in this case by helping people meet their physical activity requirements as part of their daily routine.

## **Question 47: Next Steps**

Sustrans welcomes the publication of the Public Health White Paper and the further development of public health legislation within Wales. In particular, we remain supportive of the need for the legislation to take public health beyond those who work in it directly – and for others, across the public sector in particular, to see public health and the prevention of non-communicable diseases to be a priority objective in their work.

As we highlighted in our response to the Green Paper<sup>2</sup>, legislation has the ability to reduce health inequalities across Wales – and our specific field of active travel and transport planning has a key role to play in tackling these inequalities.

Between the closing of the Green Paper consultation and the publication of the White Paper, the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 was passed without opposition in the Welsh Assembly. Sustrans sees this legislation has having major public health implications and we welcome its references in the White Paper – however, it is disappointing that the White Paper only references physical activity in relation to obesity.

**We are extremely concerned that the White Paper consultation considers physical inactivity only within the context of obesity, and that the consultation questionnaire overlooks it completely. We regard this as a fundamental flaw in the consultation and would like to see the Welsh Government take corrective action – it is very likely that this omission will effectively suppress comment and engagement from many of the organisations, bodies and individuals working on physical activity from outside the public health sector.**

It is important that the health implications of leading a physically inactive and sedentary lifestyle are properly reflected as this process moves forward. This will help to ensure that all Government departments (including Ministers and local government) and other regulatory bodies see tackling these issues as their responsibilities.

One issue as things stand is that very often the department funding active travel initiatives will not count the cross-sector benefits. In Wales, the Department for Economy, Science and Transport (EST) is the main funder of walking and cycling projects, yet assessment of the health impacts of these schemes is limited in favour of an attempt to express the economic benefits – and the negative public health implications of other schemes (e.g. building new roads) is also rarely taken into account, for example the recent Welsh Government consultation on an M4 relief road at Newport.

For any future legislation on public health within Wales, it is vital that the Finance Minister and Department are fully involved, to ensure that health costs and benefits are considered across all projects and departments. In our view, this means a future Bill must consider all elements of policy and not merely a select few.

It is important to recognise that obesity and physical inactivity are separate public health issues. Although they are linked (physically active people are less likely to be obese), inactivity raises the risk of a number of major non-communicable diseases other than obesity. At the same time, it is possible to be obese, yet physically active and be ‘healthier’ than someone of a normal weight who leads an inactive lifestyle. It is, therefore, important to look at both issues separately. This is why Sustrans believes that physical activity requires greater prominence as the process moves forward, and that the consultation should seek direct input on issues relating to physical activity.

The setting up of the Active Travel Board within the Welsh Government (chaired by the Minister for Culture and Sport) is a positive step in delivering collaborative working. The main focus of the Board appears to be overseeing the Active Travel Action Plan – Sustrans analysis of the action plan is that there is very little cross departmental commitment at a strategic level. Other than listing short term project specific initiatives, there is a lack of intention articulating how health improvement approaches will respond to the Active Travel Act by aligning resources alongside transport infrastructure spend to help people overcome the barriers that prevent them from travelling actively. New public health legislation is a great opportunity to ensure these issues are considered across portfolios well into the future.

In ‘Creating an Active Wales’ the Welsh Government has a plan that forms a basis for delivering some of the changes necessary to enable Wales to become a more active – and healthier – nation. We believe the Public Health White Paper – and future legislative process – provides an ideal opportunity to refresh the strategy where necessary, ensure its prominence going forward and ensuring wider responsibility for delivery.

Sustrans are keen to work with Welsh Government and officials to identify how best this can be taken forward (alongside working on the Active Travel Action Plan) as part of the legislative process.

## **Value for Money**

Our physical activity crisis is costing Wales hundreds of millions of pounds every year, so it's crucial we take forward programmes that are value for money. That doesn't necessarily mean spending more money, but it means spending existing money better.

If implemented to its full potential, we believe that over 20 years the Active Travel (Wales) Act could save the Welsh NHS over half a billion pounds.<sup>3</sup> Other initiatives – for example planning policy that puts physical activity at the heart of communities – could save the NHS even more money in the medium to long term.

Although the values have not been so well modelled, we can be confident that there are major economic benefits in other areas too. There will be significant savings in social care from having a physically active population; and business benefits, from increased staff productivity and fewer sick days.

There is great potential for change in shifting journeys to active travel, here in Wales 49% of our journeys are under three miles. The Cabinet Office – at a UK level - has stated that people could replace 78% of their local car trips under five miles with walking, cycling or public transport<sup>4</sup>. A two mile walking trip or five miles by bike equate to 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, the recommended minimum for adults: there and back will give the recommended level for children.

Standard transport economic analysis shows walking and cycling schemes have a markedly better return on investment than road schemes. A review of published transport analyses, carried out in 2010 for the South West regional government office (England) and Department of Health (Westminster), found that, “almost all of the studies identified report economic benefits of walking and cycling interventions which are highly significant. The median result for all data identified is 13:1 and for UK data alone the median figure is higher, at 19:1.”<sup>5</sup>

The analysis methodology, used by transport ministries and professionals in the UK, includes some health impacts (mortality from certain causes) but not all (for example, it excludes type 2 diabetes, a major healthcare cost): it therefore understates the value of the health benefits quite seriously.

Looking wider still, interventions – both environmental and behavioural – to promote physical activity can bring co-benefits much wider than health. For example effective action to promote active travel, as well as raising physical activity levels, reduces climate change emissions, noise and local toxic pollution from traffic, cuts road casualties, improve social cohesion and the quality of local environments, and reduces congestion.

## **Setting an example within the health sector**

There is undoubtedly truth in the widely held belief that ‘people trust doctors’. Within living memory, GPs and other medical professionals would smoke in front of their patients: this is now unthinkable. We need a similar paradigm shift with regard to physical activity as part of the move to a healthy lifestyle: the health sector should show the way.

Health sector businesses have an obvious exemplar role and are not in most cases currently acting it. Every hospital, health centre, administrative building, GP surgery, dental practice etc should be conveniently and safely accessible on foot, by bicycle and using public transport. The planning of new services and buildings should hold to this principle.

Specifically, in this context, the White Paper and ensuing legislation, regulation, strategies and implementation should be tightly linked to the existing Active Travel (Wales) Act. This excellent legislation is a world first but on its own the Act itself will not achieve change on the scale that is needed. Properly implemented it will transform the physical and cultural environment in Wales, and will allow many more people to choose healthy, active travel much more often. For this to happen it should be a key structural element in other Welsh policy making, so as to maximise the benefits, to public health as in other areas. Sustrans Cymru is committed to helping Welsh Government ensure that the full potential of the Active Travel Act is realised, so that world leading legislation is deserving of that accolade. We can bring evidence and good practice from across the UK, Europe and further afield to turn policy into good practice.

Health sector businesses are also important corporate neighbours, and can influence local policies for good or for ill. A disturbing negative example was the role of NHS bodies in opposing the proposed Edinburgh road charging scheme in 2004-5<sup>6</sup>: this should never happen again. A prime positive example of the active role of public health is Liverpool where, working with local government, the public health sector is championing the lowering of road speed limits across the city. This follows in the wake of work by the North West Public Health Observatory to model the reduction in child road deaths and serious injuries achievable by reduction in limits from 30 to 20mph.

Individual health professionals also should assume their responsibilities. It may be time for the NHS to review its human resources policies: it is not unreasonable to suggest that employees should demonstrate in their own behaviour the values of the organisation, and health professionals should lead healthy lives. We welcome the support for the Healthy Hospitals small scale pilot programme, of which Sustrans is a lead partner, where this is being trialled. However this is an example of where the scale of the intervention (a £133,000 over 3 years) project doesn't match the scale of the issue.

Recently published findings from the Caerphilly cohort study<sup>7</sup> showed strong evidence of a dose:response relationship between adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviours and reduced mortality rates. In cost benefit terms, increasing levels of active travel should be a priority if we want to reduce the burden on our health and social care systems in the medium and longer term, countering the impacts of an ageing population.

## **Our work**

Sustrans specialises in environmental and behaviour change programmes promoting active travel – walking and cycling as daily local transport. These include:

- the National Cycle Network [NCN], which in 2012 carried over 50 million active trips in Wales (almost half a billion across the UK), roughly 50:50 walking and cycling
- Our UK-wide programme of new routes – supported by the Big Lottery Fund – has transformed local journeys across the UK by bringing the NCN into the heart of communities, including Pont-y-Werin, linking Penarth with Cardiff Bay, and is estimated to have carried 588,500 journeys in 2012. Schemes like these are transformational in enabling people to build physical activity into their lives.
- Our work with schools has led to increases in walking and cycling, and in 2012/13 we once again trebled the number of children cycling to school where we have projects
- Our Welsh Government funded personalised travel planning project has changed travel behaviour by providing tailored information. Interim results from Cardiff have shown an 8% reduction in single occupancy car journeys with corresponding increases in more active modes of transport (including public transport which by its nature requires a walking element)
- We are working with other health organisations (including BHF and ASH) to encourage and enable healthier behaviour among staff in Welsh hospitals and universities.

Walking and cycling are now fully recognised as components of any health promotion strategy and of the individual healthy lifestyle, and are recommended by health professionals, such as NICE<sup>8</sup>. They offer great potential for incorporation of physical activity into people's lives.

Our Research and Monitoring Unit are the leading experts in analysing active travel behaviour, and our innovative Route User Surveys provide detailed information on how and why people are using new walking and cycling routes.

On the policy front Sustrans collaborates with national bodies in public health, transport and associated fields across the UK to develop cross-sector policy supportive of active travel. Among other initiatives, we:

- co-founded the All Party Commission on Physical Activity, together with Nike, British Heart Foundation, Young Foundation, English Premier League and Lawn Tennis Association
- led the partnership of public health bodies to draft the Take Action on Active Travel policy call, now signed by over 100 organisations in the relevant sectors
- influenced a number of NICE guidelines, through being a member on development committees with the WHO and the European local authority group Polis, are leading work to bring together policies and programmes in Public Health and Transport at the European level.

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<sup>1</sup> **Welsh Government 2009**, [Climbing Higher: Creating an Active Wales](#)

<sup>2</sup>

[http://www.sustrans.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/0213\\_public\\_health\\_bill\\_wales\\_sustrans\\_response.pdf](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/0213_public_health_bill_wales_sustrans_response.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> **Jarrett et al, 2012** Effect of increasing active travel in urban Wales on costs to the National Health Service

<sup>4</sup> **Cabinet Office, 2009** An analysis of urban transport

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<sup>5</sup> **Government Office Southwest / Department of Health, 2010** Value for Money: An Economic Assessment of Investment in Walking and Cycling

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.scotsman.com/news/health/united-against-edinburgh-road-charges-1-920584>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0081877>

<sup>8</sup> <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/PH41>