

PREVENTION OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Response From The Northern Ireland Cycling Forum

1. What do you consider to be the major issues that need to be taken into account in tackling the issues of overweight and obesity in children and young people?
 - a. Some of the issues around childhood and adolescent obesity are complex, however health has been a tragically neglected aspect in official assessments of transport across Western Europe and particularly in Northern Ireland. The way we have planned our physical environment and transport systems has encouraged sedentary lifestyles.
 - b. *“Evidence shows that children today expend about 600Kcal less than their counterparts 50years ago. Contemporary British children even in the preschool 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.”*¹
 - c. Dora and Racioppi stated in 2001 *“Governments spend large amounts of time and money on transport schemes which just do not take account of a healthy, cheap and traditional method of getting around”*²
 - d. Walking and cycling, the healthiest and most sustainable modes of transport need to have much higher priority in transport planning if we are serious about improving children’s, young people’s and general public health levels.
 - e. It is irrefutable that active, non-polluting forms of transport (walking and cycling) are more beneficial to our health than the use of motorised vehicles. *“There are major opportunities for achieving large health gains for the European population by increasing levels of routine physical activity. Walking and cycling as means of daily transport can be a most effective strategy to achieve these gains”*³
*“14% of Chinese households acquired a car between 1989 and 1997.Men who acquired a car gained 1.8kg and doubled their risk of obesity”*⁴
 - f. Childrens’ independent mobility has in a single generation shrunk to one-ninth of its former size.⁵

¹ 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.

² Dora, Carlos and Racioppi, Francesca (2001) “Cycling and walking: The planners don’t always count it” European Bulletin on Environment and Health, May 2001 – http://www.euro.who.int/transport/modes/20030207_1

³ Physical activity through transport. WHO 2002

⁴ Bell et al, Obesity Research 2002; 10: 277-83

⁵ Hillman, Mayer “One false move” A study of childrens’ independent mobility, the home habitat of a typical eight-year-old – the area in which in which children are able to travel on their own has shrunk to one ninth its former size.

- 63 degrees north compared to Belfast's 54 degrees north - therefore less winter daylight than Belfast.
- Same annual precipitation as Belfast,
- 7 degrees C colder than Belfast in the winter, summer a little cooler,
- The Northern Ireland climate is more benign than that of northern Norway. Norwegian cyclists enjoy political and civic support. Interestingly the Norwegians are Europe's least obese people.

Finally we emphasise the wider benefits of cycling⁹

- The more people cycle the more aware drivers become of cyclists –a safety critical mass
- Improved air quality
- Reduced noise
- Increased play and activities for children
- Benefits to health and wealth
- Social capital and inclusion

⁹ Hill, Alison South East Public Health Observatory and National Cycling Strategy Board, paper presented to CTC/CCN Autumn Conference Cycling and Health 2003 and based on Cavill and Davis briefing paper "Cycling and Health" for the English Regional Cycling Development Team