

SECURING THE BENEFITS OF ACTIVE TRAVEL IN EUROPE

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Active travel relates to physical activity undertaken as a means of transport. It includes travel by foot, bicycle and other non-motorised vehicles. Use of public transport is also included as it generally involves walking or cycling to pick-up and from drop-off points.

A shift to active travel and public transport can yield immediate health and environmental benefits, much greater than those achievable by focusing only on improving air quality and the local environment through greater fuel and vehicle efficiencies.

More walking and cycling, for all trip purposes – to work, education, shopping, social and leisure trips – can generate important economic benefits through large public health gains, in addition to reduced energy consumption, pollution and congestion. Active travel and public transport may lead to the creation of new jobsⁱ. Several studies in different urban environments indicate that these gains offset the disbenefits of potential increased traffic casualties and exposures to air pollution while travelling by active modes.

Insufficient physical activity is one of the leading risk factors for ill health in the 53 Member States of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region, where nearly 1 million deaths per year are estimated to be attributable to lack of physical activityⁱⁱ.

The science is not in doubt: European policies and recommendations are clear about the link between transport and health. There is now a need for effective cross-sectoral action, including by European institutions, to realize the multiple benefits of active travel.

This paper calls upon European institutions and other European actors to take action, to ensure that the multiple benefits of active travel are made central to all relevant European policies and programmes.

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I – Background

Transport and health in the European Union (EU)

Until now, the health impacts of transport have been addressed to a large extent through local and national policy and investment programmes. Only recently has there been action at the European level. With EU support, pioneering initiatives at the local level could be encouraged in other cities, whilst respecting subsidiarity, as part of their sustainable mobility plans (SUMP). As an example, the Transport for London's 2014 Transport action plan which delivers on health through a 'whole-street' approachⁱⁱⁱ.

In European policy, there are a number of **policy documents linking transport and health**: these include most prominently Action 3 of the Urban Mobility Action Plan^{iv}; the Council recommendation on health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) adopted on 26 November 2013^v; the WHO European Charter on Counteracting Obesity, and the WHO Action Plan for Implementation of the European Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2012–2016^{vi}, which mentions safe cycling and walking as part of the package of measures and policies to be promoted to address overweight and obesity; and the mention of the importance of physical activity in the 2007 "Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related health issues", stressing the role of active urban commuting in encouraging physical activity.

Additionally, since health represents the largest part of the external costs of transport, active travel and health fits within the strategy of reducing the external costs posed by the transport sector to society. It is already stated in the European Commission's transport White Paper that full internalization of external costs should be pursued^{vii}, and health is clearly an important external cost that should be taken into account.

The European Commission under the 2013 Health call of the 7th Framework Programme is co-funding, inter alia, the research project PASTA (Physical Activity through Sustainable Transport Approaches), to gain a better understanding of active travel promotion and encourage increased physical activity through sustainable transport approaches, which started in November 2013.

Anticipating future challenges

The **shift towards more active travel fits into a wider European agenda** to answer future challenges linked to changing lifestyles, increased urbanization, new travel patterns, energy efficiency and a sustainable approach to public investments. Cities are becoming more and more densely populated: 82% of the population in Europe will live in towns in 2050 compared to 72% today. These high-density, mixed-use urban environments offer the advantage of having a higher share of short distance local trips, many of which could be made on foot or by bicycle to access jobs, education, health and other services.

Yet of the 10 million deaths per annum in Europe, **nearly 1 million can be attributed to lack of physical activity**, as reported by the WHO assessment of the burden of disease related to major risk factorsⁱⁱ. Furthermore, the costs incurred in public health to treat noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) due to **sedentary lifestyles, obesity among children and adults, and exposure to noise and air pollution are substantial**. These negative trends can be reversed. A bigger share of national budgets should be used to encourage healthy lifestyles, rather than solely paying the ever-rising costs of preventable noncommunicable disease, and the European level can play an important role in advocating and supporting this shift.

If bicycling and walking in cities are to increase, these modes of transportation must be made safe and secure by creating **suitable policy frameworks and adequate infrastructure**: of 92,000 deaths per year in Europe, **pedestrians and cyclists are road users most at risk**, constituting 31% of all road deaths^{viii}.

II – Benefits of active travel

Beside the health benefits of increased physical activity for individuals, promoting a shift towards more active travel offers **huge potential economic benefits, to society as a whole.**

Promoting active modes of transport:

- **can strongly help achieve European targets and goals** in terms of reduced congestion, improved air quality, less noise pollution and better road safety as well as better quality of life in urban areas, and can reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollutants, and dependence on fossil fuels;
- **would potentially reduce risks of premature deaths** both linked to air quality and lack of physical activity;
- **would reduce future costs for national health care systems** by reducing the burden of noncommunicable diseases;
- **has direct economic benefits** on job creation in green and healthy transport accounting for 76,600 additional jobs in the pan-European Region if selected cities achieved the same level of modal share of cycling as Copenhagen, Denmark.

We therefore call for strong **integration and coordination between transport and health policy**, notably at European level.

III – Lines of action

Although the health benefits of active travel are clear and well accepted, this is not always translated into concrete actions and funding on the local or national levels for active travel, and not yet at the European level.

Overall, a shift in mind sets is needed to help promote and secure the health benefits of active travel. **It is important to make full use of existing and new platforms and networks to disseminate tools and share knowledge.**

More specifically, the following lines of action can contribute to achieving the goal.

- A leader for the work on active travel and health should be clearly identified in the European Commission. This would facilitate ownership and facilitate interactions with networks and stakeholders.
- References in European policy documents to improving health through active travel should form the basis of shared objectives, policies, work programmes and investment to increase levels of walking and cycling.
- Enhanced collaboration with pan-European policy platforms, such as the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP), through which Member States in the WHO European Region have pledged to take action to support, among other things, active travel and public transport.
- Systematic internalization of health costs in road transport, notably linked to air emissions and physical inactivity is needed.
 - In this respect, **HEAT** (Health Economic Assessment Tool), developed by WHO, is designed to help conduct an economic assessment of the health benefits of walking or cycling by estimating the value of reduced mortality that results from specified amounts of walking or cycling.
 - HEAT may be used to model the health economic impact of all proposed transport investment, including at the European level.

- A policy framework is needed to take into account health considerations. In this respect, an integrated approach to all modes of transport while planning mobility is best suited. Thus **SUMPs are a valuable policy framework** to integrate health considerations in transport planning.
- **To help create a safe and supportive environment for active travel.**
 - **Supporting Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) strategies** and the design of inclusive neighborhoods for liveable communities where active travel modes are prioritized in combination with the use of public transport, including **pro-safety policies** which should take on board both infrastructure and policy frameworks. With good policy design, an increase in ridership can be accompanied by a concomitant reduction injury risk.
- To further research the links between active travel and health, but not use the need for further research as an excuse to delay action.

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