



## **NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITY**

### *Position Paper*

## **Response to Consultation on the European Commission Communication on a Sustainable Future for Transport: Towards and Integrated, Technology-led and User Friendly System**

**September 2009**

The European Commission opened a consultation with a deadline of 30 September 2009 offering stakeholders the opportunity to comment on the Communication on a Sustainable Future for Transport (COM2009 279/4). This consultation response is supported by: representatives working on public health within the North West of England region, in particular, primary care trusts, local authorities, NHS trusts and wider health organisations. We also support the position put forward by the Transport and Health Study Group (THSG).

### **1. The North West of England**

The North West of England is a diverse region with a population of over 7 million people, the third most populated English Government Office region behind the South East and London. The region as a whole accounts for over 11 per cent of employment and over 10 per cent of United Kingdom GDP. The North West has five distinctive sub-regions, Cheshire, Merseyside, Cumbria, Lancashire and Greater Manchester.

Unfortunately, the health of the people in the North West is poor in comparison with other regions in both the UK and parts of Europe. The North West is currently tackling significant health challenges such as cancer, teenage pregnancies, heart disease, obesity, health and social inequity and the effects of excessive drinking within the region.

The North West of England Public Health Community has a history of European engagement, having responded to many EU consultations where public health and health systems have a role to play, including, most recently: the 'Adapting to Climate Change' consultation in November 2007; the Consultation on 'Reforming the Budget, Changing Europe' in April 2008; DG SANCO Annual Work Plan 2009 in September 2008; the initial 'Future of Transport' consultation and the 'European Health Workforce' consultation in March 2009; and the 'Health Inequalities' consultation in April 2009.

### **2. General Comments**

The North West of England public health community appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the debate on a sustainable future for transport. We believe that this consultation can set the course for transport policy to contribute positively to the health needs and challenges of EU citizens. Many of the principle challenges facing citizens in the coming decades will be related to their health, with obesity, cancers, cardiovascular disease, mental illness, climate change, health inequalities and access to services amongst the top challenges. If properly prioritised, EU transport policy can have a positive effect in helping EU citizens and regional and national health systems to pro-actively address these challenges. The good health of EU citizens is essential in achieving the overarching goals and policy objectives of the EU, both now and in future decades and transport has an underdeveloped but vital role to play in this.



### **3. Key points in relation to the sustainable future for transport communication**

1. We welcome the recognition in the communication that transport policy can impact on health and wellbeing in a number of ways. We support the inclusion of policy statements made relating to road safety, air quality and encouragement of walking and cycling.
2. Our **main concern** is that the communication does not go far enough in recognising the considerable public health benefits of walking and cycling or the health and wellbeing benefits that would accrue from greater pedestrian permeability of street design.
3. We would strongly support a greater focus on the promotion of an integrated train/cycle network.
4. Transport is a major contributor to climate change and poor air quality, both of which impact heavily on health. Action to reduce congestion, noise and air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector are of vital importance.
5. We strongly support increased cross sectoral collaboration at EU level. Sustainable transport needs to be integrated into the wider development of healthy and sustainable communities. To achieve a sustainable future, policy makers in all areas need to ensure that there are synergies between policies.
6. Different EU funding streams (e.g. ERDF, Research, Public Health as well as Transport) should be used more innovatively to address some of the issues raised in the communication and to fund sustainable transport in sustainable communities.
7. There is a lot of knowledge and expertise at local and regional level and we would encourage the Commission to develop ways in which this can be shared as widely as possible between European regions.

### **4. Specific comments on aspects of the communication on the sustainable future for transport**

In the rest of this document we have tried to highlight key health issues as they relate to the different section headings of the Commission communication. The section referred to is clearly indicated in each heading.

#### **Section 4.1 – Quality Transport that is Safe and Secure**

Transport provides access to important determinants of a healthy lifestyle such as recreation, social support, work, health services, healthy food choices (the greatest food choice is often now located in out of town shopping complexes, only accessible by car) and social opportunities. We strongly support accessibility strategies to address inequality of access to these various opportunities, particularly focussing on those who are too young/old or poor to own a car.

We welcome the recognition that the transport needs of an aging population need to be taken into account in long term transport planning. We would also highlight that transport which is accessible to disabled people is an important factor in the normalisation of their lives.

We welcome the reference to overall quality and safety of transport. In addition we would add that, although road safety is affected by many issues, speed limits substantially reduce the consequences of road accidents. A 25kph speed limit in residential side streets has a minimal impact on journey times but can substantially reduce the number of pedestrian road deaths. Road design, public and driver education and regulation of vehicle use are all areas where further work could be undertaken to increase road safety. The Commission could promote road safety by developing ways to disseminate good practice and results of pilot projects around road safety and road design. Publicity campaigns at EU level addressing road safety issues such as speeding or drink/drug driving would be welcome. Funding of road safety projects and campaigns is also a key area for action.

Decreased physical activity is a major determinant of the current obesity epidemic and walking and cycling represent an opportunity to increase physical activity in the course of daily life. In the interest of promoting



healthier, good quality transport options, attention should be given to the development of more cycle ways and networks of safe, user friendly urban walking routes. Consideration should be given to using a variety of funding streams (such as ERDF or public health funding) for both infrastructure and promotion of such schemes.

#### **Section 4.2 – A Well Maintained and Fully Integrated Network**

We support further development of an integrated transport network and would encourage the EC to promote best practices from across Europe concerning successful integrated transport. In particular, given the substantial health benefits of active travel such as walking and cycling, we would support an integrated rail and cycle network, which includes adequate cycle parking/storage provision, cycle carriages on trains and proper provisions for cyclists to change trains at major stations and interchanges without causing obstruction to other passengers.

In addition we believe the development of an efficient, integrated high speed rail network across Europe, with integrated connecting local and regional services, will be an important factor tackling the multiple challenges of climate change, increased mobility needs of the population, road congestion and air quality. The possibilities for utilising and upgrading existing infrastructure, including (potentially) conversion of some motorway routes for development of rail facilities should be fully investigated.

A sustainable, integrated transport network should be part of a holistic approach to developing sustainable communities. Therefore, strong cross sectoral links should be made to ensure synergies between transport policy and other policy areas. The EU has a leading role to play in encouraging this approach by ensuring better cross sectoral communication and coordination between Commission DGs and between European institutions.

#### **Section 4.3 – Environmentally Sustainable Transport**

We welcome the recognition of the need for more environmentally sustainable transport systems. However, it is disappointing that some of the key health and environment issues are not fully addressed in the communication:

Greenhouse gas emissions from transport are a major contributor to the threat of climate change, which has far reaching implications for public health. Increased health risk areas include: increase in food, vector and tick borne diseases; shortages of food and good quality drinking water; deterioration in air quality; disproportionate impact of severe weather events on different sectors of the population, leading to increased social and health inequalities; and increased burden on regional and local health systems. We strongly support action to reduce emissions from the transport sector and believe that increasing high quality rail networks across Europe is an important tool to achieve this. We would strongly support the development of a convenient, efficient and user friendly European train and cycle network combined with the right price signals to encourage citizens to use rail rather than road or aviation for all but the longest or most complicated journeys. The car industry also has an important role to play in developing technologies to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from vehicles and this should be recognised in future transport policy.

Aviation causes noise and stress in communities close to airports, as well as contributing heavily to climate change. Currently aviation competes with rail even for journeys (such as London – Paris/Brussels) where the train is just as convenient and quick. We would support greater focus on promoting viable alternatives to aviation (such as high speed rail) for all but the longest journeys (over 2500km for business and over 4000 km for leisure journeys).

Air quality is seriously affected in (often densely populated) areas, which are subject to congestion and heavy traffic. This has a real impact on the health of people living working and visiting those areas; the recent European Commission communication on a partnership for action against cancer, for example, highlights air quality as being a key determinant for cancer prevalence. There are a number of other conditions that are seriously affected by poor air quality such as asthma and other respiratory diseases. In addition, congestion and traffic noise pollution can cause stress and impact heavily on mental health.

Noise pollution is an under-addressed issue at EU level. A recent survey in the UK, commissioned by Environmental Protection UK and funded by DEFRA, suggests that nearly one third of people report feeling



stressed by traffic noise and one in five report disturbed sleep due to traffic noise. There is also increasing evidence at EU level that exposure to high levels of traffic noise over a prolonged period can be linked to increased risk of CVD and to disturbed cognitive functioning (especially in children). We support action at EU level in terms of setting limits for acceptable levels of traffic noise and promoting R&D initiatives which reduce the noise burden associated with traffic (e.g. quieter tyres/engines etc). We also support actions to reduce road congestion and offer viable alternatives to personal car use. Flexing of working time regulations to allow commuters to travel to and from work at different times and promotion of home/remote working may also contribute to the reduction of congestion issues. Dissemination of best practice measures implemented locally in noise “hotspots” would also be welcome.

Green spaces are important resources for the health of the population, especially in urban areas, as they can be used for a number of active recreational pastimes, which may help tackle diseases such as obesity and CVD, as well as contributing to mental wellbeing. Sustainable transport planning should aim to ensure that these green spaces are not lost due to poor planning and that they are accessible by means of public transport to as many people as possible. Again, the Commission has a role to play in disseminating best practice in urban planning and by considering funding schemes by which urban green spaces could be developed into attractive recreational areas.

#### **Section 4.5 – Protecting and Developing Human Capital**

Worklessness has been shown to be a determinant of poor health and health inequalities. Unemployment or sudden loss of employment can also have severe impact on mental health. The North West Health Community supports the view that transport industry restructuring needs to be carried out in a socially responsible way. Social support, re-training and, as far as possible, assistance finding work should be provided for transport workers whose roles have become obsolete due to technological and market developments.

Transport (or lack of transport) can be an important obstacle to work creation in poorer or deprived areas, thereby contributing to the cycle of poverty and social and economic deprivation which contribute to health inequalities across Europe. Transport policy should make links with other policies in tackling this problem. For example, regional development funding streams such as ESF and ERDF could be used to support actions at regional and local level which tackle transport and work accessibility issues.

#### **Section 4.6 – Smart Prices as Traffic Signals**

We support the development of smart price signals to encourage consumers to make the right transport choices. It is important to encourage citizens to find alternatives to personal car use. This is particularly true in urban areas where the problems of congestion, pollution and loss of green space due to road building have the biggest impact on health. These are also the areas where it is also easiest to develop and promote public transport or cycling/walking alternatives. The environmental, economic and social costs of cars should be fully considered when looking at road and vehicle taxation and congestion charging schemes.

Pricing and the further development of efficient services should also encourage consumers to choose high speed rail over aviation for long journeys and integrated rail/cycle networks over personal car use for other journeys.

#### **Section 4.7 – Planning with an eye to transport: improving accessibility**

Given the extensive impacts of transport decisions on the health of the population, we would strongly support the inclusion of a health impact assessment when urban and transport planning decisions are being made.

According to calculations in the 1990s by the British Medical Association, if one third of car journeys of under 5 miles were replaced by walking or cycling, heart disease rates would reduce by the UK government’s then target for all other prevention measures combined. Evidence from America shows that increased pedestrian permeability of street design can reduce mean population bodyweight by 3kg. The considerable health benefits of walking and cycling should be taken into account when planning; street design should encourage active travel by providing a safe and pleasant environment for pedestrians and cyclists.



The Commission's communication identifies that there are now greater distances between the citizen and services such as supermarkets/shopping malls and recreation/sports centres which are in out of town locations. This trend can result in increased health inequalities between sections of the population, with those who are able to drive being able to access, among other things, more health and leisure facilities and potentially better choice and quality of food than those who do not drive. It is important to make sure that key services such as healthcare are accessible and planners should take this into account when planning the location and distribution of public services and public transport. This accessibility issue is particularly relevant in light of an aging population.

A recent study in Bristol in the UK and older studies in San Francisco all show that increased traffic in a residential street impacts negatively on the number of friendships and acquaintanceships that people have with others in the street. This can have an adverse effect on health by reducing the level of social support and community cohesion that contributes to wellbeing. Increased traffic in residential streets also contributes to the development of obesity inducing (obesogenic) environments as it reduces the opportunities for children to play safely out of doors. Consideration should be given to these health implications when planning new residential developments and making decisions about placement of key community services such as schools. As mentioned in the previous section on environmental sustainability, the location and protection of green spaces is of great importance to the health of a sustainable community and should be considered as such when planning decisions are made.

We would encourage the Commission to promote best practices from across Europe in relation to transport planning and urban development. Funding of innovative pilot schemes to improve community wellbeing by means of better urban design and transport planning should be promoted at European level.

### **Section 5.1 – Infrastructure: Maintenance, Development and Integration**

As mentioned above, we would strongly encourage the application of a health impact assessment similar to the EIA and SEA when developing infrastructure projects and transport policy.

We fully support the view that the costs of developing a sustainable transport system should be reduced by making optimal use of existing infrastructure. We strongly advocate the development of a fully integrated international high speed rail network, supported by integrated and efficient national, regional and local rail services in conjunction with cycle schemes. If a real shift towards sustainable transport is going to work, policy makers should be prepared to consider a range of options regarding this, from upgrading existing rail infrastructure to making use of other transport networks such as parts of motorways to develop rail lines.

### **Section 5.2 – Funding Sustainable Transport**

The EU could support the shift to active travel by considering financial support for local active travel schemes through regional funding. It could also add value by disseminating best practice and financing cities which have successfully implemented schemes and integrated transport solutions to mentor other cities/towns who are trying to make that shift.

In addition, by encouraging the collaborative use of different, cross sectoral, EU funding streams (for example research funding, regional funding, public health funding and transport funding), many transport issues which are of equal importance in other policy areas could be tackled more effectively. In this way, the EU would encourage the holistic approach to policy making that is required for the development of sustainable communities.

The correct pricing systems, which take into account the full costs of unsustainable transport modes and charge accordingly, will not only send the right price signals to consumers but will also help fund the substantial overhaul of public transport which will be required to support a low carbon, sustainable economy.

### **Section 5.5 & 5.6 – Behaviour Change and Effective Coordinated Action**

The estimation in the Commission's transport communication that there will be up to 3 billion cars in the world by 2050 highlights the fact that current behaviour patterns relating to transport are unsustainable. These patterns contribute, among other things, to environmental degradation, climate change, air and noise



pollution, congestion, stress, obesity, loss of a sense of community and social segregation between those who can afford high quality transport and those who cannot.

We welcome the recognition that widespread behaviour change will be necessary for a sustainable transport system in Europe. We support the idea of education, information and awareness raising campaigns and greater stakeholder involvement as means of changing consumer behaviour. However, a lot of work and resources will be required to change current, now ingrained, behaviours related to transport and to develop genuinely sustainable communities which offer citizens viable alternatives to personal car use in terms of access to services, recreation and employment. The EU could add real value by considering how such large scale behaviour change programmes can be financed and implemented. In addition, there is a role for the EU in promoting the exchange of information about best practice and innovative schemes and technologies which promote and incentivise healthy and sustainable transport choices.

### **Section 5.7 – The External Dimension**

We support the idea that the EU enters into discussions with the US, Russia, China, India, the African Union, Arab countries, ASEAN and the OAS to investigate the possibilities of an intercontinental rail network which could be used for both freight and passengers.

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