



Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs [Eleventh Report](#)

ELEVENTH REPORT

The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee has agreed to the following Report:

WALKING IN TOWNS AND CITIES

INTRODUCTION

1. Walking is important. It is a major form of transport and is overwhelmingly the main means of making short trips. Longer trips, including motorised ones, begin and end with a walk. Walking is central to a high density urban life, and we are pleased that the Government has now recognised and is encouraging this. Our finest cities, including Bath, Oxford and York, were built at a time when with few exceptions all journeys within the town were on foot. Walking is also healthy. A modest three 10 minute walks a day can reduce the risk of heart attacks, strokes and other serious diseases.

2. Yet, despite these advantages, we are walking less. The National Travel Survey shows that since the mid-1980s the proportion of all journeys made on foot has fallen from 34% to 27%. The total distance walked fell by a fifth from 244 miles per person per year in 1985/86 to 191 miles in 1997/99. This is not surprising. While it is difficult to account precisely for the decline, the general reasons seem clear. The convenience of the car has made it the preferred form of transport for those who can afford it for most journeys. As importantly, for a century we have decided to accommodate car travel with little concern for the damage caused. A host of measures were taken from building major new motorways to widening the turning circles of minor roads. Inner ring roads were smashed through some of our most beautiful cities, demolishing countless historic buildings dating from the middle ages onwards. Planning policy permitted the creation of new facilities, including out-of-town shopping and leisure centres, which were designed to be reached by car but were inaccessible to pedestrians. New housing developments have been and continue to be built on the edge of towns at densities which are too low to support local services. They are still being built in villages where there is no shop and purchasing a newspaper requires a car journey.[10]

3. In contrast to the changes made to every town and city to ease motor transport, walking has been made ever more unpleasant. Pedestrians have been treated with contempt. In a myriad of ways when we walk we are treated with less respect than when we drive. Engineers and economists have even considered our time less

valuable when they assess new projects. We are corralled behind long lengths of guard railing, forced into dark and dangerous subways and made to endure long waits at pedestrian crossings. We have promoted travel between districts but at the expense of ruining the local environment. The short walk to the shops has been made unpleasant so that the commuter can get to the centre of town more quickly. People are discouraged from walking in urban parks by vandalism, poor maintenance and fear for their personal security, and now travel to the countryside for a short walk.^[11] Conditions are poor for all of us, but for the vulnerable, for the young, for the disabled and for the elderly they can be all but impossible. Those who design highway schemes would do well to remember that one day they will be old and very possibly carless.

4. For once all that has to be done to see the difficulties is to step outside the Palace of Westminster. The local authority, Westminster City Council, is not short of funds as a result of the revenues from parking fines. The problem seems to be too much money. By the House of Lords the council has installed a staggered crossing where pedestrians cross half the road on one green light and then have to wait in a pen in the centre for another. The aim is to speed traffic flows and protect those on foot, but it does neither effectively because the traffic soon slows down at bottlenecks close by and many pedestrians ignore it in frustration at the inconvenience. A few yards to the south is another staggered crossing; to the north is the giant roundabout known as Parliament Square. Here in the heart of our largest and richest city, by the nation's best known buildings, it is impossible to cross some of the roads. The most circuitous routes often have to be taken, as anyone who has had to walk from the east end of Westminster Abbey to Downing Street knows.

5. We touched on some of these problems in our report on the Government's proposed Integrated Transport White Paper.^[12] The Government's White Paper, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*, July 1998, subsequently saw a prominent role for walking, and announced that "we are working closely with local government and a wide range of organisations to prepare a strategy (which was being prepared by a steering group) that will provide a framework for action".^[13] However, no national strategy for walking was published and instead a practical guide was finally issued in March 2000, *Encouraging walking: advice to local authorities*.^[14] The 1998 White Paper also introduced new Local Transport Plans which would be "a centrepiece" of government policy. These were to be local authority proposals for "delivering integrated transport for a five year period" with "the first plans covering the financial years 2001 - 2004/5".^[15] In March 2000 the Government also published *Guidance on Full Local Transport Plans* which "invited local authorities to include local strategies for encouraging walking" in those plans.^[16] The full Local Transport Plans (LTPs) were published in July 2000. In the same month *Transport 2010: The 10 Year Plan* announced the investment of £180bn for transport up to 2010.^[17] In parallel, in November 2000, in response to the Urban Task Force Report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, which had argued for the 'walkable city', the Government published its Urban White Paper, *Our Towns and Cities: the Future: Delivering an urban renaissance*.^[18] As Government policy on transport, planning and the urban

renaissance was becoming clearer, this seemed an appropriate time to consider what progress was being made in creating an environment conducive to walking.

6. Our terms of reference were to examine the following:

- The contribution of walking to the Urban Renaissance, healthy living and reducing dependency on cars;
- The reasons for the decline in walking and the main obstacles to encouraging walking and increasing the number of journeys made by foot;
- What should be done to promote walking, including the creation of city squares, the role of pedestrianisation, Home Zones, additional measures to restrain traffic, the harmonisation of walking and public transport and improved safety and security for pedestrians;
- What can be learnt from good practice both in England and elsewhere;
- Whether the relevant professionals have the appropriate skills and training;
- Whether all Government Departments, their agencies, including the Highways Agency, and local authorities are taking appropriate measures, and in particular whether Local Transport Plans, PPG 13 and the Government Paper, *Encouraging Walking*, are adequate;
- In particular, whether greater priority should be given to measures to promote walking, including a greater share of the Government budget and the re-allocation of road space;
- Whether national targets should be set and a National Strategy published; and
- Other matters which may arise in the course of questioning.

7. We received over 100 memoranda, an impressive number for an often neglected subject, and held six oral evidence sessions. The evidence was submitted from a wide range of organisations and individuals, including almost all the relevant professional and several health bodies. We were, however, disappointed that a number of groups with an important role in encouraging walking had not sent in evidence. In particular, there were relatively few submissions from local authorities, motoring bodies (with the exception of the RAC) or from retailers. We are aware that walking touches on a wide range of issues, including planning policy, road safety and provision for the disabled which merit more detailed consideration. Our successor Committee may wish to return to the subject to carry out a fuller examination. We would like to thank our advisers, Tim Pharoah and Rodney Tolley for their invaluable assistance.

Importance of walking as a mode of transport and its contribution to the urban renaissance, social inclusion and health

Transport, congestion and air pollution

8. Because it is so simple and natural it is easy to forget that walking is a major form of transport, especially for short trips. 27% of all trips and 80% of short trips (over 50 yards and under one mile) are on foot. The average walking trip is 0.6 miles. In addition about 80% of travellers arrive at or leave railway stations on foot, walking on average some 650 metres. Journeys to and from bus stops average some 300 - 350 metres.[19] Table One shows the mode of travel for all trips.

Main mode of travel, all trips

Mode	%
Walk	27
Cycle	2
Car driver	40
Car passenger	22
Bus	6
Rail	1
Other	2
Total	100

Source: National Travel Survey 1997-99

A significant increase in the number of short walking journeys could bring about a considerable reduction in urban car trips. Such an increase seems to be achievable since in some UK and continental cities the percentage of trips taken on foot is considerably higher than 27%.[20] Conversely a further decline in walking will mean an increase in car travel, and thus will contribute to increased congestion and pollution. A short walk is often a substitute for a longer car journey; for instance, when people get into their cars they often choose to travel to larger shops further away rather than to local ones.

9. Strangely, while the evidence we received stressed the contribution of walking to reducing congestion in urban areas, in its advice note to local authorities, *Encouraging Walking*, the Government set out ways in which walking can be made easier, more pleasant and safer, but then observed that "none of this is going to have a major impact on total vehicle mileage, air pollution or global warming".[21]

10. While walking may not have a significant effect on total mileage nationally, the impacts on congestion and air pollution can be considerable in urban areas. Indeed the decline in trips on foot over many years and the growth in trips by car has been a significant cause of congestion; reversing this switch could have a significant effect.[22] Research commissioned after our inquiry began from Professor Goodwin, a former adviser to the Government, argued that pedestrianisation and small schemes to promote walking might reduce congestion more cost effectively than the Government's road programme.[23] Questioned by the Committee on these matters, Lord Macdonald was somewhat equivocal at first, but eventually agreed both that local congestion was affected by the levels of walking and that the Department was uncertain whether small schemes or big projects would best reduce congestion. He also agreed to re-examine these issues.[24]

11. The statement in *Encouraging Walking* is also surprising since it seems to contradict the Government's Air Quality Strategy which makes clear the need to reduce traffic levels in pollution black-spots.[25] Despite technical progress this remains a problem. Modern catalytic convertors do reduce pollution from the beginning of the journey, but many cars have older convertors which are inefficient over the short trips which are common in cities. In Ferrara in Italy the Committee was shown how air pollution levels over the year responded to the use of different modes of transport: they are lower in summer, when people use their bicycles or walk more, than in winter when there is more travel by car.

Urban renaissance

12. As well as being a mode of transport, walking brings many additional advantages. It has an important role to play in the urban renaissance. Streets and public places where people walk, meet and talk are an essential part of a vibrant urban life. Indeed without an improvement in the conditions for walking it is unlikely that there will be an urban renaissance. We were told:

"Walking in cities is not just a transport mode, people also like to stay outdoors to socialise, watch what is going on... A city where people are out and about on foot is a far more attractive place to live than one where people stay indoors or inside their cars";[26]

"Pedestrians improve the urban environment economically, socially, and environmentally, and this should be capitalised upon through the planning system. Walking is already an important form of transport...but in urban areas it is often an unpleasant chore rather than a pleasure. The potential for transforming this experience is both immense and urgent";[27] and

"Successful cities are walkable cities. Streets, alleys and squares that are dirty, dangerous and unattractive discourage walking and reduce the quality of urban life. This is not just about walking as a means of getting from A to B. It is also about sitting, talking, meeting neighbours, helping strangers and allowing children to play".[28]

Social inclusion

13. Creating conditions that make walking easy and pleasant brings particular benefits to the three in ten households which do not possess a car since they are disproportionately the victims of a culture which favours the motorist. They take more journeys on foot,[\[29\]](#) but often live in environments most polluted by traffic. They are also most at risk from traffic. The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety informed us that:

"Children, the young and the elderly are most at risk of injury [as pedestrians]...children from poorer families are five times more likely to be killed in road accidents when out walking than children from other families. Children from minority ethnic groups also suffer disproportionately from road crash injuries".[\[30\]](#)

14. An urban way of life where people walk more also helps to break down social segregation. People meet in the street rather than pass each other in the isolation of their vehicle. Henry Law made the point that

"When people get out of their cars and start walking, social interactions start to take place which are beneficial in themselves, for example, as casual meetings take place in the street, which are precluded when people are boxed-up in motor vehicles".[\[31\]](#)

Health

15. Walking is also healthy. Coronary heart disease is the largest single cause of premature death in the UK, and physically inactive people are about twice as likely to suffer from heart problems as those who regularly take suitable exercise. In some respects inactivity poses more dangers than smoking. The British Heart Foundation estimates that about 37% of coronary heart disease deaths under 75 are attributable to inactivity, nearly double the percentage (19%) which are the result of smoking.[\[32\]](#)

16. Most importantly, recent medical advice indicates that only modest amounts of exercise are necessary to bring significant health improvements. We were informed that "the greatest health benefit is achieved by moving from being sedentary to being moderately active".[\[33\]](#) This activity can easily readily take the form of a few short walks. Indeed walking was described as "the nearest activity to perfect exercise".[\[34\]](#) It is the easiest way for most people to integrate activity into their daily routines. The Health Development Agency told the Committee of its most recent advice that thirty minutes moderate activity per day can provide protection against coronary heart disease. This target could be achieved by 3 short walks. However, three 10 minute walks a day would require a very significant increase in the distance we walk every year. Assuming people walk at 3mph, walking for 30 minutes they would travel in total 1.5 miles a day or c.550 miles per year. At present the distance walked per person is under 200 miles per year, including walking as part of car and public transport journeys. On average therefore we would need to walk 2-3 times as much as we do today.

17. That walking brings these multiple benefits was stressed by witness after witness. The following were typical:

"Walking is important not just in its own right but as a health measure, a means of social cohesion, and a vital link to public transport".[\[35\]](#)

"In urban areas a return to walking for more short distance journeys would give substantial health and environmental benefits and help authorities meet their congestion and air quality targets".[\[36\]](#)

Walking is a major mode of transport. Increasing the number of walking trips can have a significant impact on urban road congestion and air quality. Walking is also healthy. In addition, creating a pleasant environment which is conducive to walking is essential to the urban renaissance and, in particular, to the quality of life of the three in ten households without a car.

REASONS FOR DECLINE

18. Despite the many benefits of walking the amount we walk has declined for many years. The number of trips per person on foot fell by 20% between 1985/86 and 1997/99.[\[37\]](#) Decline is likely to continue, not least because pedestrians are so dissatisfied with present conditions. Indeed surveys suggest that without very major changes the decrease in the number of trips on foot will continue at the present rate. The only increases have been in a few cities, although there has also been a growth in walking for leisure both in towns and cities.[\[38\]](#) There were 300 million leisure walks in England's towns and cities in 1998, up from 210 million in 1994.[\[39\]](#)

19. The main contributory causes of the decline seem to be the convenience and comfort of car travel; land use planning policies; the truly awful conditions for pedestrians; and increasingly the fear of being attacked or robbed. These factors are heavily influenced by the extraordinarily low status accorded to pedestrians. As a result walking is seen by many as the mode of transport for those who have no alternative.

The convenience of car travel

20. The most evident reason for the decline in walking is that, as the Department put it, "people have increasingly been able to choose car journeys which are often quicker and more comfortable".[\[40\]](#) Some people feel they have less time and want to get from place to place as quickly as possible. A member of the public who wrote to us, Angela Thomson, put it bluntly: "lack of time is a major reason for the decline in walking".[\[41\]](#) Many find it more convenient to shop in bulk at a more distant location. Others just prefer to drive, including those "who would walk miles in the countryside or in a shopping centre, [but] drive 200 metres for a pint of milk".[\[42\]](#)

Land use planning

21. To a significant extent the convenience of car travel depends on decisions about land use which at first accommodated the car and subsequently made it seem to many a necessity. For many years we have seen developments which are inimical to access on foot, including low density housing developments and large scale shopping, leisure and office facilities built out-of-town or on the edge-of-town. The Regeneration Practice observed that:

"a creeping disconnection between people and place driven by social and economic trends has been exacerbated over the last 50 years by the land use planning system which has encouraged mobility demands, the disintegration of living and working communities and social dispersal".[\[43\]](#)

22. In opposition to these changes, walking requires local facilities clustered in high density, mixed developments since it is subject to a fairly rigid threshold and small changes in distance can affect whether we walk or not.[\[44\]](#) The average trip length on foot is 0.6 mile, a figure which has remained static since 1975. 80% of walking trips are less than one mile, 97% are less than 2 miles. It is axiomatic, therefore, that where people have to travel more than one mile, the proportion of trips made on foot will be small. The proliferation of out-of-town centres and housing developments in the countryside has accordingly created a land use pattern which is unsuitable for journeys on foot. Out-of-town centre stores typically have a modal split for customers of 80-90% by car. Single use activities provide a further obstacle to walking. People who walk one mile to a town centre with a wide range of shops are unlikely to walk the same distance to reach a single isolated large shop. In contrast people are far more likely to go to local shops on foot.[\[45\]](#)

23. While there were improvements to planning policy in the 1990s which restricted the construction of out-of-town developments, Government research has found that implementation has been patchy. Moreover, the local planning assumption until very recently has been that, providing the location is right, any scale and format of development which a developer brings forward is acceptable. Yet this is crucial in influencing travel mode. In particular large format development (large superstores, regional leisure centres, centralised hospital facilities, university campuses) usually have to be located out of town because of their land requirements. They therefore attract journeys from a wide catchment area, thus making it impossible for more than a small proportion of trips to be made on foot, or even cycle and bus.

24. The location and scale of new developments have not been the only problem. Many supermarkets, leisure centres and other facilities, even where they are in or near to the town centre, are not on the line of the street as buildings were traditionally. Instead, they are at the back of the plot with large car parks in front. This means that pedestrians have to cross a monotonous landscape of parked cars to reach the facility. Even those who drive to the site often have quite a long walk from the remoter part of the car park.

25. New housing developments have commonly been constructed at the edge of towns or villages at a low density which has discouraged walking to local shops and other facilities even where they exist.[\[46\]](#) To make matters worse they have

usually been developed with convoluted road layouts, which have been designed to prevent rat-running through traffic and to create what were in the past considered secure environments. Such "loops and lollipops" layouts mean that local facilities, including bus stops cannot easily be reached on foot. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) referred to "the standard cul-de-sac layout of new housing schemes [which] tends to promote car dependency and reduce pedestrian movements, while at the same time putting additional pressure on connector routes and making them less safe for pedestrians".^[47]

10 The Committee has considered the location of housing and the problems caused by low densities in a number of reports, including: Tenth Report, 1997-98, *Housing* (HC 495-I) and, Seventeenth Report, 1998-9, *Housing: PPG 3* (HC 490-I) [Back](#)

11 On the subject of people driving to take exercise, see WTC04 [Back](#)

12 Ninth Report, Session 1998-9, *Integrated Transport White Paper* (HC 32-I) [Back](#)

13 Cm 3950 [Back](#)

14 DETR, March 2000 [Back](#)

15 Cm 3950, pp 111-2 [Back](#)

16 WTC40 [Back](#)

17 DETR, July 2000 [Back](#)

18 Cm 4911 [Back](#)

19 Encouraging walking, p 17 [Back](#)

20 For cities with a higher proportion of trips on foot, see WTC 12 and para 37 below [Back](#)

21 Encouraging walking, p. 6 [Back](#)

22 Further decline could have a significant effect. WTC 20 notes: "If one third of all trips within walkable distance continue to be replaced by longer car trips there is massive potential for further traffic generation" [Back](#)

23 *Running to Stand Still?* An analysis of the Ten Year Plan for Transport, Research for CPRE, published on 12 February 2001 [Back](#)

24 QQ493-500 [Back](#)

25 Even the DETR memorandum to this inquiry noted that road traffic contributed to air pollution and two of the major pollutants are particles and oxides of nitrogen.

It added that "better provision for walking and cycling will help to encourage people not to use their cars for some journeys, thus reducing air pollution overall and personal exposure to the car users" (WTC40) [Back](#)

26 WTC36; and see WTC5 and WTC35 [Back](#)

27 WTC13 [Back](#)

28 WTC30 [Back](#)

29 WTC28 [Back](#)

30 WTC7 [Back](#)

31 WTC26 (Mr Law is a resident of Brighton) [Back](#)

32 WTC74; the quotation is from the Health Development Agency (WTC 34); other memoranda made a similar point (eg. WTC58) [Back](#)

33 WTC34 [Back](#)

34 WTC34 [Back](#)

35 WTC12 [Back](#)

36 WTC32 [Back](#)

37 Transport trends 2001, p 29 [Back](#)

38 See WTC 20 (from the Centre for Technology Strategy) for an analysis of walking and other travel statistics [Back](#)

39 UK Day Visit Survey [Back](#)

40 *Encouraging walking*, p.6 [Back](#)

41 WTC63; and see WTC06 [Back](#)

42 WTC30 [Back](#)

43 WTC10 [Back](#)

44 WTC28 [Back](#)

45 WTC28 [Back](#)

46 WTC41 [Back](#)

47 WTC102 [Back](#)

