

Cold feet on pedestrian strategy

How many readers of *Planning* walk to work? A reasonable guess would be well under half. If so, it would not necessarily be due to planners failing to practise the sustainability principles that they preach. It would merely be the reflection of a population-wide trend.

The National Travel Survey shows that since the mid-1980s the proportion of all journeys made on foot has fallen from 34 per cent to 27 per cent. The total distance walked fell by a fifth from 244 miles per year in 1985-86 to 191 miles in 1997-99.

This is despite the fact that walking is not only an extremely healthy activity but can also have benefits for society by reducing congestion and making streets safer.

The House of Commons environment, transport and regional affairs committee last week published a report, *Walking in Towns and Cities*, on its investigation into the reasons for this decline. It also looked at whether the government, through its ten-year transport strategy, is doing enough to improve the situation.

One initial finding is that there is very little understanding of why particular groups of people decide to walk or not to walk. This is because very little research has been carried out on the subject. As Reg Harman, an independent transport consultant, says: "Walking frequently gets neglected among transport professionals because it is not seen as a mode of transport in its own right. But in fact it is a fundamental one, and so this should be rectified."

However, there are some factors that the MPs see as clearly contributing to the decline in people's willingness to walk. And, predictably, misguided planning policies take some of the flak.

The MPs point to past policies that allowed many out-of-town shopping and leisure centres to be built. Anyone who has tried to walk or cycle to an out-of-town shopping area alongside a busy dual carriageway will know that such places are designed with drivers, not walkers, in mind.

Boots may be made for walking, but most city streets and centres are not. David Dewar reports on efforts to expand the role of our most sustainable mode of transport



Best foot forward: pedestrian-friendly planning may cut down on congestion and pollution

Meanwhile, the MPs say that new housing developments have been and continue to be built on the edge of towns at densities "too low to support local services". They comment that in contrast to the changes made in every town and city to ease motor transport, "walking has been made ever more unpleasant, and pedestrians treated with contempt."

But they insist that there is potential for a significant increase in the number of short walking journeys, and this could bring about a considerable reduction in car trips. Oxford, Brighton and Bath are examples of cities where walking is on the up, says the report.

Terrence Bendixson, president of the Pedestrians Association, points out that these are all places that don't have inner ring roads. Together with radial roads in urban areas, such ring roads can present a very strong impediment to local pedestrians' use of the streets, he says. "So the type of thing going on in

Birmingham, where they are bridging the inner ring road to reunite the city centre with adjacent districts, is very important."

The MPs' report agrees that just as planning policies are to blame for developments that have discouraged walking, they have a key role to play in reversing this trend. The committee applauds the fact that the government's urban renaissance agenda has recognised the need for mixed-use, compact cities that keep distances between facilities short.

The report welcomes developments in planning guidance, such as PPG6 and

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PPG3, which have led to a suite of policies designed to prevent urban sprawl and foster compact, pedestrian-friendly cities. But the committee says that there are still problems with implementing them, and calls for more to be done to co-ordinate transport and planning policies locally.

The report is also critical of the revised planning policy guidance on transport in PPG13. It notes that the maximum parking standards for offices, food stores and town centres are more generous than the draft version of the guidance had envisaged, and warns this could undermine policies to maximise access to town centres by walking.

The MPs claim that the changes in the standards have come about because government has become nervous of private sector opposition to strict parking standards and the effect they could have on business profitability.

But their most vocal criticism is reserved for the Treasury,

and its inquiries into how the planning system impacts on business and economic growth. The MPs say that it is "a matter of concern that this has been undertaken with the aim of undoing the important policies to restrain out-of-town development that were put in place in the last decade".

If the inquiries lead to these policies being undermined, the committee says, "it would have severe consequences for walking, congestion and the urban renaissance."

The government's refusal to publish a national walking strategy also comes under fire in the report. In the early years of the Blair government, ministers promised that such a strategy would be drawn up. A national steering group, consisting of many organisations involved in the transport sector, was convened to conduct the task.

But the resulting document, *Encouraging Walking*, was downgraded to the status of an advice note to local authorities when it was published last year. Bendixson says the Government "got cold feet", and thought that publishing a national walking strategy would be seen to be anti-car.

But he insists, along with the Commons committee, that a strategy is still essential to the future success of walking. The report says that a strategy could galvanise local authorities and professionals in pushing the walking agenda forward. It could also set out targets for increasing the modal share for walking.

Along with the car, walking is one of two modes of transport that were given no targets in the ten-year transport plan, which contains very little on the role of walking. This is something that badly needs to be overhauled, according to campaigners.

Welcoming the report, Reg Harman said he agrees that there is "very considerable potential" for an increase in walking. Bendixson also resoundingly endorses the report's findings. He describes it as "the missing chapter from the ten-year transport plan".

● *Walking in Towns and Cities* is available from The Stationery Office (tel) 0870 600 5522.