Faculty of Public Health Transport Special Interest Group: Climate and Ecological Crisis Policy Brief

June 2024

The UK Faculty of Public Health (FPH) sets out a vision, which includes as a priority: 'Promote policies and programmes that improve the health and wellbeing of people and communities and tackle health inequalities.' Transport policies have wide impacts on health and health inequalities. This policy brief is one of a series developed by the FPH Transport Special Interest Group (SIG) that describes actions needed to ensure that transport policies and practice promote positive health and reduced health inequalities in the UK. The series of policy briefs is available here.

The Climate and Ecological Crisis

Overview

The climate emergency and loss of biodiversity are the greatest threats ever faced by humanity.[1] Climate change exacerbates communicable and non-communicable diseases[2] and results in significant health risks linking to extreme weather events[3], mass migration and pollution of ecosystems.[4]

Transport contributes to the climate and ecological emergency as it is the largest sector of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, producing 26% of the total emissions in 2021[5].

Transport is also impacted directly by the climate emergency, given the consequences of extreme temperatures and weather events.

This briefing sets out what action the Faculty of Public Health's Transport Special Interest Group recommends in relation to the health impacts of transport and the climate and ecological crisis.

FPH Policy position

Advocacy around the climate and ecological crisis is at the core of the FPH's mission, because of the dire consequences on population health, as well as the health co-benefits of adaptation and mitigation strategies.[6] A healthy transport system will improve population health, reduce inequalities and be sustainable to the environment.

The underpinning principle relating to transport should be a major shift away from cars to active travel: walking, cycling and public transport. This would reduce the harms of the road transport system; help individuals, society and the environment; and help reduce carbon and improve air quality. To achieve this, more people would need to consider the best option for short-journey stages to be walking and cycling, and for longer-journey stages to be cycling and public transport use.

Green infrastructures including street trees, and roadside verges, promote active travel, and have an important role in improving health and well-being, air quality addressing social inequality and mitigating of climate change.[7,8]

The FPH sees access to good transport systems to be a key determinant of good health, a powerful driver in reducing inequalities and a significant contributor towards mitigation of and adaptation to the climate emergency. To achieve this, system leadership and cultural shifts will be needed.

FPH policy recommendations

To reduce the negative impact of transport on the environment and health, FPH recommends the following:

1. **Establish a healthy zero-carbon transport system which include economic and health impact assessment on all transport development**
   - A healthy transport system promotes the health of the population, reduces inequalities, and is sustainable for the environment.[9]
   - Use a return-on-investment approach that considers the full economic costs/ benefits including externalities, benefits of active travel to individuals, employers, community and opportunity cost of use of public land.
   - All transport developments should routinely use health impact assessment to ensure health, equity and sustainability issues are addressed. Replace private cars with active travel for shorter journeys and transit systems for longer journeys.

2. **Replace private cars with active travel for shorter journeys and transit systems for longer journeys**
   - Stop all highway development and improvement programmes and redirect the resources to alternatives.
   - Reallocate resources to rail, public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure, and develop natural infrastructure to eliminate the barrier effect.
   - Replace urban use of private cars with rapid transit systems (rail-based or bus-based).
   - Implement an intermodal transport solution (e.g. walk-bike-bus-train combinations), addressing barriers including the prohibition of cycles on buses, trains and trams; inadequate bicycle storage capacity and/or safety; and, in some cases, inadequate shower and change facilities at destinations.
   - Implement integrated fare systems for public transport. Consider free public transport.
   - Substitute urban delivery journeys with cycle freight.
   - Replace long-distance road freight with freight by rail and by water.

3. **Plan the necessary adaptation of the effect of climate change on transport systems**
   - Plan the adaptation of transport systems that will be impacted by flooding, wildfires and storms.
   - Redesign transport infrastructures to accommodate hotter, dryer, windier and wetter conditions.

4. Consider the impact of new transport schemes on biodiversity

- Give priority to walking, cycling and collective transport modes on all roads.
- Avoid building roads through and into forested areas.
- Consider the impact of shipping on marine life.

5. Reduce business travel and commuting dependent on fossil fuels

- Ensure employer travel policies discourage private car use and encourage active and sustainable transport.
- Provide infrastructure and incentives to use virtual work and meeting spaces
- Establish free or appropriately priced neighbourhood internet connections accessible to everyone to access basic work, governmental services, bill payment, education, health and other spaces essential to daily life.
- Reduce meetings involving international travel.
- Replace office work with working from home where possible.
- Achieve shorter working weeks.
- Building out sustainable transport networks, such as running cargo and passenger trains with clean electric energy, to drastically reduce business travel and commuting dependent on fossil fuels.

6. Replace aviation with a zero-carbon alternative

- Stop expansion of airports.
- Develop national and international high-speed rail networks and replace existing passenger aviation with high-speed rail.
- Reduce air freight by accepting seasonality for some produce or replaced by faster international rail freight services.

7. Address the shipping industry's carbon footprint

- Explore the replacement of fossil-fuel-powered ships with sailing ships with auxiliary solar-powered electric engines.

References

[1] The Lancet. The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change. Available at: https://www.thelancet.com/countdown-health-climate. Accessed 06/03/24.

[2] World Health Organisation. Climate Change and Health. 2021; Available at: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health. Accessed 06/03/24.

[3] UK Health Security Agency. Adverse Weather and Health Plan: Supporting Evidence. 2023.

[4] Met Office. Effects of Climate Change. no date; Available at: https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/climate-change/effects-of-climate-change. Accessed 06/03/24.

[5] Transport and environment statistics: 2023 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)Accessed 06/03/24

[6] The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change. Policy Brief for the UK, 2022.

[7] WHO Regional Office for Europe. 2016. Urban green spaces and health: A review of evidence. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/345751/WHO-EURO-2016-3352-43111-60341-eng.pdf?sequence=3 [accessed 31 May 2024].

[8] Yu, J., Zhang, H., Dong, X., & Shen, J. (2024). The impact of street greenery on active travel: a narrative systematic review. Frontiers in public health, 12, 1337804. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1337804

[9] Mindell JS, Watkins SJ, Cohen JM (eds). Health on the Move 2. Policies for health-promoting transport. Stockport: Transport & Health Study Group, 2011.