

Speaking Notes for the launch by Minister of State

Ciarán Cuffe T.D.

of the

National Heart Alliance and Irish Heart Foundation

Position Paper on Physical Activity, Young People

and the Physical Environment

Wednesday 14th April, 2010 at 9 a.m.

Orion Suite, Clarion Hotel, IFSC, Dublin 1.

I am delighted to have been invited here today to launch the National Heart Alliance and the Irish Heart Foundation's position paper on Physical Activity, Young People and the Physical Environment.

Some people here might be just a little bit puzzled as to why I'm involved in today's event. After all, isn't transport primarily about providing things like decent roads, rail networks, airports, public transport and seaports?

Yes it is – but only to an extent. In fact, if you care to think about the transport agenda in the broad context, it's really about helping people and goods move in the most efficient, environmentally appropriate, manner. It's about developing Smarter Travel patterns – and this applies, in particular, to how we, as individuals, get from place to place.

We all have memories of our younger days and a view on how things have changed. What is particularly striking for me is the dramatic change in the levels of activity of young people. Gone are the days when the only play was outside in the open air. Nowadays, play and leisure is increasingly based around computer screens.

Indeed, for everyone, young, old and middle-aged, our lifestyle has become much more sedentary. It seems that everyone's first choice for travel is to rely on the car, even over short distances.

This greatly concerns me because there can be little doubt that it contributes to some disturbing trends in our society. The levels of obesity in all age groups, and young people in particular, are growing at an alarming rate – with an eight fold increase in male teenage obesity since 1990 and a doubling of obesity levels in female teens.

Clearly, something has to be done – but there is no simple way to roll back societal change. Responding to this challenge will require concerted, coordinated, action over a sustained period. It will require actors from all sectors – and here I’m talking about health, education, sport, physical planning, infrastructure delivery and, indeed, transport – to step up to the plate and make a difference.

The Smarter Travel policy represents a radical shift in transport policy. I have to acknowledge that it will take time to fully bear fruit – but, crucially, it is quite clear on the health dividend it can deliver. Smarter Travel specifically targets a shift towards active travel for shorter journeys with the aim of having over 200,000 additional people walking and cycling to work by 2020. Smarter Travel recognises that interventions will be required, particularly in relation to physical planning and retrofitting of existing infrastructure, if it is to reach its targets.

Delivering Smarter Travel will require a change of mindset among the transport community. To kick start this process, we fast-tracked the publication of the National Cycling Policy Framework and its implementation is one of my key priorities. My Department is currently driving the progress of an inter-departmental working group on developing a National Walking Policy. We are also working closely with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to bring the Smarter Travel ideals into the core of the physical planning system.

Policy work is vital but we also need action on the ground. We've targeted some early, high profile, wins on active travel – among these are the 18km walking and cycling route from Newport and Mulranny which is to be opened next week; the off-road cycle route from Portobello to Bull Island which Dublin City Council hopes to deliver before the end of this year; and the recently provided Rochestown to Passage West cycle route in Cork.

We're also testing out new concepts through financial support for a comprehensive school route project in Dundalk – and further radical projects will emerge later this year under the Smarter Travel Areas competition.

While infrastructural investment is very important, soft measures in the transport area can also deliver extraordinary results. After coffee, you will hear a hugely inspiring story from An Taisce's Jane Hackett about just how successful the Green Schools Travel Programme, funded by my Department, has been. The programme currently reaches about 140,000 students in around 480 schools and by 2012 it will reach over 265,000 pupils. The 2009 results show that participating schools delivered a 22% reduction in car use for travel to school, supported, in particular, by a 43% increase in the numbers of students walking to school.

We must continue to explore new ways to push the agenda forward and to maximise the contribution that transport can make to delivering a healthier, more active, nation. I'm glad to announce that my Department has recently combined with the HSE, the Irish Sports Council, the Irish Heart Foundation, the Institute for Public Health, the Community Games movement, the Department of Education and Skills, An Taisce, Cycling Ireland and the National Transport Authority to establish a working group to drive forward a coordinated approach to the Get Ireland Active agenda.

I'm confident that the combined efforts of these players can deliver much more than the sum of their individual parts. I'm not only prepared, but I'm anxious, to play my part in facilitating this very important shared agenda.

In formally launching this position paper, I want to congratulate the Irish Heart Foundation and the National Heart Alliance. It's well researched, written in language that is accessible to all and hits all of the key points. In fact, I'll admit to taking real pride in the fact that the Smarter Travel policy has made such an impact on this agenda since its launch just over a year ago.

In closing, I think it's important to say that we shouldn't need reminding – but we do – that physical activity is necessary for our physical and mental health. A key objective for policy makers must be to make it easy for us all to build activity into our everyday lives rather than to see it as some sort of extra task that must be undertaken.

Smarter Travel is firmly based on this belief.