



12 September 2012

The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS

By Post

Dear Secretary of State,

Congratulations on your appointment to the Department of Health. We are sure you are relishing the challenges of one of the most important posts in government. You may wonder why a cycling organisation is contacting you at this busy time, but we believe that bicycles and active transport have a huge role to play in making Britain a healthier nation, and that investment in bicycle infrastructure is necessary to achieve the economic benefits of greater public health.

Physical inactivity represents an enormous drain on the health budget. The Department of Health estimates that, in England alone, it costs the NHS £8.2 billion annually, and that a further £2.5 billion is spent annually dealing with the consequences of obesity.¹

The most recent systematic review of the literature on cycling and health suggests a clear relationship between the amount of cycling, and all-cause mortality, cancer mortality, cardio-vascular disease and obesity.² Promoting active transport is an easy and obvious way of reducing the costs of these and other diseases. Cycling, as well as walking, can be built into everyday routines, creating the small amounts of physical activity that would result in huge net savings for the health budget.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence have concluded that, while promotion and marketing interventions have their place, it is unreasonable to expect people to change their behaviour without changes in the physical environment. It is vitally important that pedestrians and cyclists are given the

¹ Department of Health (2004) *At least five a week: evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health*. London: Department of Health.

² Oja et al. (2011) *Health benefits of cycling: a systematic review* Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 21 pp.496-509



highest priority in the development and maintenance of our streets and roads, by the reallocation of road space to allow safe, pleasant and convenient cycling, and by the restriction of motor vehicle access.³

These changes are important because they will do the most to enable physical activity among the groups which are currently most inactive. Recent Department for Transport research⁴ in the Cycling Demonstration Cities and Towns (CCTs) suggests there would be 600 fewer deaths annually in these CCTs alone if the inactive members of their populations became just moderately inactive. The most significant health and economic gains come from encouraging these, most inactive, people to become slightly more active; not from encouraging those who are already active to engage in more exercise.

We would like you to consider the lessons of other countries that have implemented the kinds of measures NICE are calling for; countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, where cycling and walking are the most obvious options for most everyday trips, because their streets have been designed to prioritise cycling, and to make it safe and inviting. Applying these measures in Great Britain – where so few people cycle – would produce considerable health and financial gains, to say nothing of the further long-term advantages of reduced pollution, congestion and carbon emissions.

Given the enormous health, economic and social benefits cycling infrastructure, and at a time when the government is considering forms of infrastructure investment as a means to kick-start the economy, we would urge you and your cabinet colleagues to give serious attention to investment in infrastructure for bicycles.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Davis
Chair, Cycling Embassy of Great Britain

³ NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) (2008), *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity* NICE Public Health Guidance 8.

⁴ Cavill, C. & Buckland, J. (2012) *Investigating the potential health benefits of increasing cycling in the Cycling Cities and Towns* Department for Transport