PRESS RELEASE: Embargoed until 00:01 on 13 August 2007

A new report by the Institute for European Environmental Policy and Adrian Davis Associates published today will highlight the extent to which car use is implicated in the increase in obesity as well as rising carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions.

The main points of the argument are as follows:

- Since the Second World War, the continuous increase in car ownership has led to a dramatic decline in walking as a means of transport - muscle power gave way to fossil power.
- This report calculates that just by returning to the average distance walked by people in the UK without cars, the rising tide of obesity can be almost halted.
- At the same time, a substantial share of individuals' contribution to national carbon dioxide emissions could be avoided.
- The report goes on to argue that this could and should be done through renewed efforts to promote walking as transport. This would be vastly cheaper than dealing with the consequences of the obesity epidemic and climate change.

Some key findings from the report:

- 40% of all journeys in the UK are under 2 miles in length – distances easily covered by up to 30 minutes of brisk walking. Nonetheless, 38% of these journeys are currently by car.
- If a typical British adult were to walk just an hour more per week (equivalent to the difference in walking between a typical driver and a non-driver) this would counteract a weight increase of 2 stones over a decade, and a longer-term slide into obesity.
- This alone could make a major contribution to halting the trend of increasing obesity across the UK.
- The extra walking could displace at least 11 million tonnes of CO_2 from cars – amounting to 15.4% of the total emissions from passenger cars.

Lead author, Dr Adrian Davis commented

> "the substitution of car use for walking is a major contributor to the steep rise in obesity, as walking is the most obvious way for most people to burn calories. A small daily reduction in walking over a decade or more has a profound and damaging impact on body weight."

Carolina Valsecchi from IEEP added that

> "the twin crises of obesity and climate change are clearly interlinked through the switch from muscle power to engine power for transport. Concerted action is needed to reverse both these trends. Our research demonstrates that something as simple as walking short trips now made by car would be make an important contribution to tackling both obesity and climate change".

Contact Details

For further queries or comments please contact the authors:

On transport and CO_2 emissions;
Carolina Valsecchi, Malcolm Fergusson on 020 2244 7799 (w) or 07900 824383 (m)

On obesity and health;
Adrian Davis 07977 664406 (m) 01179 245603 (w)

Notes for Editors

1. The report is: ***Unfit for Purpose: How Car Use Fuels Climate Change and Obesity*** by Adrian Davis, Carolina Valsecchi and Malcolm Fergusson. Published by the Institute for European Environmental Policy, London.

Car Ownership and the Decline in Walking

2. The report records the decline in routine physical activity in the form of walking associated with growing car use from 1975-2005.
3. Car ownership has risen steadily since the Second World War, to the point where most households now own at least one car, and many have several. Now 81% of all adults live in households with at least one car.
4. Levels of walking have steadily declined in recent decades, and as car ownership increases, many journeys that would once have been made on foot are being replaced by car travel.
5. Main car drivers walk only half the distance and for half the time of adults in non-car owning households over a year.

Decline in Walking and the Rise of Obesity

6. The report argues that the dominant factor in the obesity epidemic is a decline in energy expenditure, through declining levels of physical activity.
7. For most obese adults obesity occurs incrementally - small energy imbalances on a daily basis can lead to major weight gain over a decade and more.
8. Nearly 1 hour of travel per week is switched from walking to car travel once a car is available, and this decline in walking is in itself enough to account for much of the rise in obesity of recent decades.
9. Over a decade this switch from walking to car use could lead to a weight gain of more than 2 stones, and over 20-30 years lead to an obese body weight. At a population level the substitution of walking for car use has contributed to a public health shift in the Body Mass Index distribution which significantly increases the prevalence of obesity.

Car Use and Carbon Dioxide Emissions

10. If all drivers were to walk an extra hour per week (the same as non-drivers) the extra walking could displace at least 11 million tonnes of CO_2 from cars – amounting to 15.4% of the total emissions from passenger cars.

A Return to Active Travel

11. The report goes on to argue that we need to provide travel behaviour change intervention programmes tailored to individual needs, in order to help those interested in change to find ways to make walking a routine activity in their lives and lifestyles.

12. The costs of such programmes are likely to be dwarfed by those that will be incurred by the NHS and society through inactivity, ill-health and premature death as a consequence of obesity (estimated at £8.2 billion per year).
13. This would also be a cost-effective way to cut individuals' carbon dioxide emissions at the same time.