



European
Commission

Health Equity Pilot Project (HEPP)

The promotion of physical activity in Finland

Case Study



Health

HEPP CASE STUDY

Title of Project/Policy

The promotion of physical activity in Finland

Project/Policy Reference

Finish Physical Activity Policy

Country

Finland

Name of Organisation(s)

Multiple organisations across Finland have been involved in developing policy on physical activity. Principal organisations include:

- Government of Finland
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
- UKK Institute (The national physical activity research institute)
- Fit for Life (the national physical activity campaign)

Type of case study

Example of effective practice

Thematic/sector focus

Physical activity

Date(s)

From 1970s to present day

Case study overview

Relevance of a focus on physical activity

Physical activity has benefits for the prevention of noncommunicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and poor mental health and wellbeing and enhanced healthy life expectancy. Physical inactivity is thought to be as important a modifiable risk factor for chronic diseases as obesity and tobacco¹. Interventions to promote physical activity also have positive effects in many other policy areas. Active travel – walking and cycling – in particular can promote social inclusion, contribute to reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce congestion. Regular physical activity also promotes a healthy workforce, and many interventions are able to generate an effective return on investment in sectors such as transport and tourism.

Physical activity is a key challenge for Member States. The WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases ² calls for a 10% reduction in physical inactivity by 2025. To achieve this target, the physical activity strategy for the WHO European Region (2016–2025) calls upon all countries to develop inter-sectoral strategies to address physical inactivity across the life course³. The European Commission's 2007 *Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight, and Obesity-related Health Issues* aims at contributing to reduce the risks associated with poor nutrition and limited physical activity in the European Union⁴. The Commission has formed a High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity to provide leadership on this topic ⁵.

Significance in reducing inequalities

The most consistent inequalities in physical activity relate to gender: in virtually all countries in Europe, males are more active than females. This difference tends to begin during adolescence and continue into old age.

Physical activity also varies by socioeconomic position, although the pattern is less distinct. In Southern Europe, higher socio-economic groups are likely to be less active; in the United Kingdom and Ireland, higher socioeconomic groups tend to be more active. In most countries, people from lower socio-economic groups do more physical activity through work than those from higher socio-economic groups. People with a higher socio-economic position are more likely to be physically active in their leisure-time ⁶.

There is a notable absence of data and evidence in the literature on ethnic differences in physical activity in Finland. This may in part reflect the low prevalence of black and minority ethnic groups in Finland.

Effective and carefully targeted promotion of physical activity would therefore have the potential to reduce inequalities between men and women, and between different socioeconomic groups.

Theoretical model and evidence base

The promotion of physical activity in Finland is not based on a specific theoretical model, but it does follow clear principles, such as creating a broad and supportive national policy framework; focusing on the notion of health enhancing physical activity (in contrast to a focus on competitive sport); modifying the environment; and applying a 'health in all policies' approach.

Evidence comes from a variety of sources, notably national-level evidence from surveys on the prevalence of physical activity, as well as project-level evaluations.

Finland’s approach: Overview

Finland is one of the few countries to have reported a consistent long-term increase in physical activity in recent years⁷. Between the late 1970s and 2014, the proportion of people classed as regularly active rose from around 40% to over 60% among both men and women. This proportion stabilised at about 60% from the latter part of 1990s and has stabilised around this level since. One of the most striking features of this trend is that women became more active than men from around the mid 1990s (Fig 1).

It is interesting to note that during the same time period walking and cycling to work (at least 15 minutes per day during summer) decreased gradually from about 40% to close to 25% among men and from over 60% to around 45% among women. (see later section)

Fig 1. Proportion of men and women who take part in a minimum of 30 minutes of leisure-time physical activity at least 4 times a week and at least 2 times a week in 1978–2014 (%).

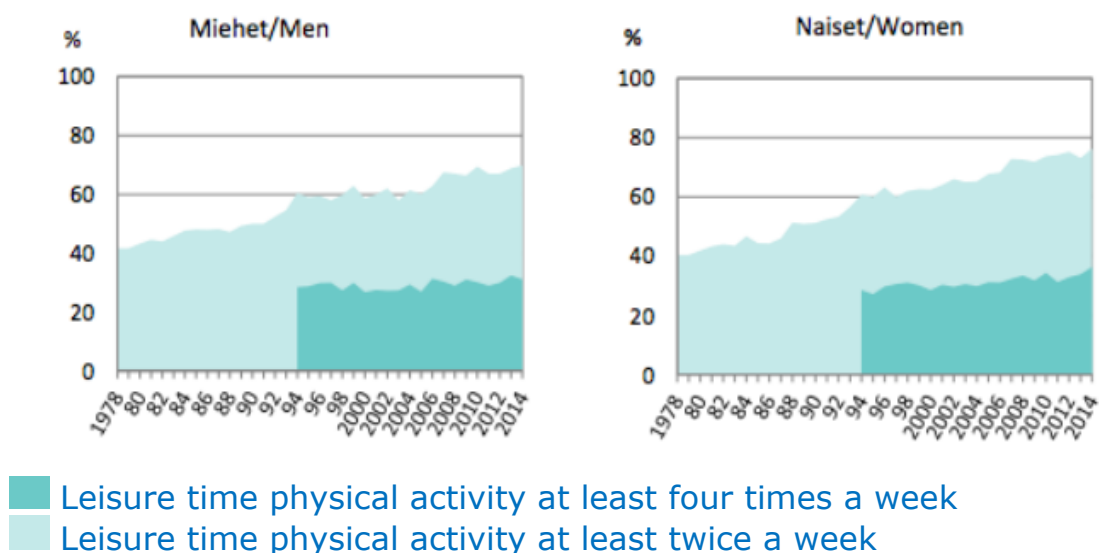
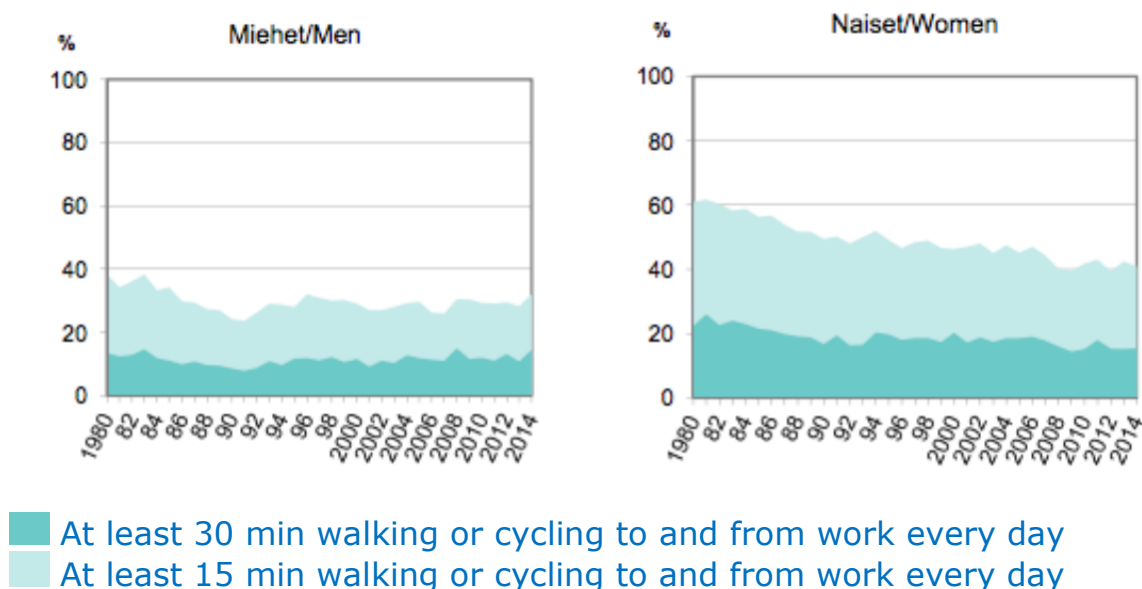


Fig 2. Proportion of men and women who spent at least 30 minutes and at least 15 minutes a day walking or cycling to and from work, 1980–2014 (%).



Current national policy approaches.

One of the major features of Finland’s approach to promoting physical activity has been a strong and consistent policy framework at national level. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture have adopted a national strategy, 'On the Move', to promote physical activity for health and well-being to 2020, embracing the principles of a 'Sports for All' policy⁸. The strategy aims to address physical activity throughout the life-course, with a focus on reducing inactive lifestyles through education and sharing and disseminating best practice. This is in turn supported by the Exercise Act, passed by the Finnish Government in 2015, which aims to promote top-level sports, in tandem with physical activity for all, and called for greater municipal responsibility, along with cooperation between State administrative bodies and funding channels⁹.

Policy history

This strong policy framework is built upon a succession of supportive policies that have been a focus for public health in Finland for many years. These have included:

- The value of physical fitness and health were strongly emphasized in the main planning documents from the 1970s¹⁰

- The first Sports Act (1980) was one of the few of its kind in the world. It directed state support to local government for construction of sports sites and for local sports associations, to national sports organisations, and to research and international activities in this field.
- In 1986 the National Health Programme 'Health for All by the Year 2000' included action on physical activity.
- The second Sports Act, 1999, emphasized the value of health by stating its purpose to promote physical activity and sports and related civic activity in order to facilitate population health and well-being. This led to the Ministry of Education broadening their funding for sport to include sites serving ordinary people in their daily environments.
- A Government Resolution on policies to develop health-enhancing physical activity was released by the State Cabinet in 2002 ¹¹.
- An Advisory Committee on Health-Enhancing Physical Activity was founded in 2002 within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, to steer and monitor the implementation of the resolution. This helped fund multiple projects across the country.
- The Finnish Sport Federation has a strong focus on general physical activity, not merely sport. For example its strategy for the years 2003-2005, had a mission statement: "...to support the non-profit activities of voluntary organisations, which form the foundation for pluralistic physical activities and sports for children and young people, recreational and health-enhancing physical activities for adults as well as competitive and elite sports".

Table 1. Summary of key national physical activity initiatives in Finland ¹²

Table 3. Summary of key physical activity initiatives in Finland

HEALTH	SPORTS	EDUCATION	TRANSPORT	MONITORING	GUIDELINES
Counselling on physical activity as part of primary health care services	Existence of a national Sports for All policy(ies)	Mandatory physical activity in primary and secondary schools	National or subnational schemes promoting active travel to school and/or workplace	Physical activity included in the national health monitoring system or separate routine survey	Existence of national recommendation on physical activity

Overview of the main evidence-based interventions

There have been a number of successive national promotion programmes for adults:

Finland on the Move 1991 – 1994

This programme was launched by the Finnish government to promote physical activity, particularly through the joint work of civic

organizations (such as cycling/walking groups) and municipal (sport, health, school) authorities.

The total cost of the programme was about 2million Euros, of which about 1.2 million was given as 'pump-priming' grants to 94 projects covering the whole of Finland (approx 5 million people) and various aspects of physical activity promotion. A thorough evaluation process found that the project was highly successful ¹³. Learning points included:

- Funding gave status to the projects and created numerous local ideas and initiatives
- Tailoring initiatives to the needs of the target audience; consumer-orientation, and common goals with stakeholders are important conditions for success.
- The requirement of joint work between stakeholders forced various parties to collaborate, very often for the first time.
- Despite strong voluntary support, some amount of permanent (and paid) work force, e.g. municipal employees, is necessary for continuity, coordination, and leadership of the project ¹⁴.

Fit for Life 1995 – 1999

Following the above programme, the Ministries of Education and of Health launched a new joint national programme, Fit for Life. The goal of the programme was to increase the number of regularly active middle-aged subjects by 10% in five years.

The basic strategy and approaches were largely the same as in the previous programme. The emphasis was on promotion of regular physical activity of previously sedentary people through local projects. The programme supported over 400 local projects in all parts of Finland, with grants of between 1,500 and 3,000 Euros. Formal evaluation of the first three years of the Fit for Life programme showed again that "grass root" projects that were based on local ideas and knowledge of the local situation were the most successful at increasing physical activity ¹⁵. A key factor for success was motivated, committed individuals in charge of the project. The projects were supported by national level mass media communication activity, but this was considered to be less effective than information prepared and distributed by the local actors.

After the first three years about 6% of Finns belonging to the target group had participated in the Fit for Life activities, and the projects estimated that 30 to 50% of them were previously sedentary. The proportion of people exercising less than once a week had decreased by 3% ¹³.

Fit for Life 2000 – 2004

Based on the successful experiences of the first five years of the Fit for Life programme it was extended for another five years beginning in 2000. The Ministries of Transport and Communication, Ministry of Environment and the Board of Forestry were brought in as co-sponsors. The total amount of funding has slightly increased. The target population of the programme was extended to cover all persons over 40 years of age. The strategies and approaches remained much the same as before, but considerable emphasis was directed to increase and improve environmental conditions for physical activity, notably an infrastructure for walking and cycling; and to create a permanent network of support services. A corresponding programme, Young Finland, has been created in order to promote non-competitive sports among children and young people.

Fit for Life, since 2004.

Funding has continued for the Fit for Life programme ¹⁶, from the Ministry of Education and Culture. The central aims of the programme and its sub-scheme “Working ability to working life” are to increase health and wellbeing at work and enhance the physical activity levels of working-age people. In addition, one of the basic tasks of the Finnish Sports Confederation is to promote physical activity in the workplace.

Current national-level action

Multi-sectoral collaboration on physical activity promotion continues to be strong and wide-reaching in Finland. The purpose of the national “On the Move” strategy (17) and the new Act on the promotion of sports and physical activity (390/2015) (18) is to strengthen this cooperation even more. Many different projects are continuing to be funded with national programmes for every phase of the life-course:

- Finnish Schools on the Move (24),
- Fit for Life (28),
- Strength in Old Age (37)
- National Policy Programme for Older People’s Physical Activity (38).

Cross-sectoral collaboration is a crucial principle integrated into all of these programmes, involving extremely large and diverse networks.

Various campaigns exist in Finland targeting behavioural change, motivation and culture. These aim to reach different ages and population groups; examples include

- Moovit Sports Adventure,
- The Adventures of Joe Finn campaign,
- National Outdoors Day for Older Adults,
- “Take the stairs” days
- Various cycle-to-work challenges.

Physical activity in the workplace forms part of the fundamental work of many national and regional organizations ¹². This is under the umbrella of the National working life development strategy (2012-2020) (26). This emphasizes physical activity as one of the key building blocks of the strategy, specifically entitled “health and well-being at work”, including suggestions such as encouraging employees to exercise.

Action on inequalities

Finland is generally seen as a homogenous society, and does not tend to have clear differences in health outcomes between socio-economic groups. Programmes in Finland have therefore been principally targeted by age and gender rather than by social class or education. A ‘life-course perspective’ has been taken to address all ages ¹⁷, with initiatives including daily physical activity for every child and youth in day care and in school; services to promote family physical activity; workplace health programmes; a national strength programme to improve the musculoskeletal function of homebound older people.

Two specific policy frameworks have been developed to support marginalised groups in Finland ¹²:

- 1) The first is the programme for integrating immigrants through sports, established in 2010 by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The aim is to help immigrant populations to increase social ties and inclusion within communities, as well as increasing employability ¹⁸.
- 2) The second scheme (also established in 2009 by the Ministry of Education and Culture) involves development grants for club activities, providing funds for activities run by sports clubs and other local organisations that require monetary support ¹⁹. In addition, third-sector public health organisations — gathered under the umbrella of the Finnish Federation of Adapted Physical Activity — are often very active in the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity ²⁰.

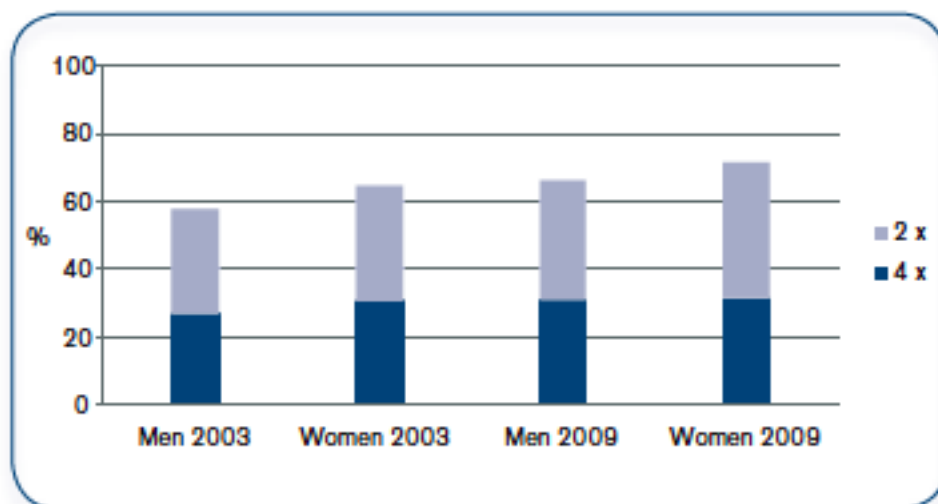
Results and key findings

Impact on inequalities: Gender inequalities

The gender gap seen in most countries in the world (where men are more active than women) has been eradicated in Finland. As shown in figure 1 above, levels of physical activity have risen consistently since the 1970s, with women becoming more active than men in the mid 1990s.

Fig 2 shows that more women are active than men at different levels, both among those who exercise twice a week and those who exercise four or more times a week. Activity levels appear to have risen from 2003 to 2009²¹.

Figure 2. The proportion (%) of 15-64 year old men and women who engage in physical activity at least twice a week and at least four times a week for 30 minutes or longer at one time ²¹



Socio-economic inequalities

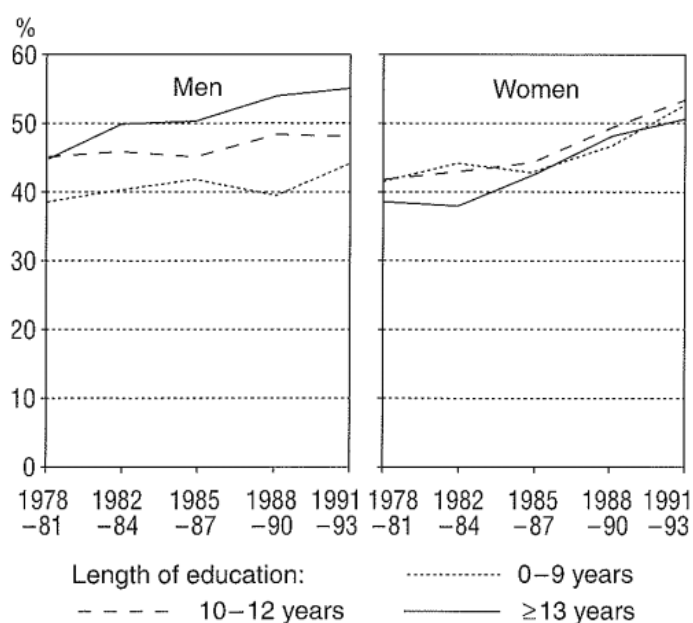
In general there are relatively low socio-economic differences in health outcomes in Finland compared to other countries in Europe, but there are still differences present. For example, Lahelma et al (1997) found differences in health status and most health behaviours (smoking, the use of high-fat milk and butter, physical activity but not drinking alcohol) varied by educational attainment: the longer the education, the better the health and the more favourable the health behaviours²².

Makinen et al (2009) analysed national data on leisure time and commuting physical activity (active travel) among employed adult Finns between 1978 and 2002²³. They reported that the overall trends in physical activity show that leisure-time physical activity has increased and commuting physical activity has decreased in Finland⁷. They showed that socioeconomic differences in leisure-time and commuting physical activity have been quite small among employed Finns, and have remained similar from 1978 to 2002²³.

There is some evidence that socio-economic differences in physical activity participation have reduced over time. An analysis of twenty-five-year trends in lifestyle and socioeconomic characteristics in Eastern Finland²⁴ showed that between 1977 and 1997 differences in educational status between low and highly active groups disappeared.

However, an analysis of national data from 1978 to 1993 shows a different picture: among women there were no differences in physical activity participation by level of education, but among men the differences were 'clear-cut and consistent, the men with a higher education exercising the most and those with basic education exercising the least.' These differences showed a tendency to increase over time during the study²² (Fig. 3 below). In 2014, the proportion active was 3% higher in the most educated group compared to the least educated, among women this difference was 9%⁷.

Fig 3. Percentage of men and women aged 25 to 64 years exercising at least twice a week, by education – age adjusted figures 1978-1993.



In conclusion, it appears that participation in physical activity does vary by socio-economic factors in Finland, but these differences are small and have remained consistent.

Cost effectiveness

A thorough evaluation was conducted on the first phase of the campaign, from 1991-1994¹³. The total cost of the Finland on the Move programme was about 2 million Euros, of which about 1.2 million was given to 94 local projects across Finland. These all focused on promoting local opportunities for physical activity and sport. The Finland on the Move programme supported over 400 local projects in all parts of Finland, with grants of between 1,500 and 3,000 Euros. These were evaluated locally, with no real systematic or consistent approach. No systematic cost effectiveness analysis has been done to date.

Lessons learned

A number of factors appear to have contributed to Finland's success in increasing activity levels:

- Physical activity promotion during the last couple of decades has been built on a strong tradition for sport and activity.
- This supportive culture was from national government: there has been a tradition of strong and sustained political commitment for physical activity for many years.
- The promotional measures during the 1980s and 1990s were based on a solid evidence base. This was enhanced by the founding of a specialist centre for physical activity research (the UKK Institute).
- Funding has been long term and stable.
- The national programmes were designed to be 'bottom-up'. Rather than a top-down national approach, they supported local-level activity and innovation. This appears to be important culturally, and has helped with sustainability.
- Strategies were developed through effective cross-sectoral collaboration, with a 'Health in All Policies' approach.

Timeliness/interest

The Finnish example is unique in that it demonstrates a clear and consistent national approach to a public health challenge, implemented year after year from an early start (1970s). In many countries, where approaches and measurement systems change and hinder attempts at standardisation²⁵, the Finns have continued: collecting the same data

and implementing the same programmes, and refreshing them with new ones.

"What is striking about the Finnish scheme to get people more physically active is the depth and breadth of its reach and the duration for which it has been sustained. It also hit the right tack from the off, first by selling enjoyable activities to people that happened to require physical activity, and second ensuring exercise was the cheap and easy choice to make."

Ian Sample, The Guardian. 15 January 2005

It is not clear where the drive for these continued and long-term initiatives has come from, other than the Finnish government's desire to act on the evidence on the importance of physical activity for health, perhaps married with a strong cultural tradition for physical activity ¹⁴.

Generalisability and transferability to other countries

In principle, there are few obvious reasons why the Finnish approach might not transfer well to other countries. Clearly, Finland has benefited from an 'early start' with activities and policy focus beginning in the 1970s (from origins in the North Karelia project). Obviously this is not possible in other countries that have yet to tackle physical inactivity consistently. However, there are a number of factors that have contributed to Finland's success, that might be borne in mind by other countries trying to learn from Finland's approach:

- National leadership. The Finns have ensured that laws and acts of parliament have been passed at a national level to ensure clear policy support for action
- Grass roots action. Alongside this national lead, action has been stimulated at the local level, through funding to grass-roots community organisations.
- Cross-sectoral collaboration. The Finns have recognised that physical activity is an issue that cuts across sectors, including health; transport; environment; education etc. Their policies and actions are always joined-up
- Consistent. Finland has been measuring and promoting physical activity non-stop since the 1970s. This is longer than any other country in the world. They have not changed with changes of government, or pulled back in times of austerity. They have just kept going. Many countries could learn from this, as often action on physical activity is transient.

That said, two important factors may have contributed to Finland's success that may not be readily available in other countries. The first is a strong cultural norm of enjoyment of an outdoors lifestyle, which is likely to have contributed to a good uptake of initiatives and promotions¹⁴. The second is the cultural acceptance of national messages or directives. As one leader in the field put it: *"In Finland, regardless of your political views, we are quite obedient, we are trustful of the state and the media. But people are also well-educated, they hear the messages we put out and they know they are sensible"* Prof Ilkka Vuori, former director, UKK Institute, Finland.

Sustainability

Finland has demonstrated that they have taken a long-term consistent approach to date, supported by a strong national policy framework. This has no doubt helped sustainability as the various acts of parliament and laws have provided a strong basis on which to build actions. Finland's approach is likely to be sustainable in the long-term, provided that they continue to have clear cross-sector agreement and collaboration. As with many social policy issues, the main threat is likely to be reduced funding due to pressures to invest in other policy areas. However, their approach to date has included increasing the capacity of local grass-roots organisations to deliver physical activity programmes, which in turn increases sustainability in the face of potential budget cuts.

Next steps / Recommendations

Finland has demonstrated important leadership on physical activity promotion, and provides a valuable example for other countries to follow. It has generated sustained improvements over many years, and has reversed the existing inequalities in activity between men and women.

Socio-economic inequalities in physical activity are low in Finland, but there is nevertheless still some room for improvement, notably reducing the inequalities in physical activity by level of education²². This is likely to be best achieved by specific programmes targeted at men with lower levels of education.

There would be great value in in-depth research within Finland on the factors underpinning their success, addressing aspects of political science as well as public health and epidemiological aspects. This could be linked to similar research in other countries to maximise the learning from this work.

There are a number of clear recommendations for other member states based on the Finnish experience. These can be expressed in terms of 'Do's and Don'ts'

- DO ensure there is clear national leadership with a focus on health enhancing physical activity. DON'T focus only on competitive sport or change policies every few years
- DO support grass-roots action from a wide range of community organisations. DON'T assume they can do this without funding or guidance
- DO ensure that all the relevant sectors (health; transport; environment; education, environment) work together with a common goal. DON'T assume it is the responsibility of one sector such as health.
- DO be consistent. DON'T change measures in surveys, policies or funding streams before they have had impact.

Initial conclusion

Does the project/policy represent best practice?

"Thirty years ago, Finland was one of the world's unhealthiest nations. Diet was poor, people were inactive and heart disease was at record levels. Now it's one of the fittest countries on earth.
Ian Sample, The Guardian, January 2005

Sources of funding/sponsors for project/policy

Funding for the vast majority of initiatives in Finland was provided by national government funds. In a few isolated cases, sponsorship was received from private companies.

References/ Studies/ Respondents

This case study has been drafted by Dr Nick Cavill and Prof Harry Rutter, for the UK Health Forum. Nick and Harry have been working in public health (and physical activity promotion) for over 20 years. They have collaborated with Finnish public health and academic colleagues on many occasions and have written previous analyses of Finland's approach to physical activity promotion.

The case study is based primarily on document analysis. Key documents were identified through: interviews with leading public health figures in Finland; searching of personal files; and internet searches. A limitation of this approach is that the authors are applying their own interpretation of Finland's approach which may be biased. However, the draft was checked by Finnish colleagues and amendments and additions incorporated. This ensures that the authors' analysis reflects the views of people closely involved with Finnish health policy. The authors are particularly grateful for the input of Tanja Onatsu (Fit for Life) and Prof Pekka Oja (UKK Institute).

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