

Swedish municipality launches walking map to promote health and environmental development

Huddinge, in Greater Stockholm, is the first municipality in Sweden to get its own urban walking map. The map will combat increased sedentary living and growing waistlines by encouraging people to get out and walk more. This “activity pharmacy”, as well as detailing walking routes in the area, lists exercise providers, places to visit and even cafés to entice people out. The initiative demonstrates one simple pragmatic approach to meeting the health, environmental and urban planning challenges of the liquid-fueled transport society. Hopefully, Huddinge’s 89,000 inhabitants and planning departments will be in better shape and better prepared to meet the effects of rising fuel costs as oil becomes scarcer.

Huddinge, like most of Sweden, has been seeing warnings about the general health – and rising care costs- of its population for some time. Something like 60% of all illnesses can be attributed to life-style and the health service is worried that demand for health care will increase by 50% in the in the year 2020. Early in 2005 the Swedish National Food Administration and the Institute of Public Health drafted a report with a 79 point action plan calling on municipalities to produce action plans covering:

- Redesigning the local environment to encourage activity
- Changes in education to spread more knowledge about activity and nutrition habits
- Requiring the medical and health services to place more emphasis on nutrition and activity
- Increasing training in nutrition and physical activity
- Development of the health promoting workplace including certification
- Food sector changes including labeling and supply management
- More involvement from sports associations

Says Edwin Krzesinski from the sustainability consulting practice A Very Beautiful Place (AVBP): “The report surprised many, as Swedes in general have a reputation for being health conscious. My guess is that increased reliance on local transport and use of cars, together with increased pressure to work harder and longer is taking its toll. We have also seen more consumption of fast food which may be affecting people’s levels of energy”.

A recent study carried out by the construction company, NCC, shows that about 75% of the working population have desk jobs. The lack of

opportunity to move around while at work may be contributory.



The starting point of the project was an initial proposal to develop a walking path of the type '**Sli na Slainte**' - the Irish phrase for 'Path to Health'. These routes are popular in the Stockholm area, about 10 km long, and encourage people to take regular exercise. Says Kjell Thelander, director of the Sports and Leisure in the municipality: “it was felt that '**Sli na Slainte**' would not have a wide appeal as Huddinge already offers many fine circular routes. Due to its geographical spread many Huddinge residents would have too far to go to join the trail.”

At the same time the health service, after launching the concept of FAR (prescriptions for exercise), were looking into ways to spread FAR in the local primary health care. At a recent seminar Ina Sand, physiotherapist and manager of a project in the Stockholm area of Lidingö, pointed out that “doctors are often not familiar with the local area, its opportunities for exercise and the various associations active in the area”. They also do not have time to go into these specific opportunities with each patient.”

The brief for the map, then, was to show walking paths and routes on one side, and on the reverse information about exercise, lists of local activity providers, things to do, places to visit and where to find more information. “I saw it like a pharmacy for physical activity,” says Stephen Hinton, AVBP’s project manager for the map. “You get a prescription from a doctor and take it to the pharmacist, well now you get a prescription for physical activity and open the map to see what kind of “medicine” you would like to take.”

Swedish municipality launches walking map to promote health and environmental development

Says Kjell Thelander ” Huddinge chose the walking map alternative as it would lower the threshold for people to just start right in front of their door or workplace. “

The project pre-study revealed that existing maps do not show gaps between buildings, all building plots appearing as solid objects. For anyone looking to take a direct walking route they would either have to spend a lot of time exploring for paths or walk along the roads, and then they would have to experiment if they wanted to avoid heavy traffic.

As work got underway the project team gleaned much to reflect over. ”We do wonder how much planners take into account the walking needs of people when we started to map out where people actually walk,” says Stephen Hinton.

Many of the 30 strong contributors who drew in the paths and routes commented how despite having lived in the area a long time most of them saw paths they were not aware of earlier.

Perhaps the most surprising thing the team came across was that many people are not used to judging distances and time. When we asked how big the area we were mapping was, estimates varied widely. And estimates for how long it takes to walk one kilometer varied from a few minutes to half an hour!

Project manager Stephen Hinton: ”we got the impression that people are so used to taking the car or bus that they tend to over-estimate how long it takes to walk from A to B and not even try. We want to lower that threshold using the information and tables on the back of the map.”

The reverse side of the map also functions as a poster, and will be offered to the some 20 schools in the area. The project team hopes teachers will use it to train mathematics, geography and as a basis for discussing exercise and health using step counters.

Skapa, a Stockholm –based health promotion consultancy, are offering to help out in the workplace. Says health consultant Jane Arrowsmith; ”we want to identify those in the danger zone who are overweight and getting too

little exercise. Simple things, like step counting and walking regularly, give good results. As employers bear the costs of staff being away from work we know that it is worth every dollar invested.”

One next step might be to get local sports associations and study organizations involved. The Lidingö project has positive experience of approaching FAR from the other angle. They spent a good deal of time setting up collaboration



between the health service and local associations and treatment and activity providers. They are now actively referring patients to these organizations. Patients are getting the activity they need and associations are getting new members.

In Greater Stockholm as a whole, research shows that 15% of all journeys are carried out on foot compared to 6% by bicycle. The majority of journeys are by car, for men the average is 53%. Every other car trip is shorter than 5km and every fourth trip is under 2km. Public transport accounts for a mere 30% of all journeys. It follows that focusing on walking, and encouraging people to walk to public transport has the potential to reduce car use and increase people’s daily step count.

Says AVBP’s Edwin Krzesinski; ”walking maps are a simple instrument to promote sustainable development. From an economic point of view, increasing exercise decreases the risk (and cost to society) of lifestyle diseases like heart problems and diabetes. Environmental impact of transport could be lessened by reducing the number of short car trips. We also want to promote the social aspects of walking – group walking with hiking poles and the benefits of shopping locally for example. Liquid fuel scarcity will require planners to enable more walking journeys. If it improves health and environment as well it will truly be a win-win situation for all”.

For more information see www.avbp.net

