

Seventy-fifth report of Session 2022-23

Department for Transport

Active travel in England

Introduction from the Committee

Active travel describes everyday ‘journeys for a purpose’ made by walking, wheeling, or cycling. In 2021, an average of 235 walking trips and 15 cycling trips were taken by each person. Active travel is a low-carbon way to get around and offers many benefits compared with other forms of transport. Government believes that active travel can support its wider strategic priorities to increase physical activity, tackle obesity, improve air quality, level up, and achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Government expects to spend around £6.6 billion on active travel between 2016 and 2025. It spent £3.3 billion between 2016 and 2021, of which it spent approximately £2.3 billion on infrastructure and £1 billion on other activities such as behaviour change initiatives.

The Department for Transport (DfT) is responsible for active travel policy in England. DfT sets objectives for active travel and the available funding in investment strategies. The first strategy was published in 2017 and the second in 2022. A third is planned from 2025. DfT’s four objectives for active travel are to: increase the percentage of short journeys in towns and cities that are walked or cycled; increase people’s annual walking activity; double rates of cycling; and increase the percentage of children aged 5 to 10 who usually walk to school. Most active travel schemes are delivered by local government. Active travel schemes can range from creating new infrastructure, such as separate cycle lanes on roads or amending existing road space to create pedestrian zones outside schools, as well as activities such as providing training in cycle safety.

In 2020, DfT published *Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking*. This set out government’s ambition to transform the role active travel can play in the transport system. In this, DfT announced its intention to establish Active Travel England (ATE) to improve the approach to investment in active travel infrastructure and deliver better outcomes. ATE was established in August 2022 and became fully operational in August 2023. Its operational budget for 2023–24 is around £7.5 million, increasing to around £9 million in the following year.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence on 19 July 2023 from the Department for Transport. The Committee published its report on 3 November 2023. This is the government’s response to the Committee’s report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [Active Travel in England](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 1376)
- PAC report: [Active travel in England](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 1335)

Government response to the Committee

1. PAC conclusion: Active Travel England has made good early progress but it is still early days for the new organisation.

1. PAC recommendation: DfT should review what ATE has achieved in its first 12 months in operation and whether it has adequate funding and support to deliver its active travel objectives and maintain momentum as it continues to develop. This should include reviewing the available capacity within its different functions and if this is sufficient for it to have an impact.

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: June 2024

1.2 Active Travel England (ATE) published its [corporate plan](#) on 25 July 2023. This included a clear set of targets that it would seek to deliver in 2023 to 2024 alongside its financial plan. ATE was formally established on 1 August 2022 therefore the final four months of its first year of operation (1 April 2023 to 31 July 2023) are captured within the corporate plan. Performance in the earlier period (1 August 2022 to 31 March 2023) was covered in the [Annual Report and Accounts](#) 2022-23 published by ATE on 5 June 2023.

1.3 The Department for Transport (DfT) (the department) will review what ATE has been able to achieve against the targets set out in its plan when it expires, and, as part of this, will consider its resources to deliver across its range of functions and whether these are sufficient to achieve any further targets published in any revised corporate plan (capturing the period April 2024 onwards).

1.4 In addition, and as set out in the [ATE Framework Document](#) that was published on 21 July 2022, ATE's overall effectiveness as an 'arm's length body' of the department will be reviewed. This will take place in 2025.

2. PAC conclusion: DfT is not on track to meet its objectives to increase rates of active travel by 2025.

2a. PAC recommendation: DfT should include in its Treasury Minute Response:

- **its review of its objectives for active travel in England, setting out what it expects to achieve with the funding now available for active travel to 2025.**

2.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

2.2 As the Committee has noted in its report, the intention of the department was to set deliberately challenging objectives for active travel in [the second statutory Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy](#) (CWIS 2) and this was irrespective of the funding available.

2.3 The most recent [National Travel Survey statistical release on walking and cycling](#), published on 30 August 2023, showed that the department is on track to achieve only one of the four objectives for active travel in CWIS 2 (that 46% of short journeys in towns and cities should be walked or cycled by 2025).

2.4 The department does not consider it to be necessary to re-evaluate what it expects to achieve against these objectives by 2025. This is because it will be reviewed in the report to Parliament on CWIS 2 and revised objectives will be set within the third CWIS (both due in 2025).

2.5 To inform the report to Parliament and the third CWIS, the department has commissioned research on active travel funding for the first and second CWIS (from 2016 to 2025) and the outputs of that funding. Many of the funding streams within both CWIS periods are projections, based on a range of evidence. This research will more accurately measure how much money has been spent, and what was delivered against the projected outputs.

2b. PAC recommendation: DfT should include in its Treasury minute response:

- ***how it plans to improve the monitoring of progress against its objectives. This should include better measures that can track progress on cycling rates where there has been local investment.***

2.6 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

2.7 The department considers the National Travel Survey statistics to be the best available source to measure progress against the four objectives set out in CWIS 2. Its size and design provide a nationally representative, statistically robust source that allows repeatable longitudinal measurement of progress. Work is underway to increase the national sample size further, allowing better sub-national representation.

2.8 The department does agree that more can be done to understand the impact on cycling and walking rates following investment at the local level. ATE is developing a revised approach to evaluation of active travel schemes that have received grant funding from government, and where ATE has been involved in the assessment of the related bid for grant funding from the relevant local authority. ATE is also investigating the potential to develop locally representative datasets to complement existing data sources.

2.9 The cornerstone of the revised ATE evaluation approach is the five-year Active Travel Portfolio Evaluation, a process and impact evaluation of Active Travel Investment, led by Sheffield Hallam University, to be completed in 2026-27. ATE is also considering the approach to process, impact, and value for money evaluation of particular interventions (for example Social Prescribing). In parallel, the department is, in collaboration with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, developing the scope of an impact evaluation of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement and the Levelling Up Fund. This includes the impact of active travel elements. The department and ATE are working to ensure complementary approaches across the evaluations.

3. PAC conclusion: DfT has not done enough to understand the impact and benefits of the £2.3 billion of taxpayers' money it has spent on active travel.

3a. PAC recommendation: DfT should, by December 2023, update the Committee on progress with:

- ***its plans to evaluate active travel interventions and how it intends to use findings from its evaluation activities to inform its ongoing and future active travel activity and investment decisions.***

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

3.2 The department should clarify that all grant funding it provides is monitored, for example, to ensure that expected outputs are delivered. Evaluation of schemes, including, for example, the impact a scheme has had on rates of cycling and walking, is longer-term and more resource intensive. The department has previously set a £2 million threshold for evaluation on individual schemes. However, in the most recent round of active travel grant funding, 'Active Travel Fund 4', local authorities with schemes costing between £1 million and £2 million were strongly encouraged to undertake evaluation. Schemes above £750,000 are also required to submit a full economic appraisal using the Active Mode Appraisal Toolkit.

3.3 The department accepts this means it does not have a complete understanding of the effectiveness of all active travel schemes and, as noted in the Committee's report, the average value of schemes from recent funding rounds was £750,000. However, as noted at paragraph 2.9, a broader 'portfolio evaluation' of active travel investment will consider a sample of schemes with lower values. The department considers this to be a proportionate use of resources and in line with HM Treasury's Green Book on evaluation.

3.4 In addition, and as per the department's response to recommendation 2b, ATE is developing a revised approach to scheme evaluation. ATE is also working with local authorities to understand their ability to deliver active travel interventions effectively. ATE published the ['capability ratings' for all local authorities](#) on 10 March 2023, and plans to publish revised ratings in 2024.

3b. PAC recommendation: DfT should, by December 2023, update the Committee on progress with:

- ***how it intends to comprehensively identify and measure the benefits of active travel across all government policy areas.***

3.5 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

3.6 As set out in the department's response to recommendation 2a, it has commissioned research to more accurately measure how much funding has been allocated to active travel interventions over the first and second statutory cycling and walking investment strategies (CWIS 1 and CWIS 2) covering the period 2016 to 2025. This is in respect of funding managed by the department, as well as cross-government funding such as the Levelling Up Fund. In addition, and where the funding body has maintained appropriate records, the research will also set out the impact of the funding against the projected outputs from each funding stream. This research is expected to conclude in April 2024.

3c. PAC recommendation: DfT should, by December 2023, update the Committee on progress with:

- ***how ATE will improve the collection and standardisation of data from active travel schemes.***

3.7 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

3.8 ATE has enhanced the [guidance for local authorities](#) so that they are strongly encouraged to use the new 'Active Travel Infrastructure Platform' so that they can better, and more consistently, detail the type and characteristics of the active travel intervention that they are seeking grant funding for.

3.9 ATE has employed further tools to strengthen data collection, including a scheme database to collect objectives, spend, output and milestone data for all Active Travel Fund schemes, and monitoring 'pulse' surveys that are used to update the database every quarter in a consistent and standardised way. Further work is underway to develop a web-based reporting portal for local authorities.

3.10 In addition, where ATE enters into a grant agreement with local authorities to fund active travel interventions, the Section 31 grant agreement letters (that a local authority chief finance officer is required to sign) have been strengthened so that it places specific requirements on the local authority in terms of data that must be provided to ATE. All

authorities should be prepared to participate in the ‘portfolio evaluation’ as referred in paragraph 2.9 and work with the national evaluator if selected. More broadly, and in respect of funding not directly allocated by ATE, there is a long-term piece of work (which is at the very early stages of development) to align standards of data reporting from local authorities for all active travel schemes. A definitive timeframe cannot be provided at this stage.

4. PAC conclusion: DfT’s communications to the public have not been enough to help tackle perceptions that active travel is unsafe or to encourage more people to take part.

4. PAC recommendation: DfT should, by December 2023, set out to the Committee how it will lead a proactive and coordinated approach with other stakeholders to: better promote the benefits of active travel; identify and address safety concerns; and encourage more people to participate in active travel.

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee’s recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

4.2 The department intends to publish a new road safety strategy document in due course. This will consider ways in which road safety can be improved for vulnerable road users. The department will explore aligning the publication of this document to a broader campaign that promotes the benefits of active travel. The department will also explore whether communications via local authorities and other delivery partners, such as charitable and stakeholder bodies, can deliver similar messaging.

4.3 The department has previously sought to address safety concerns around active travel by communicating the [revisions to The Highway Code](#) to the public. The January 2022 changes to The Highway Code have been communicated via:

- a [factual awareness-raising campaign in February and March 2022](#), alerting road users to the changes as they came into effect; and,
- a [further campaign which ran in summer 2022 and 2023](#), to help embed the changes and encourage understanding and uptake of the guidance.

4.4 The percentage of road users reporting to know either a little or a lot about the Highway Code changes increased from 36% in January 2022 to 58% in August 2022, with 83% of road users having heard of the changes by August 2022. Going forward, the department will continue to monitor attitudes and behaviours to help evidence the prioritisation of THINK! Campaign activity and the level of future communications investment required.

5. PAC conclusion: DfT has not ensured that active travel schemes are sufficiently joined-up with wider transport infrastructure, for example enabling people to walk safely to bus stops or take their bike on the bus or train.

5a. PAC recommendation: DfT and Active Travel England should, by April 2024, develop a clear and consistent approach for ensuring greater integration of active travel infrastructure with the public transport network.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee’s recommendation.

Target implementation date: April 2024

5.2 The Prime Minister announced [new funding for local transport](#) (‘Network North’) on 4 October 2023. This represents a significant and long-term increase in funding for many local

authorities and the department will encourage them to invest in integrated local transport solutions.

5.3 ATE will ensure that any funding for active travel delivered via Network North is compliant with applicable design standards, that it is value for money and is appropriately linked in with the wider transport network. This has already been agreed in correspondence between the Secretary of State for Transport and Chris Boardman (active travel commissioner and chair of ATE) and mirrors the approach taken by ATE in respect of other grant funding, such as the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements.

5.4 By April 2024, the department and ATE will reach a clear and agreed position on how ATE design tools for local authorities can be best utilised to support integration between active travel and public transport. This will include how ATE will prioritise its Inspectorate function to review schemes intended to integrate active travel and other forms of transport.

5b. PAC recommendation: in its Treasury Minute response, DfT should set out how, and by when, it will increase the number of public transport stops that can be safely accessed by foot, in both urban and rural areas.

5.5 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

5.6 The department is taking forward research to understand the experience of disabled bus and coach users, including aspects of bus stop and station design which enables their access and adds value to their journey. The department intends that this will, in the longer term, support the provision of improved roadside infrastructure.

5.7 Local authorities could use local transport money from Network North to improve access to public transport stops, by, for example, creating more accessible footpaths on roads that currently only have grass verges. As set out in the [Command Paper](#) published on 23 October 2023, the funding will enable local authorities to "...improve connectivity in their areas...". Network North also incorporates [an additional £8.3 billion for highways maintenance](#) and how this funding will be allocated was announced on 17 November 2023. This gives local authorities the opportunity to introduce dropped kerbs and tactile paving when resurfacing the road or footway, or to make the footway wider if circumstances allow.

5.8 ATE will ensure that any new active travel routes to bus stops are designed and delivered effectively, and as part of its broader role with Network North funding as set out in paragraph 5.3.

5.9 For all local authorities, [guidance on Bus Service Improvement plans](#), last updated on 11 October 2021, makes clear that walking routes to bus stops should be planned and maintained with safety in mind.

6. PAC conclusion: Local authorities are being held back from delivering successful active travel interventions by the considerable uncertainty in the funding available for schemes.

6. PAC recommendation: DfT, working with other Departments including HM Treasury, should set in the next six months how and when local authorities will be provided with greater certainty about the funding available for active travel to enable them to invest and deliver long-term, ambitious active travel interventions. This work should include an examination of whether the number of grant schemes available for active travel can be reduced or simplified.

6.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

6.2 The department recognises that multi-year funding certainty is essential to local authorities' ability to plan and deliver ambitious active travel schemes. The introduction of five-year [City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements \(CRSTS\)](#) underlines the department's ambition to both rationalise existing schemes and give local government funding certainty for the longer-term. Network North set out significant longer-term funding for local transport for a number of local authorities and the department is developing the detail for how this will operate. This includes an increase in CRSTS as well as the introduction of Local Integrated Transport Settlements.

6.3 Other forms of capital grant funding however, including the dedicated active travel grants managed by ATE are only available on a yearly basis due to approvals given by HM Treasury following the Spending Review 2021 settlement. There is no opportunity to revisit this ahead of the next Spending Review.

6.4 The department will seek to manage fewer and more joined up grant schemes for local authorities over the longer term, and subject to future Spending Review conditions. However, continued provision of dedicated grant funding, including revenue measures, for local authorities will be essential for ATE to be able to provide the targeted support needed to boost local authority capability. The department will reflect any revised approach within third statutory cycling and walking investment strategy, which is due in 2025.

7. PAC conclusion: DfT has not set out how it plans to expand its Bikeability programme and increase the rate of children and adults receiving cycle safety training.

7. PAC recommendation: As an urgent priority, and within three months, DfT needs to set out a clear plan for its Bikeability programme with a revised business case, including the funding it will make available to the programme over the remainder of the investment period to March 2025.

7.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

7.2 ATE announced a [2-year, £50 million funding package for Bikeability](#) on 29 September 2023. This delivers the funding certainty it needs for the remainder of the current Spending Review period, i.e., until 31 March 2025.

7.3 Alongside this, ATE has commissioned a review of the Bikeability programme with the aim of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of management arrangements. The review will focus on the systems used to allocate, monitor, and drive delivery of cycling training and associated support activities, including bench marking against other comparable training programmes.