

Written evidence submitted by Leicester City Council

Introduction

I am submitting this evidence in my role as the Deputy City Mayor with responsibilities for climate, economy and culture, which includes active travel, transport, net zero, and climate readiness.

Leicester has been working to deliver high quality infrastructure to support walking, wheeling, and cycling for over a decade, and alongside this has supported behaviour change work with all ages and demographics. Our network has grown over the period, and we now have over 231km of cycling infrastructure within the city including full segregated cycle tracks, off-road paths, toucan crossings, and cycle lanes.

During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the city championed the delivery of pop-up and temporary lanes, dubbed 'key worker corridors', to provide an alternative to passenger transport for key workers and for daily exercise: our methods and tactics were replicated across the country.

The total investment in sustainable travel over the period is well over £100 million, much of which was – and is – government funding secured via streams including the Transforming Cities Fund, Active Travel Fund, and Levelling up.

This level of investment has allowed Leicester to be scored as a rank 3 authority, one of only 5 across the country, as part of Active Travel England's self-assessment programme.

Though the above chart our successes, we have had our share of unsuccessful bids – a recent levelling up bid and a lack of success in securing Bus Service Improvement Plan funding, for example – alongside difficulties during the design and delivery of schemes that has caused project and programme setbacks.

The unavoidable truth, however, is that there remains much, much more for us to do. Over 85% of trips in the outer city are by car, and the average trip remains under 5km. Leicester is a compact city, over a quarter of residents live within a 10-minute cycle ride of the city centre, and this modal share despite our work and investment demonstrates the continued need for improvement and support.

There remain large, arterial roads with poor or minimal provision that would require investment measured in the tens of millions to be brought to standard – an equal if not greater value would be needed to replace junctions designed in years past for maximum traffic throughput to ensure there is safe and appropriate provision.

Still more work would be needed on residential streets. Leicester was successful in securing funding to develop a mini-Holland scheme. The area chosen, roughly 1/8 of the city network, would require combined investment in excess of £100m to deliver to a reasonable standard.

With the above considered, I present below what I and the city council consider to be vital, very well informed information, opinion, and evidence for consideration by the committee. For clarity, I have presented these under five subject headings as below:

- Funding
- Wider Sector Support

- Skills, Staff and Education
- National Messaging and Campaigning
- Legislative Framework

Under a sixth heading, I have additionally summarised recommendations we believe would enable us and other authorities to deliver the necessary change to meet the government's own targets for active travel and the wider priorities.

1. Funding

- 1.1. Active Travel funding has been increasingly held behind lengthy, competitive, intensive funding bids constructed around individual schemes.
- 1.2. Given the competitive nature of these bids and wider funding, authorities must engage with these and attempt to secure as much funding as possible within a given window. Authorities that either lack the resource or experience to construct bids are therefore placed at an immediate disadvantage.
- 1.3. The officer time required to construct these bids is substantial, not aided by what – at times – have been unrealistically short bidding windows.
- 1.4. For example, authorities were notified of round 4 of the Active Travel Fund on the 10th of January 2023 with a deadline of submission for the 24th of February. Authorities were not provided an indicative allocation, necessary for identifying projects in scope, until the 6th of February. The bid placed additional requirements on officers in completing validation and analysis work on schemes, which necessitated briefing sessions right through to the deadline for submission. At times, the guidance issued changed during those same sessions – it was therefore vital that officers attended, adding yet more demands for time.
- 1.5. The annual bidding cycle is wasted time for officers, with the potential to yield no results. Given staffing levels have reduced considerably as authorities chase ever more demanding savings targets, this time results in other work being sacrificed.
- 1.6. If bids are successful, the stipulations on construction have a substantial impact on works programming. They will often have to take priority over other schemes, and be delivered at pace. There is the strong potential for bids to be required at the same time as construction and/or design milestones, adding yet more pressure to staff.
- 1.7. This funding cycle constrains the schemes that are entered into bids – schemes may be prioritised for ease of construction, or expectations of smoother consultation and engagement pathways, over strategic need given the lack of time to resolve issues whilst hitting construction targets.
- 1.8. The need for oversight is understood, but government have form with multi-year funding settlements or with block allocations. The Integrated Transport Block, for example, or the nature of large-scale strategic road or rail investment. The surety that would be provided by a multi-year fund, alongside a degree of flexibility, would not only allow authorities to deliver schemes as fits local priorities and strategic need but would allow greater confidence in the ability to recruit, train, and retain skilled staff.

- 1.9. It would, additionally, grant authorities the time to undertake the necessary behaviour change or engagement work to secure support for what could otherwise be difficult or controversial schemes. As is, there are concerns that this engagement work will lead to a lack of support when future funding does not materialise. Authorities can therefore not fully engage on projects until funding is secured, by which point – as above – there are pressures on delivery that weight support towards scheme that are less likely to be derailed.
- 1.10. The overall level of funding must be addressed. Transformational infrastructure is expensive, and more and more local authority networks are now incomplete due to gaps in the provision that are expensive to fill. The recent funding reductions only highlight the distance between the ambition and desire of local authorities and what they may be able to deliver.
- 1.11. The funding must also account not only for capital delivery but continue to support the ongoing revenue demand for staff to support behaviour change. As with other streams, this is currently decided by annual bids – there is a real risk to authorities that an unsuccessful bid, or a reduced award, would mean either additional pressures on budget or necessary reductions in staffing levels. Internally we refer to the bidding culture as ‘tombola funding’.
- 1.12. Local authority maintenance budgets have, like all budgets, been decimated. Additional funding for potholes, whilst welcome, does nothing to address the sizeable maintenance backlog nor provide the ability to ensure installed infrastructure is kept in a clean, effective, and attractive state. Consideration must therefore be given to granting authorities the funds necessary to ensure the wider transport network is not kept in a state of managed decline.

2. Wider Sector Support

- 2.1. Funding for the wider industry must be considered and prioritised. Leicester has established good partnerships with the advocacy and charity sector (Sustrans/Living Streets), alongside representative bodies such as British Cycling and Cycling UK. These organisations are often in receipt of ad hoc grants for projects that can be leveraged to great effect, but a lack of continual support calls into question their overall usage. Behaviour change is only effective when consistent, and ad hoc projects do not provide the sustained effort needed to successfully transition travellers away from the motor vehicle.
- 2.2. The creation of Active Travel England (ATE) is very welcome indeed, and we look forward to future engagement with our newly appointed relationships manager, and we would suggest this can be a catalyst to support wider industry support and engagement.
- 2.3. There is scope for ATE to become the hub of the sector, and we would like to see them play an active role in bringing together authorities, partners, and the wider sector together – similar to how the National Association of City Transport Officials (NACTO) operates in America, providing a means for the industry to share knowledge, skills, contacts, and best practice at a regional and national level.
- 2.4. Given the recent launch of the Bus Centre of Excellence we would additionally welcome ATE taking a role in promoting best practice and providing access to curated training on all matters from design to behaviour change and communications, allowing authorities to

operate within agreed guidelines and further supporting the dissemination of skills. This will be further discussed in section 3.

- 2.5. National conferences, such as Cycle City Active City, or Transforming Cities (which Leicester has previously hosted), are very effective means of disseminating information and engaging with the wider industry but to date are delivered either via private means or by authorities from already stretched funding budgets. An annual conference, run by government and with a set allocation of tickets per authority, would support networking in the wider industry and a means of sharing good practice in a supportive atmosphere.

3. Skills, Staff, and Education

- 3.1. There remains a considerable skills gap for the sector, including the provision for design engineers and transport planners. These careers, essentially 'green jobs', can and should be actively promoted in schools and colleges, perhaps via the introduction of bursaries and training grants to enable authorities to better support their local institutions. Particularly in the transport sector, the provision of civil engineering focused on highway or pavement design is often lacking, and consolidated around a relatively small number of institutions that provide courses more tailored to generalists.
- 3.2. More needs to be done to ensure that those entering the sector are representative of the wider demographics, and include both more women, people with disabilities and those of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, so that transport schemes and strategies can be shaped by a wider range of experience and viewpoints.
- 3.3. Authorities should be supported in graduate or apprentice recruitment, and be able to recruit staff with assurances that they will be able to be funded for a sufficient amount of time to complete their studies and deliver on the requirements. Additional funding for improved salaries to improve staff retention, and reduce the risk of private sector employers recruiting local authority staff via the offer of higher wages.
- 3.4. Authorities should also be supported in ensuring staff are given access to – and supported in joining – the relevant professional institutions. Most authorities are no longer able to subsidise joining costs, nor the requisite fess for chartership. This constrains development and places the onus on the officer to fund and progress their own development. This not only reduces the ability for authorities to access the wider sector, it again increases the risk of staff leaving local government with the skills and experience they have gained.

4. National Messaging and Campaigning

- 4.1. Though referenced in policy documents, government support for active travel is not always evident in publication or message. Government's response to the issue of LTNs is representative of this.
- 4.2. Policy (Gear change) and guidance (LTN 1/20) both support LTN schemes and modal filters, as does the wider academic literature and findings from schemes in the country and continent, yet the principle has been consistently attacked and at times wilfully misrepresented by the public and media without government challenge.
- 4.3. That the announcement for Active Travel Fund 4 is specific in not including "any low traffic neighbourhood schemes" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-of-people-to-benefit-from-200-million-to-improve-walking-and-cycling-routes>) suggests tacit

support for these views by government, and undermines the guidance and policy authorities have been following.

- 4.4. Leicester has a long history of successfully removing traffic from neighbourhoods (Highfields and Clarendon Park), which point to the potential of future schemes to improve some communities and the health and well-being of those that live within them.
- 4.5. Beyond this specific niche, government have missed other opportunities to promote walking, wheeling, and cycling as valid, sustainable, and cost-effective means of replacing car journeys when it could have provided the most benefit.
- 4.6. For example, during the rapid increase in costs of fuel and electricity following Russia's invasion of Ukraine there was prime opportunity for government to endorse walking, wheeling, and cycling as cheaper alternatives to the car both as a means of reducing the impact on consumers and weakening the overall demand.
- 4.7. With the increasing cost of living and inflationary pressure, the value proposition of active travel has never been stronger particularly cities like Leicester. Like many authorities we are promoting this as a means of supporting residents in the current period, but lack the resources or reach of a government campaign.
- 4.8. Of additional concern, the changes to the Highway Code were not widely communicated and to date many drivers are unaware of the changes or the onus it places upon them, particularly – and most visibly – with pedestrians or cyclists crossing side roads. Given the government have access to the details of every registered driver in the country, it would have been feasible to communicate the changes directly. The lack of a targeted campaign weakens the intent and overall effectiveness of the changes, again suggesting a lack of vocal and visible support for active travel from the government.
- 4.9. There is, additionally, a lack of national discourse on the benefits of active travel to shared issues and priorities including the increase of obesity and pressures on the health system from congenital diseases. Active Travel has not only been proven to reduce the likelihood of or impact of both, but is cited in medical policy and research as being one of the most effective tools. Given the pressure faced by the NHS currently, it is suggested that this is the ideal time to promote the transition and again support increasing the modal shift.
- 4.10. Finally, the role of active and sustainable travel on the climate emergency should be referenced strongly – the approach as it stands seems to tacitly encourage the uptake of electric vehicles, whilst more should be done to ensure that we do not see a 1:1 transition, which would not achieve the potential of active travel nor alleviate congestion issues which have an economic impact.

5. Legislative Framework

- 5.1. The government has not yet published revised guidance on the development of Local Transport Plans (LTPs), which provide the blueprint for local authority transport policy. The levels of frustration this has caused cannot be underestimated. The lack of guidance has meant that new LTP development has stalled, not only weakening strategic transport planning but preventing authorities from identifying, engaging on, and committing to a vision for transport that would further promote active travel. The guidance has been expected for some time, and we would urge government to publish as soon as possible and ensure Active Travel is well supported.

- 5.2. In addition to the above, there has been relative silence on the matter of pavement parking since the end of the consultation on the matter in 2020. The matter is still unresolved, and whilst we do – alongside other authorities – have the powers to introduce a pavement parking ban this is wrapped into a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) process that requires a considerable amount of local support, cost, and time to deliver. This severely impacts our ability to introduce such a ban, as well as placing authorities in the position of having to decide between convenience and safety.
- 5.3. This would again, to some extent, relate to the ambiguity of the messaging issued from government. By permitting pavement parking, there is the suggestion that the ability to park a motor vehicle on the carriageway in proximity to a premises is of greater import than the ability for a member of the public to pass and repass safely. The arguments for and against are not to be rehashed here, but we would strongly encourage the government publish the response to the consultation, institute changes, and if necessary revised guidance to allow local authorities to act as necessary on this manner.
- 5.4. In related matters, the TRO process continues to be necessary for a wide variety of matters related to active travel. The process is lengthy and costly, preventing what would otherwise be relatively small yet impactful interventions from being delivered at pace. We recognise the need for the orders and the process, including the escalation to a judicial review if so challenged, but streamlining the order making process and allowing authorities to engage and consult in a manner that suits the environment and scale would go some way to minimising the overall impact of the order making process.
- 5.5. Finally, there remain a number of areas where additional legislation or regulation would remove ambiguity or provide additional controls to authorities. For example – it is illegal, under the Road Traffic Act (1988, S.21), to park on a designated cycle track. However, the police have the powers to enforce this, preventing the local authority from taking action. The provision of double yellow lines within the track itself is not permitted, in regulation, and the provision of markings and signage to permit a level of on street parking but protect the cycle track creates additional highway signage clutter and complicated traffic orders more open to challenge. A relatively simple change of aligning this to a parking offence would grant local authority Civil Enforcement Officers the ability to take action and ensure the tracks are kept clear.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1. I would put it to the committee that, to achieve the targets government have set, the following would need to occur:
 - 6.1.1. A move to multi-year funding arrangements to authorities, granting increased flexibility in how monies can be deployed between schemes, comprising a substantial capital and revenue allocation.
 - 6.1.2. The adoption of a grant, rather than a bidding or ‘tombola funding’ approach, allowing authorities to operate strategically and with confidence over the level of funding available to them for delivery.
 - 6.1.3. A substantial increase in the amount of funding available, nationally, across both capital and revenue schemes.

- 6.1.4. Increased support, either in the form of national contracts or top-sliced allocations, for the NGOs and voluntary organisations to enable them to work more closely with authorities and support with their own specialised skills and experience.
- 6.1.5. Further initiative from ATE to become a focal point for the industry, drawing together authorities and partners together across the sector via an offer of training, support, and networking.
- 6.1.6. Additional resource put into schools and colleges to promote civil engineering and transport planning.
- 6.1.7. Support for authorities to recruit and retain graduates, apprentices, and industry joiners without fear of private sector offers depleting resource.
- 6.1.8. A renewed national campaign drawing out the benefits of walking and cycling to the individual and to wider society, which authorities can tap into and support either via a consistent message, brand, slogan, or imagery.
- 6.1.9. Urgent publication of the LTP guidance and decarbonisation calculations toolkit to enable development and adoption of local transport plans at pace.
- 6.1.10. Urgent publication of the government's response to pavement parking regulations.
- 6.1.11. A review of legislation attached to infrastructure and traffic regulation orders, to ensure the appropriate powers are held by authorities and they can be used effectively and efficiently to protect existing and install new infrastructure in the manner that best suits.

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