

# National Audit Office report on Active Travel

To: England: Chief Executives, Highways Officers and Councillors with a Highway interest

For info: Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland

## Key issues

- Active Travel England's assessment of local authorities suggests 56% have low capability and ambition to deliver active travel interventions
- Work is required to review the approach to public engagement on active travel
- The need for longer-term stable funding and building more capability is a significant barrier.

## 1 Background to the report

Audit England released its report on active travel in June 7 (HC 1376). The report has tested the objectives of the Department for Transport (DfT) against progress to date and this briefing provides the key information on progress. Overall, the report finds little to praise and much to challenge.

The DfT's estimate of total spend by the UK Government on active travel between April 2016 and March 2025 was £6.6bn. Active Travel England (ATE) is a new body established by DfT in August 2022 to deliver the Government's ambitions for increased active travel.

## 2 Active Travel

Active travel describes everyday journeys made by walking, wheeling, or cycling. It includes trips that are made by foot, pedal-cycles, e-cycles, adapted cycles, wheelchairs, mobility scooters and push-scooters. Active travel is a low-carbon way to get around and offers many benefits compared with other forms of transport. The Government believes active travel has potential to support its wider strategic priorities to increase physical activity, tackle obesity, improve air quality, level up, and achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

### 3 Objectives

Alongside a broad objective to deliver a world-class cycling and walking network in England by 2040, DfT has set four specific objectives for active travel, which are to:

- increase the percentage of short journeys in towns and cities that are walked or cycled from 41% in 2018-19 to 46% in 2025, 50% in 2030 and 55% in 2035;
- increase walking activity to 365 stages per person per year in 2025;
- double cycling from 0.8 billion stages in 2013 to 1.6 billion stages in 2025; and
- increase the percentage of children aged 5 to 10 who usually walk to school from 49% in 2014 to 55% in 2025.

### 4 Audit Office Conclusions

In recent years DfT has raised its ambition for active travel in England. In doing so it has recognised areas where its performance must improve. Although active travel schemes have the potential to deliver important benefits, in practice DfT has known too little about what has been achieved and has not been able to influence the local delivery of schemes consistently. This has led to patchy delivery of active travel schemes, **and it is unlikely that DfT's objectives for increased active travel by 2025 will be achieved.**

Four key barriers DfT identified to the increased uptake of active travel are:

- poor-quality infrastructure.
- limited, inconsistent provision of active travel infrastructure in planning decisions in local areas.
- limited capacity and skills within local authorities to deliver active travel interventions; and
- public concerns around safety and confidence to cycle.

### 5 Recommendations

The Audit Commission set out recommendations to ensure that DfT is well-placed to deliver value for money from the Government's active travel investments. These recommendations will also be relevant as DfT plans its third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy from 2025. DfT should:

- a) review its cycling and walking objectives for 2025 and beyond to inform setting appropriate targets for Active Travel England:
  - It should consider whether its objectives remain achievable or whether it would be appropriate to adjust its targets, considering progress to date and available funding.
  - It should review its Gear Change actions and set out publicly which of these it will not

be able to make further progress with, given available funding and its strategic priorities.

- b)** support ATE to establish a benefits monitoring approach that tracks the contribution of active travel investments to all of government's wider strategic priorities. This would improve the monitoring of active travel outcomes, enabling DfT and other government departments to make more informed investment decisions;
- c)** develop a more stable funding environment for local authorities delivering active travel interventions by working with others in government. This would help local authorities to invest in plans and resources and deliver interventions more efficiently; and
- d)** working with ATE, set out how it plans to address the safety concerns that persist around active travel.

In establishing itself as a new executive agency, ATE should:

- e)** develop a clear, consistent framework for standardised local data collection to provide baselines and inform scheme evaluations using comparative analysis. This plan should draw on digital technologies and ATE should be ambitious about the standards of data it expects and how these will be collected;
- f)** maximise learning from future active travel pilot schemes funded by DfT. This should include developing rigorous approaches to evaluation such as randomised controlled trials so that the impact of behavioural schemes can be understood and used to inform wider rollouts;
- g)** work with DfT to review the approach to public engagement on active travel. More is required to ensure that there is a good understanding of why active travel is important to enable behaviour change and increase walking, wheeling and cycling; and
- h)** prioritise its work with central and local government according to who can make the greatest contribution to increasing rates of active travel, based on stakeholder analysis. ATE should undertake stakeholder analysis to identify organisations with common goals, or those that can make the greatest contribution to its objectives and should prioritise building relationships with those organisations.

## **6 APSE Comment**

Active Travel is a worthy concept although success is heavily dependent on local circumstance, geography and population. There has often been little or no engagement with the public who, generally, remain unpersuaded of the benefits. Funding has been predominantly through bidding processes, favouring those larger highway authorities with the capacity to work and deliver to short timescales. Often the bidding is tied to the levelling-up agenda and funding dependent on a range of often conflicted criteria. The guidance and criteria for a successful bid remain opaque.

DfT and ATE need to establish guiding principles and allow the local highways authority to determine the optimum use of the resources available to maximise active travel. Funding needs to be over 5-year periods to allow consultation, planning and delivery. A centrally funded, public information exercise, citing health and environmental benefits, is essential to garner public support for future schemes.

Rob Bailey

Principal Advisor for Leisure, Transport & Highways

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Association for Public Service Excellence  
3rd floor,  
Trafford House,  
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.  
telephone: 0161 772 1810  
fax: 0161 772 1811  
web: [www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk)