



National Audit Office



REPORT

Active Travel in England

Department for Transport, Active Travel England

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Active Travel in England

Department for Transport, Active Travel England

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

1 June 2023

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Key facts

£6.6bn

Department for Transport's (DfT's) estimate of total spend by central government on active travel between April 2016 and March 2025

4

the number of DfT's active travel objectives to 2025. As at June 2023, DfT is not on track to achieve three of its four objectives, and progress on the fourth is uncertain

**Active
Travel
England**

a new body established by DfT in August 2022 to deliver government's ambitions for increased active travel

£2.6 billion

DfT's spend on active travel interventions between 2016 and 2021

4.3:1

DfT's estimate of the benefit-to-cost ratio that its current spending on active travel will achieve

Unknown

DfT does not yet know if the schemes delivered by local authorities have been of good enough quality

**Four key
barriers**

DfT identified to the increased uptake of active travel. These 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.

56%

Active Travel England's assessment of the proportion of local authorities that currently have low capability and ambition to deliver active travel interventions

Summary

Introduction

1 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. 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.

2 The Department for Transport (DfT) has responsibility for active travel policy in England. It sets out its objectives for active travel and the available funding in cycling and walking investment strategies. The first strategy was published in 2017 and the second in 2022. A third is planned from 2025. Other central government departments, such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC), also have a role in encouraging and funding active travel.

3 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;¹
- increase walking activity to 365 stages per person per year in 2025;²
- 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 In 2020, DfT published *Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking*, which set out government's ambition to transform the role active travel can play in the transport system. As part of this, DfT announced its intention to establish a new body, Active Travel England (ATE), to improve investment in walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure. Since 2022, ATE has taken over responsibility for the operational delivery of active travel programmes from DfT and has managed dedicated active travel investments on its behalf. ATE is still recruiting and expects to become fully operational from August 2023.

¹ DfT's measure of walking includes travelling on foot and wheeling, which is an equivalent alternative to walking - for example using wheelchairs, mobility scooters, prams or pushchairs.

² A walking or cycling stage is where someone walks or cycles as part of an overall trip. For example, walking to a bus stop.

5 Successful delivery of active travel interventions relies on work undertaken by local authorities. Most central government funding for active travel goes to local authorities who decide on the best mix of interventions to achieve their objectives. Such interventions include infrastructure measures such as segregated cycle lanes and safe road crossings; and behavioural measures to increase take-up of active travel including travel planning and cycle training. DfT estimates that government spent £3.3 billion on active travel between April 2016 and March 2021, and it expects it to spend £3.3 billion between April 2021 and March 2025, the period covered by the current investment strategy.

Scope of this report

6 It is six years since DfT published its first *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* in 2017 and two years remain in the current funding period, to March 2025. This report examines whether DfT is set up to achieve its ambitions for increased walking, wheeling and cycling in England by 2025. We have assessed:

- DfT's strategic approach to active travel;
- progress made against DfT's objectives for active travel since 2017; and
- progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel.

This report does not examine the delivery of active travel interventions by individual local authorities, combined authorities, or Transport for London, nor the success of individual interventions at a local level.

Key findings

DfT's strategic approach to active travel in England

7 DfT has a clear strategic approach to raising rates of active travel in England, with increased ambitions for its work since 2020. DfT has published two cycling and walking investment strategies since 2017 which set out its ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for short journeys, and a part of longer journeys. Each strategy sets out objectives and funding for active travel to make progress against them by 2025. In 2020, DfT's *Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking* identified that while its investment was having an impact, change was not happening at a fast enough rate to achieve its objectives. DfT identified four barriers to the uptake of active travel – poor infrastructure, inconsistent provision for active travel in planning decisions, limited capacity in local authorities to deliver interventions, and safety concerns – and set out actions to address these (paragraphs 1.2 to 1.4, and Figure 1).

8 DfT has recently changed its approach: in 2022 it established Active Travel England to implement its strategy and address barriers to the uptake of walking, wheeling and cycling. ATE was formally established as an executive agency in August 2022. Its purpose is to raise the design standards of active travel infrastructure, hold local authorities to account for their investments in active travel, provide advice on how to improve walking, wheeling and cycling provision, and increase the skills and capacity in local authorities to deliver active travel schemes. ATE plans to place greater emphasis on walking and wheeling (such as using a wheelchair, mobility scooter or pushchair) than previously as it believes that this is where the largest increases in rates of participation are likely to be made (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.7).

9 DfT estimates that government could spend around £6.6 billion on active travel between 2016 and 2025, but the actual amount spent will depend on investment decisions by other parts of government. Of the £6.6 billion, £1.4 billion is dedicated funding for active travel from DfT. A further £5.2 billion is non-ring-fenced funding: £3.94 billion from wider DfT funds and £1.27 billion from wider government, including other central government departments. The level of funding for active travel from these non-ring-fenced funds is uncertain and depends on the sponsoring department's fund criteria and the proposals put forward by local authorities. Active travel may be one of several ways to deliver against the priorities of these wider funds, so departments may or may not choose to provide funding for it (paragraphs 1.8 to 1.10 and Figures 3 and 4).

10 DfT does not yet have a plan to track the benefits from active travel investments and their contribution to transport and wider government priorities. DfT has assessed that its dedicated spend on active travel between 2021 and 2025 should achieve benefits of £4.30 for every £1 spent, which it categorises as very high value for money. Active travel has the potential to contribute to the strategic priorities of eight government departments beyond DfT. Most of these benefits are health-related and come from increased physical activity. Neither DfT nor ATE has a plan in place to monitor benefits across all active travel investments. For example, DfT is not measuring the contribution that active travel investments are making to decarbonisation, compared with the trajectory in DfT's Transport Decarbonisation Plan (paragraphs 1.11 to 1.13 and Figure 5).

11 Active Travel England is taking steps to improve understanding of what works to increase active travel. ATE is investing in data and analysis, and working with local authorities, to improve the evidence base for decisions on active travel. DfT has identified gaps in its understanding of what has worked and why. ATE intends to improve data on active travel infrastructure and strengthen the quality of evidence on what interventions work best, including those targeting behaviour. This work is still at a very early stage (paragraphs 1.14 and 1.15, and Figure 6).

DfT's progress against its objectives since 2017

12 DfT's progress to date suggests it will not achieve three of its four 2025 objectives for increasing active travel, and progress on the fourth is uncertain.

DfT's objectives relate to increasing overall walking and cycling activity, with specific objectives for school journeys and short journeys made in towns and cities. The latest survey data, from 2021, show little overall progress against its objectives. Whilst one measure was close to its 2025 target, this may reflect changes to travel patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic which appear not to have been sustained. For the other three, levels of activity are lower than they were when the first *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* was published in 2017. DfT's recent progress is uncertain because it does not know the long-term impact of the pandemic on travel behaviour. However, in 2022 DfT undertook modelling to assess the likelihood of meeting its 2025 objectives and found that these were unlikely to be met (paragraphs 2.2, 2.5 and 2.6, and Figures 7 and 8).

13 DfT met its earlier objective to improve safety, but perceptions about safety remain a barrier to active travel. In its first *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* in 2017, DfT set an objective to reduce the rate of cyclists killed or seriously injured by 2020. Casualties per mile cycled fell between 2017 and 2020. DfT did not include a specific objective to improve safety in *The Second Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* but recognises its importance to uptake of active travel. Around half of respondents to a DfT survey in 2021 said they would be encouraged to walk and cycle more if roads were safer. Much of the work being taken forward by ATE is focused on improving safety and perceptions of it (paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4).

14 DfT has made progress on 22 of the 33 *Gear Change* actions it has identified as necessary to achieve a step change in rates of active travel. In 2020, DfT set out 33 actions organised under four themes relating to infrastructure quality, integrating active travel with other transport and planning policy, improving capability within local authorities, and improving safety. DfT has delivered eight actions, with the clearest progress on measures targeting local authority capability. It has made the least progress on actions intended to improve integration of active travel within transport and wider policy areas. Although *Gear Change* committed to expand cycle training as one of the behavioural interventions to promote confidence and skills in cycling, DfT has not yet expanded the Bikeability training offer as intended. The proportion of children outside London who have completed basic road training by the time they leave primary school will need to increase by around two-thirds (from around 50% to 80%) for DfT to deliver its *Gear Change* commitment (paragraphs 2.7 to 2.10, and Figure 9).

Progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel

Tackling poor infrastructure to improve safety

15 DfT does not yet know if the schemes delivered by local authorities have been of good enough quality. Between 2016 and 2021, DfT spent £2.3 billion funding local authorities to build new active travel infrastructure. DfT does not know the totality of what local authorities have achieved through this funding and has identified that infrastructure it has funded may not have been good enough quality, including where interventions were largely cosmetic and did not provide a safe space for cycling. This resulted in some poor value schemes and potential adverse impacts on active travel in some cases (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.5).

16 The speed at which active travel schemes were delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic led to some poor value investments. In May 2020, DfT announced a £250 million emergency active travel fund for local authorities during the pandemic and published new guidance on reallocating road space to encourage cycling and walking. To help facilitate social distancing, DfT focused on the speed of local authority action, requiring in its first tranche of funding for schemes to be started within four weeks. This led to some poor implementation of schemes in places where plans had not been developed before the pandemic and local communities were not adequately consulted. Some active travel schemes were removed prematurely before they could be tested properly because they proved controversial. Local authorities often found it challenging to build schemes quickly and to engage their communities during this time (paragraphs 3.6 to 3.8).

17 DfT and Active Travel England have taken steps to improve compliance with national guidance for designing good quality and safe active travel infrastructure. In July 2020, DfT published new national design guidance for cycle infrastructure. Local authority bids for dedicated DfT funding have needed to comply with this guidance since June 2021 as a condition of funding. ATE is building relationships with teams in DfT and DLUHC with responsibility for funding programmes that include support for active travel. ATE plans to review scheme proposals and set expectations around compliance with this new guidance for allocations made through these wider funds, building on initial funding requirements. The monitoring and evaluation of active travel interventions is one of ATE's core functions. ATE is developing its approach for inspecting all schemes built with dedicated DfT funding and wider government funding. It will use inspections to monitor compliance and use this information to inform future dedicated and wider DfT funding allocations to local authorities (paragraphs 3.9 to 3.11 and Figure 10).

Incorporating active travel into planning decisions

18 Active Travel England has new powers to influence planning decisions and will need to assess how these work in practice. Provision for active travel in new housing developments has been inconsistent, with some providing little or no safe spaces for walking, wheeling or cycling. Since June 2023, ATE has been a statutory consultee in the planning system. In this role it will review all new housing developments with 150 or more dwellings. This threshold means that ATE expects to review applications covering around 60% of new dwellings each year. Currently, ATE has no formal mechanism to influence decisions affecting active travel provision in developments with fewer than 150 dwellings. ATE plans to review whether the current thresholds are sufficient after one year. It will also need to consider the volume of work that its planning function can manage and how it directs this resource to have the greatest impact (paragraphs 3.12 to 3.14).

Local authority capability and ambition

19 Local authorities currently have limited capability to deliver active travel schemes, but Active Travel England is taking steps to help them improve. ATE published its first assessment of local authority capability in 2023. No local authority received the top rating of 'level 4' and more than half (56%) were assessed as 'level 1' or below, indicating limited political support for active travel and only isolated interventions. ATE has used these ratings to guide its initial allocation of dedicated DfT funding to local authorities. On average, dedicated funding per head in 2022-23 for 'level 3' authorities was £10.05 compared with £3.34 for 'level 1' authorities. ATE provided £5.4 million in financial support in 2022-23 for capability building among 'level 0' and 'level 1' local authorities alongside advice and training. 'Level 0' authorities are being paired with a similar, but higher-rated local authority to facilitate peer learning to help improve their active travel planning (paragraphs 3.15 to 3.17 and Figure 11).

20 Our work with local authorities has identified several barriers yet to be fully addressed, including the need for longer-term stable funding and building more capability. Local authorities and other stakeholders we spoke to raised issues around funding uncertainty and the multiple, short-term grants provided to fund active travel interventions. They also expressed concerns about insufficient funding for maintaining infrastructure after it is built. These issues limit local authorities' ability to plan strategically, deliver schemes more efficiently, and invest in larger schemes which might make a bigger contribution to DfT's objectives for 2025. We were also told about the importance of strong local political leadership and sustained community consultation. Delivery of active travel interventions works well when local authorities have good-quality information on which to base investment decisions, and there is good integration between transport and planning teams (paragraphs 3.18 and 3.19 and Figure 12).

Conclusion on value for money

21 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.

22 Active Travel England has the potential to be a catalyst for increasing walking, wheeling and cycling. DfT established Active Travel England to address long standing issues relating to the standard of infrastructure and to support improvements in the capability of local authorities. Active Travel England has made good early progress and is well-placed to address many of the issues that can lead to poor quality active travel schemes. Maintaining this early momentum from the set-up of Active Travel England will be important to securing the benefits for transport, health and the environment and achieving value for money from government's investment in active travel.

Recommendations

23 We set out recommendations to ensure that DfT is well-placed to deliver value for money from 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.**
- 24** 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.