



National Audit Office



REPORT

# Active Travel in England

Department for Transport, Active Travel England

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SESSION 2022-23  
7 JUNE 2023  
HC 1376



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# Active Travel in England

Department for Transport, Active Travel England

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## Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed on 5 June 2023

This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the  
National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House  
of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

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**Gareth Davies**  
**Comptroller and Auditor General**  
**National Audit Office**

**1 June 2023**

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# Contents

**Key facts** 4

**Summary** 5

**Part One**

The Department for Transport's active travel strategy 13

**Part Two**

The Department for Transport's progress against its objectives since 2017 24

**Part Three**

Progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel 31

**Appendix One**

Our audit approach and evidence base 42

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## Key facts

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**£6.6bn**

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

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**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

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**Active  
Travel  
England**

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

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**£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;<sup>1</sup>
- increase walking activity to 365 stages per person per year in 2025;<sup>2</sup>
- 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

# Part One

## The Department for Transport's active travel strategy

**1.1** Active travel describes everyday journeys made for a purpose by walking, wheeling, or cycling. It includes trips that are made by foot, pedal-cycles, e-cycles, adapted cycles, wheelchairs, and push-scooters. Government has set out the potential of active travel to support its wider strategic priorities to increase physical activity, tackle obesity, improve air quality, level up through improved access to employment and education, and achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. This part describes the roles and responsibilities for active travel in England and examines:

- the Department for Transport's (DfT's) strategy for supporting active travel;
- how government has funded active travel since 2016-17; and
- how DfT has measured the benefits of active travel investment to date.

### **Responsibilities for active travel in England**

**1.2** DfT has responsibility for active travel policy in England, although most active travel schemes are delivered by local government (**Figure 1** overleaf). 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 training in cycle safety (**Figure 2** on page 15).

**Figure 1**

## Government roles and responsibilities for active travel in England

**The Department for Transport (DfT) has policy responsibility for active travel, but investment and delivery responsibilities are split across central and local government bodies**

	Organisation	Description
Central government	DfT	DfT is responsible for active travel policy in England. It sets the strategy for active travel work and provides guidance for local authorities to follow when implementing active travel schemes.  DfT provides dedicated funding for active travel through 20 funds. It also provides funding through 10 further grants where active travel is part of wider transport investment.
	Active Travel England (ATE)	ATE is an executive agency of DfT, responsible for delivering DfT's active travel strategy. ATE manages DfT's dedicated funding for active travel and is expected to assess applications for wider funds such as the Levelling Up Fund. It inspects local authority performance, reviews planning applications and provides training and advice to local authorities to raise standards in design.
	DfT's other arm's-length bodies	National Highways has a dedicated fund for users and communities which it can invest in active travel. This money is provided to National Highways through a DfT fund.
	Other government departments	Some other government departments provide funding which local authorities can use to support investment in active travel. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities provides the most funding for active travel of these other departments.
Local government	Local authorities	Local authorities plan, design and deliver active travel infrastructure and behavioural change programmes. Local authorities use regular transport funding and bid for other funds for their active travel schemes from DfT and other government departments.

**Notes**

- 1 Other government departments include the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.
- 2 In addition to government bodies, charitable organisations, such as Sustrans, The Bikeability Trust, Cycling UK and Living Streets, are involved in delivering active travel investments.

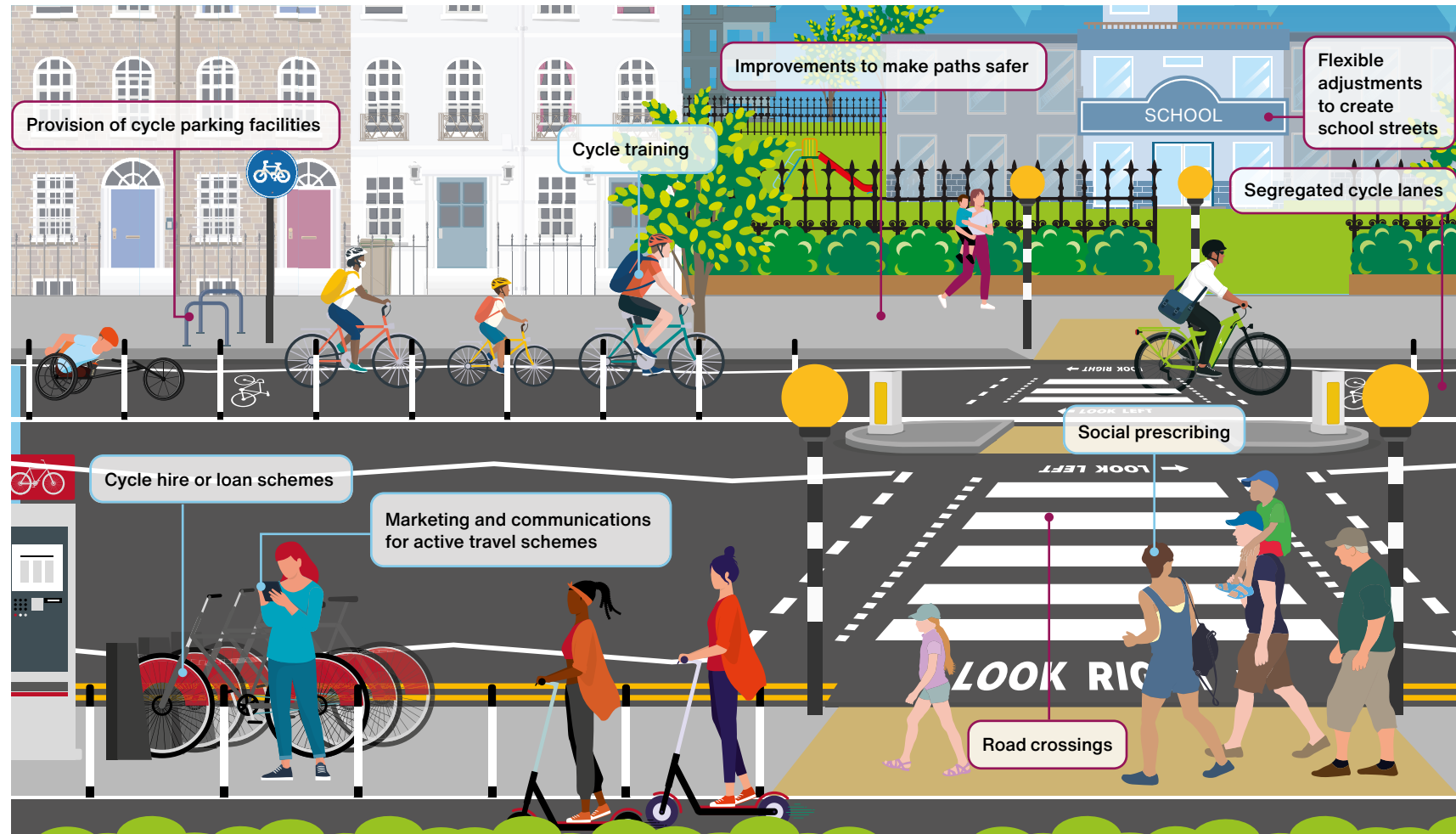
Source: National Audit Office review of publicly available information



## Figure 2

### Types of active travel interventions

Active travel interventions are varied and include capital-funded and revenue-funded schemes



- New infrastructure or changes to existing street layout, funded through capital investment
  Behavioural interventions, funded through revenue investment

#### Notes

- Active travel includes walking and the use of cycles, wheelchairs, mobility scooters, adapted cycles, push scooters and e-cycles.
- This illustration contains examples of schemes and is not a complete list of all interventions. It is an illustration only and the measures represented may not meet good design standards.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of government-funded active travel interventions

## DfT's active travel strategies

**1.3** The Infrastructure Act (2015) requires DfT to publish regular cycling and walking investment strategies. These documents set out DfT's objectives and targets for active travel and the funding that DfT expects to be provided for active travel investment. DfT has published two cycling and walking investment strategies, covering the periods 2016–2021 and 2021–2025.<sup>3</sup> It is planning a third strategy covering the period from 2025. These strategies set out DfT's ambition for active travel to be the natural choice for shorter journeys, or a part of longer journeys, by 2040; and the objectives and targets it will work towards in the shorter term to achieve this aim.

**1.4** In July 2020 DfT published *Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking*.<sup>4</sup> It concluded that while investment was increasing rates of active travel, change was not happening fast enough to achieve DfT's strategic objectives. It identified barriers to increasing active travel:

- poor-quality infrastructure;
- limited integration with other transport and planning policy contributing to inconsistent provision of active travel infrastructure in local areas;
- limited capacity and skills within local authorities to deliver active travel interventions; and
- public concerns around safety and confidence to cycle.

*Gear Change* informed DfT's second cycling and walking investment strategy. It described 33 actions to address barriers to participation in active travel. We assess progress against these actions in Part Two.

**1.5** Until 2022, DfT managed the delivery of interventions to increase active travel alongside its policy and strategy work. One action in *Gear Change* was to establish Active Travel England (ATE), a new body and inspectorate for active travel. ATE now has responsibility for delivering against DfT's active travel strategies and for implementing government's ambitions for increased active travel. ATE was formally established as an executive agency in August 2022 following a short period in shadow form. It expects to become fully operational from August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Transport, *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy*, April 2017. Available at: [and](#) Department for Transport, *The Second Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy*, July 2022. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis2)

<sup>4</sup> Department for Transport, *Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking*, July 2020. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904146/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904146/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf)

**1.6** ATE has multiple operational functions requiring high levels of expertise – including planning, inspection, grant giving, engagement and outreach, and analysis. DfT expects ATE’s work will help to address the barriers it identified in *Gear Change* by raising the standard of active travel infrastructure, improving provision for active travel in planning decisions, increasing capability within local authorities to deliver interventions, and reducing safety concerns.

**1.7** 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. To be successful, ATE will need to make sure that interventions to encourage walking and wheeling are accessible and safe for many types of users. ATE plans to build partnerships with organisations that focus on inclusivity and accessibility to inform their investment decisions, and local authorities must deliver schemes in line with DfT’s accessibility guidance.

### **Government funding for active travel**

**1.8** DfT currently estimates that central government will provide around £6.6 billion in funding for active travel to local authorities and other delivery partners between 2016 and 2025, the period of its two cycling and walking investment strategies (**Figure 3** overleaf). This comprises:

- **20 dedicated DfT funds** which are ring-fenced and spent solely on active travel interventions, including for cycle training, new infrastructure and walk to school outreach;
- **10 wider DfT funds** which are not ring-fenced and may be spent on a variety of transport interventions, including active travel; and
- **6 wider government funds** which are not ring-fenced and may be spent on a variety of projects, including active travel. These funds are overseen by other central government departments, primarily the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC).

**1.9** Funding from government sources that are not ring-fenced is uncertain because active travel will be one of several ways to deliver against the priorities of these wider funds. For example, projects funded by government’s Levelling Up Fund (first round) include regeneration and community hubs alongside some active travel schemes.

**1.10** DfT has faced significant inflationary cost pressures across its spend on major infrastructure. In March 2023, the Secretary of State for Transport announced changes to various transport investment plans. This included a £233 million reduction in its dedicated funding for active travel up to April 2025. DfT’s dedicated funding, which has been managed by ATE since 2022, is now substantially smaller than when ATE was initially created (**Figure 4** on page 19).

**Figure 3**

## Estimated funding for active travel, April 2016 to March 2025

**Funding for active travel comes from dedicated and wider government funds, with the majority not ring-fenced for active travel**

Type of fund	Department	Investment strategy 1 April 2016 to March 2021	Investment strategy 2 April 2021 to March 2025	Total	Percentage of total
		(£mn)	(£mn)	(£mn)	(%)
Dedicated funding (ring-fenced)	Department for Transport (DfT)	599	804	<b>1,403</b>	21
Wider DfT funding (not ring-fenced)	DfT	2,032	1,904	<b>3,936</b>	60
Wider government funding (not ring-fenced)		685	582	<b>1,267</b>	19
	<b>Of which:</b>				
	Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities	605	582		
	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs	28	0		
	Department for Culture, Media & Sport	50	0		
	High Speed 2 Ltd	2	0		
<b>Total</b>		<b>3,316</b>	<b>3,290</b>	<b>6,606</b>	<b>100</b>

**Notes**

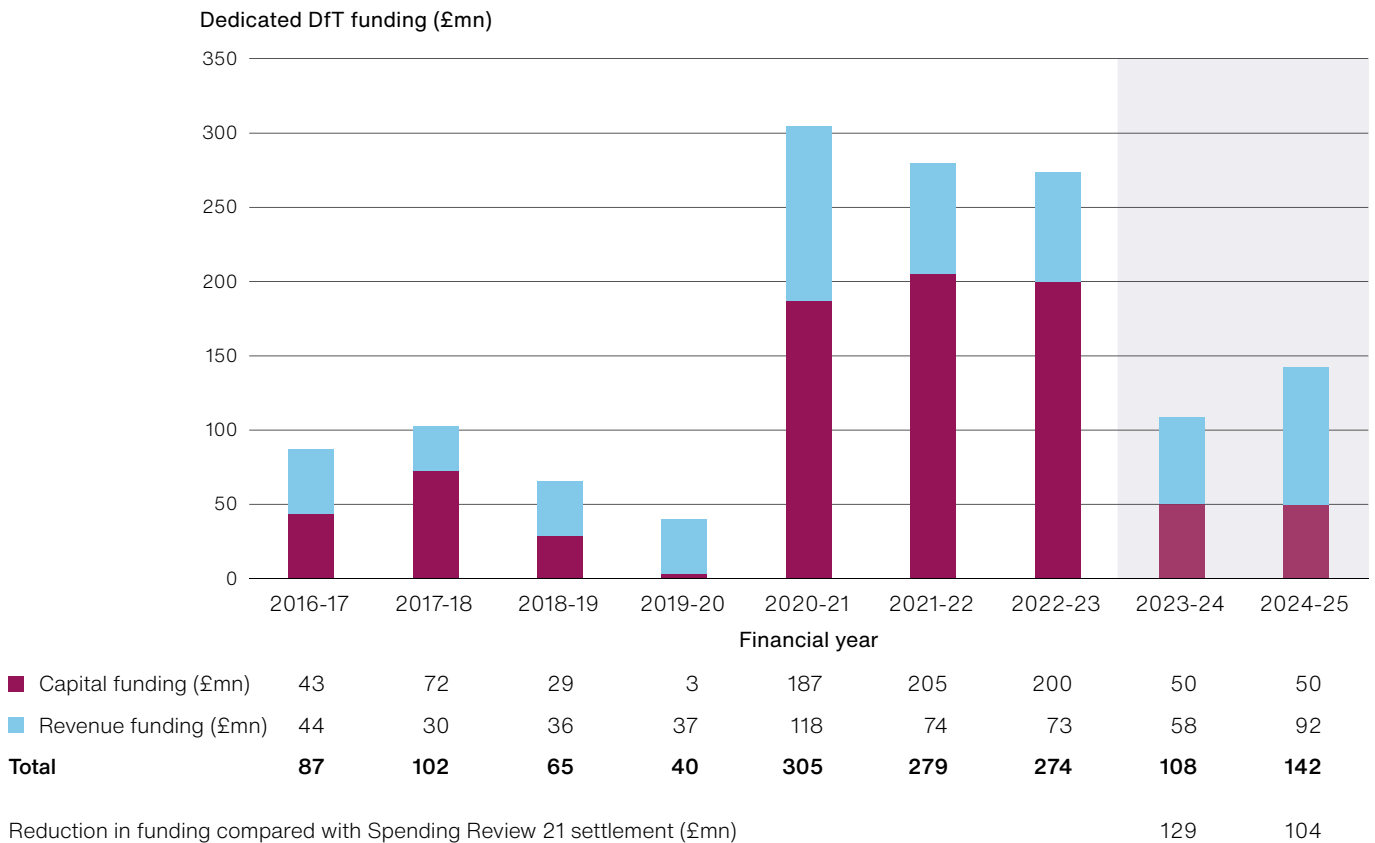
- 1 Dedicated funding values for April 2016 to March 2025 reflect the £233 million reduction made by DfT in March 2023.
- 2 Estimate of central government funding contributions only. Values are given in cash terms.
- 3 Dedicated funding is money allocated, or ring-fenced, specifically for the purpose of active travel. Wider funding for active travel, either through DfT or other government departments, is money that DfT estimates has been or will be spent on active travel from funds that are not ring-fenced.
- 4 The amount of wider funding used for active travel between April 2021 and March 2025 is provisional and DfT is continuing to refine its estimates. City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement and Levelling Up Fund spending on active travel is included under 'Wider DfT funding'. Funding provided by DfT to National Highways which it may spend on active travel is also included in 'Wider DfT funding'.
- 5 Local authorities may receive additional funding for active travel from charges levied on housing developers. DfT's analysis indicates that this is likely to be a small proportion of government funding.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information

**Figure 4**

## Department for Transport's (DfT's) dedicated funding for active travel over time

Dedicated funding available to local authorities in 2023-24 and 2024-25 will be less than in recent years

**Notes**

- 1 Funding shown in cash terms. Numbers may not sum due to rounding. Capital funding is used for physical infrastructure projects such as new cycleways. Revenue funding pays for Active Travel England operations and supports active travel interventions aimed at promoting behavioural change such as cycle training.
- 2 The increase in funding in 2020-21 is partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. DfT provided £225 million to active travel (£174 million capital and £51 million revenue) through two emergency COVID-19 funds in 2020-21.
- 3 Funding for 2023-24 and 2024-25 is allocated and reflects the £233 million reduction made by DfT in March 2023 following the outcome of its business planning.
- 4 Funding from DfT and other government wider non-ringfenced sources that can be used for active travel such as the Levelling-Up Fund is not included in this analysis.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information

## DfT's approach to measuring the benefits of active travel

**1.11** In developing its business case for active travel spend between 2021 and 2025, DfT identified that active travel has the potential to deliver beneficial outcomes for health, the environment, the economy, and society. DfT estimated that for every £1 invested, government will achieve around £4.30 in benefits, mainly from improvements to people's health. DfT categorises this as very high value for money. The benefits also support strategic priorities across government, including increased physical activity, cleaner air, and levelling up (**Figure 5**). Of the eight other central government departments whose strategic priorities can be supported by increased active travel, DfT currently estimates that only DLUHC will provide funding for active travel between 2021 and 2025.

**1.12** Government's commitments on walking and cycling also formed part of DfT's *Transport Decarbonisation Plan*, and the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero's *Net Zero Strategy*.<sup>5</sup> DfT expects the contribution of active travel to its decarbonisation plan to be modest compared with other measures such as zero emission vehicles. The biggest potential contribution from active travel for decarbonisation is likely to be achieved when walking, wheeling and cycling is integrated into the wider public transport network, becoming part of multi-mode journeys that replace car use.

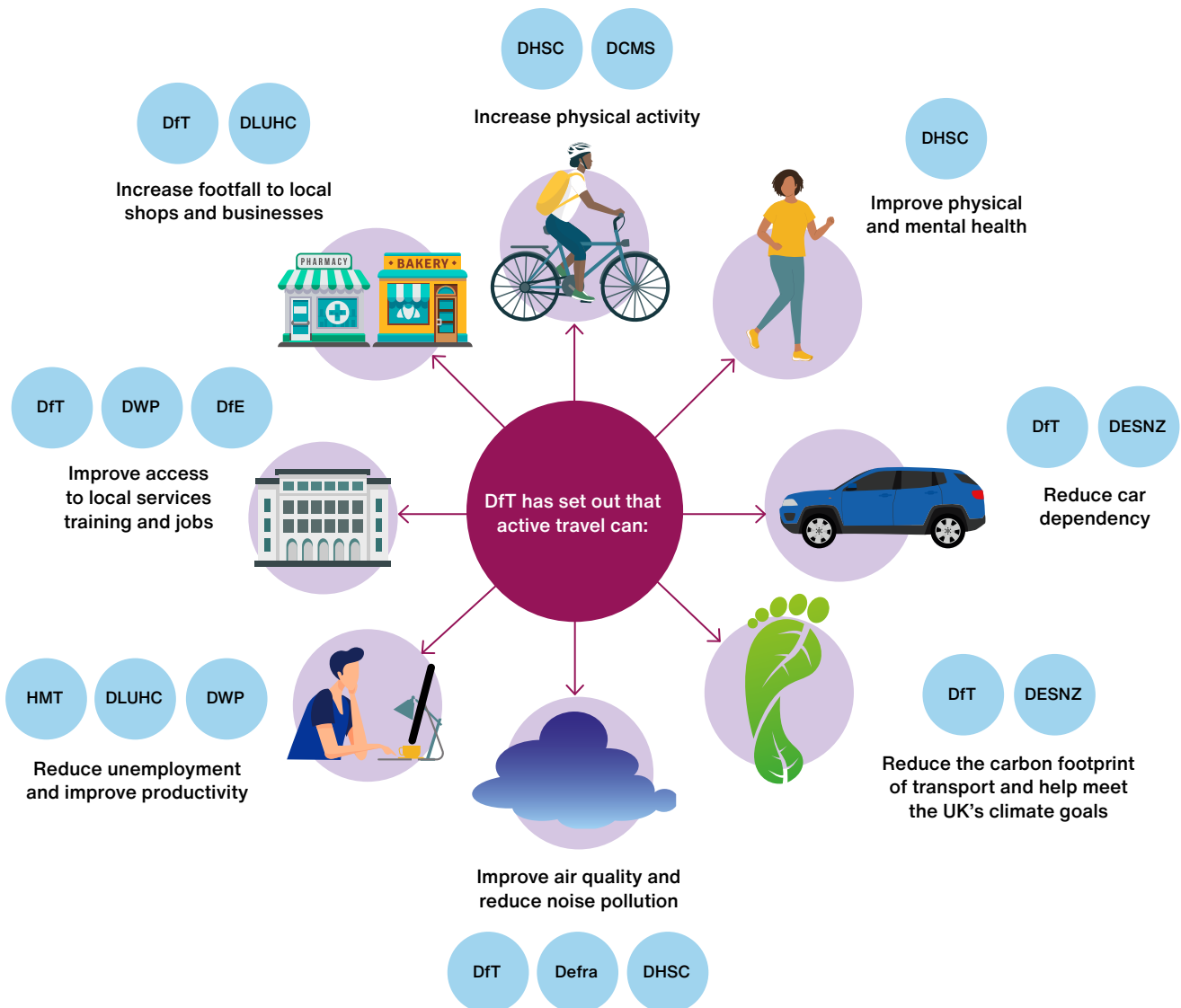
**1.13** DfT has not identified or developed metrics which it can use to track and influence delivery of these beneficial outcomes or assess what has been delivered. ATE has assessed the predicted benefits from individual tranches of funding and DfT has sponsored evaluations of individual funds. However, neither DfT nor ATE has a plan which tracks the benefits realised for health, the environment, the economy, and society through increased active travel. DfT's early and incomplete draft benefits realisation plan has not been developed since 2021.

5 Department for Transport, *Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain*, July 2021, pages 52–61. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1009448/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1009448/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf); Department for Energy Security & Net Zero and Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Net zero strategy: Build back greener*, October 2021, pages 158-159. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1033990/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033990/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf)

**Figure 5**

## Benefits delivered through increased participation in active travel

The Department for Transport (DfT) expects increased participation in active travel to result in beneficial outcomes for nine government departments



● Departments with supported outcomes

**Notes**

1 DESNZ = Department for Energy Security & Net Zero; Defra = Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs; DLUHC = Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities; DWP = Department for Work & Pensions; HMT = HM Treasury; DHSC = Department of Health & Social Care; DfE = Department for Education; DCMS = Department for Culture, Media & Sport; and DfT = Department for Transport.

2 Departmental outcomes are based on the most up-to-date outcome delivery plans, published in 2021.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information and central government department 2021 to 2022 outcome delivery plans

## Improving evidence of the impact of active travel interventions

**1.14** Between 2016 and 2022, DfT published evaluations of two active travel interventions it funded: the Cycle City Ambition Programme and the Bikeability scheme.<sup>6</sup> It has commissioned other evaluations more recently, including a cross-cutting portfolio evaluation. DfT has focused evaluations on funds that support cycling interventions. There is a gap in evidence for walking and wheeling interventions which ATE will seek to remedy through its future evaluation plans. As well as its own programme and fund-level evaluation, DfT has also encouraged local authorities to assess the impact of local schemes, but this work is based on inconsistent and variable quality data, limiting its value.

**1.15** ATE is developing plans to work with local authorities to create more robust data on active travel infrastructure and behaviours. Reducing gaps in the evidence base for active travel will enable ATE to provide better informed advice to local authorities and other government stakeholders. This work is still at a very early stage and there are opportunities for ATE to improve the robustness of its evaluation of pilot schemes (**Figure 6**).

6 SQW and Bryson Purdon, *Bikeability Impact Study, Final Report*, May 2019. Available at: [www.sqw.co.uk/application/files/1516/2038/6986/Bikeability\\_Evaluation\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.sqw.co.uk/application/files/1516/2038/6986/Bikeability_Evaluation_Final_Report.pdf);  
Sloman L, Dennis S, Hopkinson L, Goodman A, Farla K, Hiblin B and Turner J, *Summary and Synthesis of Evidence: Cycle City Ambition Programme 2013-2018*, July 2021. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1007473/summary-and-synthesis-of-evidence-cycle-city-ambition-programme-2013-to-2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1007473/summary-and-synthesis-of-evidence-cycle-city-ambition-programme-2013-to-2018.pdf)



**Figure 6**

## Assessing the impact of active travel interventions, since 2016

**Active Travel England (ATE) aims to build on the Department for Transport's (DfT's) approach to date**

	Approach prior to ATE	ATE's approach (from August 2023)
Analytical resources	6.2 FTE (DfT personnel in 2022).	18.3 FTE (13.6 ATE including digital personnel, 4.7 DfT).
Appraising schemes before implementation	Benefit-cost ratio assessed for 51% of local authority scheme proposals to DfT's dedicated active travel fund (2021-22). For other schemes, DfT considered "cost-reasonableness" using benchmarking information.	Benefit-cost ratio assessed for 83% of local authority scheme proposals to DfT's dedicated active travel fund (2022-23).
Using data	Inconsistent quality and coverage of local data, with some councils relying on intuition to identify potential active travel routes, despite DfT providing some support tools.	Digital platform planned for local authorities, to provide improved data on active travel infrastructure, more consistent tracking, and access to design tools for local authorities.
Evaluating implemented schemes	DfT-sponsored fund and programme-level evaluation of flagship cycling interventions (Cycle City Ambition, Bikeability) but says its past work has not always yielded findings on how and in what contexts interventions work. It acknowledges that there are gaps in the evidence for some important aspects of active travel, including walking and wheeling.	<p>Future evaluation will target specific themes, including school travel, traffic calming, adult cycle training and walking interventions, and will include process evaluation to draw lessons for future delivery as part of a more strategic approach.</p> <p>Nevertheless, recent e-cycles and social prescribing pilot behavioural initiatives are not being implemented and tested using the most rigorous evaluation techniques such as randomised controlled trials, despite their possible contribution to cross-government outcomes like health and net zero.</p>

**Notes**

- 1 FTE is 'full-time equivalent'.
- 2 DfT is currently reviewing data collected across local transport to streamline and standardise future monitoring requirements.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information

## Part Two

### The Department for Transport's progress against its objectives since 2017

**2.1** The Department for Transport's (DfT's) objectives are to increase rates of active travel and its *Gear Change* Plan sets actions to remove the barriers to participation. This part assesses the extent to which DfT has:

- made progress against its objectives since it introduced the first Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy in 2017; and
- implemented the actions committed to in *Gear Change*.

#### **Progress against Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy objectives**

**2.2** DfT has four objectives for measuring its progress on active travel by 2025. These relate to increasing overall walking, wheeling and cycling activity, with specific objectives for school journeys and short journeys made in towns and cities. 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. The latest data on activity rates are from 2021. This shows that DfT made little progress against its active travel objectives between 2017 and 2019 (**Figure 7** on pages 26 and 27). In 2020 and 2021, travel behaviour was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as more people worked and attended school from home. Cycling increased in 2020, largely because of a surge in leisure cycling, before falling back in 2021. Progress in increasing the proportion of short journeys cycled or walked in towns and cities appears more positive but this may reflect the large decline in use of motor vehicles during the pandemic which appears not to have been sustained. The time-lag in DfT's active travel statistics means that data for 2022 are not yet available and the longer-term impact of the pandemic on changes in active travel behaviour remains uncertain.

**2.3** DfT's first investment strategy included an objective to reduce the rate of cyclists killed and seriously injured by 2020. In July 2022, DfT reported to Parliament that its objective had been achieved. Rates fell from 1,286 casualties (per billion miles cycled) in 2017 to 1,205 in 2019 and further to 866 in 2020, partly due to a reduction in road traffic in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that year. In 2021, rates increased to 1,100 but were still lower than in 2017.

**2.4** Perceptions of safety influence people’s willingness to walk or cycle, and measures which address safety could lead to increased participation. In 2021, around half of respondents to a DfT survey stated that safer roads would encourage them to cycle (53%) and walk (45%) more. Data from DfT surveys show that, between 2017 and 2020, the proportion of existing cyclists who agreed that it is dangerous to cycle increased from 48% to 57%. DfT did not include an objective on safety in its second investment strategy but said that it was still a priority, and it remains a core theme in interventions now being taken forward by Active Travel England (ATE).

#### DfT’s modelling of the likelihood of achieving its objectives

**2.5** In 2022, DfT considered two scenarios to assess the likelihood of meeting its second investment strategy objectives (**Figure 8** on page 28). This was based on different levels of funding and different assumptions about the level of active travel without further investment. Only in the high funding scenario did DfT estimate it would get close to achieving its 2025 objectives.

**2.6** DfT’s forecasting is, however, uncertain because it has an incomplete understanding of how different active travel interventions work and it does not know the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel behaviours. DfT’s modelling also did not include any impact from ATE’s activities, which are expected to have a positive impact, and may result in funding being better focused than was modelled.

### Implementing *Gear Change* actions

**2.7** In its *Gear Change* plan (July 2020), DfT set out 33 actions to achieve a step change in active travel participation.<sup>7</sup> These were organised under four themes:

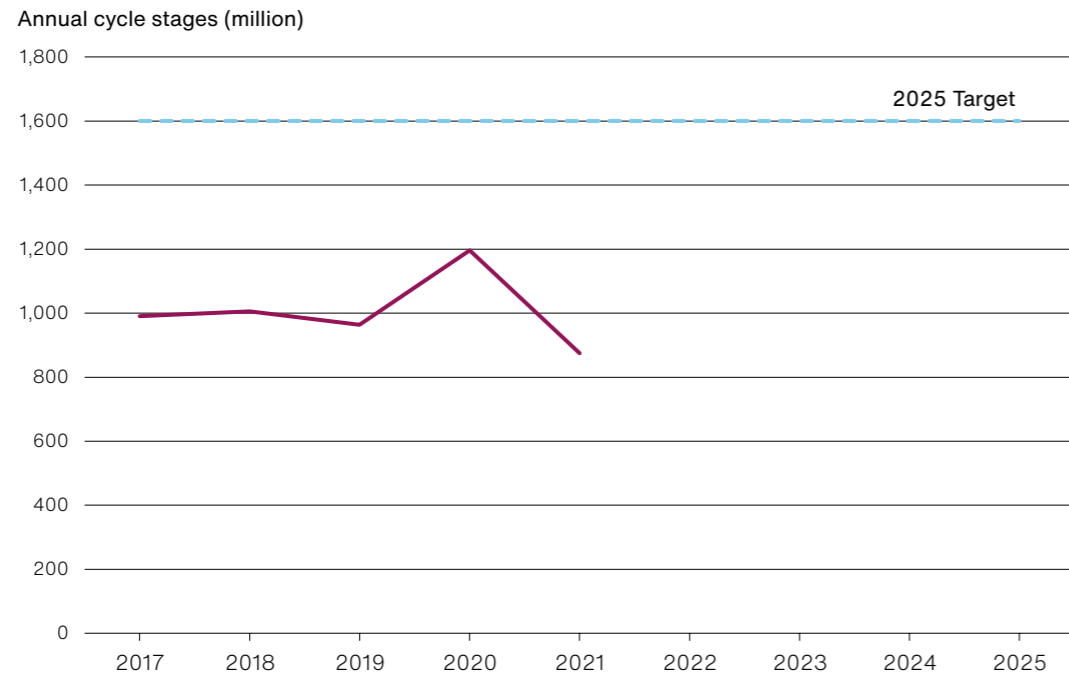
- Infrastructure: Better streets for cycling and people.
- Integration: Putting cycling and walking at the heart of transport, place-making, and health policy.
- Capability: Empowering and encouraging local authorities.
- Behaviour and safety: Enabling people to cycle and protecting them when they do so.

<sup>7</sup> Department for Transport *Gear change: a bold vision for cycling and walking*, July 2020. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904146/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904146/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf)

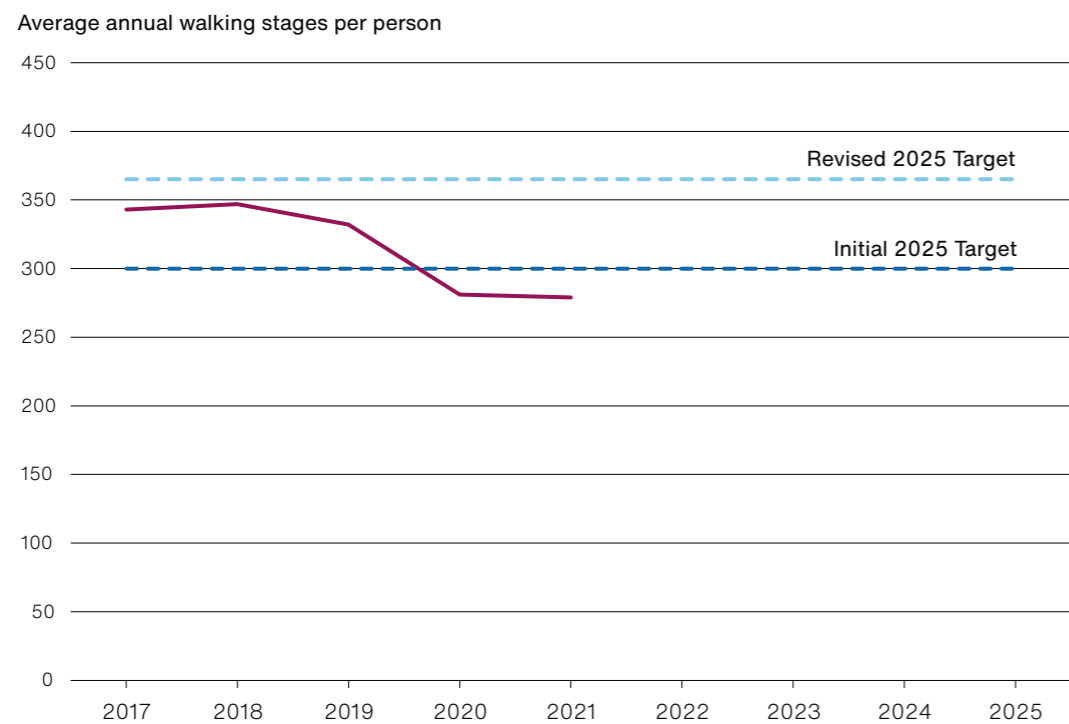
**Figure 7**  
Department for Transport's (DfT's) performance against its objectives for active travel

DfT is not currently on track to achieve all of its objectives for increasing walking and cycling

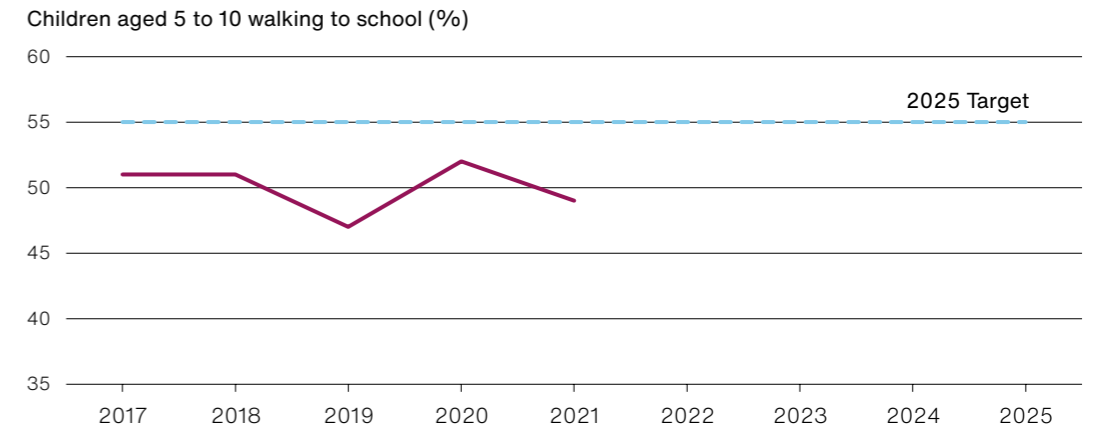
**Progress against DfT's objective to increase annual cycling stages**



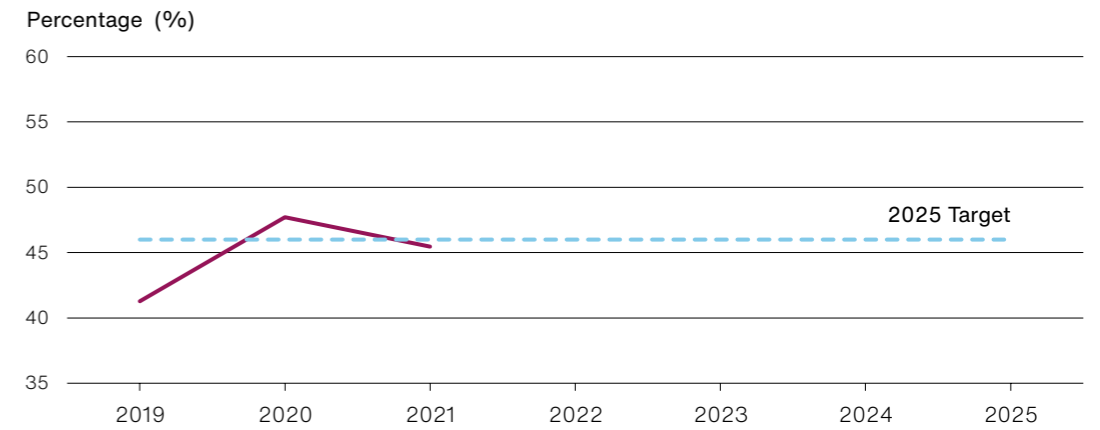
**Progress against DfT's objective to increase annual walking stages**



**Progress against DfT's objective to increase the percentage of children aged 5 to 10 walking to school**



**Progress against DfT's objective to increase the percentage of journeys under five miles in towns and cities walked or cycled**



**Notes**

- 1 A stage is where someone walks, wheels or cycles as part of an overall trip.
- 2 Progress against the objectives is monitored through annual, national surveys. Full data for 2022 are expected to be available in September 2023.
- 3 DfT's initial target for walking was set in 2017 and was revised in 2022. The measurement methodology for walking was changed shortly after the original walking target was set to improve data collection on short walks. 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.
- 4 DfT started reporting data on journeys in towns and cities under five miles in 2019. To help with visual clarity, two of the graphs do not begin at zero on the y axis.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport performance data

**Figure 8**

Department for Transport's (DfT's) assessment of the likelihood of meeting its objectives for increased active travel under two different funding scenarios

**This assessment found that in both scenarios, it was unlikely for all objectives to be met**

Objective	Target to 2025	Low scenario	High scenario
Increased cycling	1.6 billion stages	1.2 billion stages	1.6 billion stages
Increased walking (per person per year)	365 stages	285 stages	347 stages
Children aged 5–10 who usually walk to school	55%	53%	54%
Journeys in towns and cities walked or cycled	46%	42%	47%
<b>Total funding (April 2021 to March 2025)</b>		<b>Assumed £4.4 billion</b>	<b>Assumed £7 billion</b>

**Notes**

- 1 A stage is where someone walks, wheels or cycles as part of an overall trip. 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 The low scenario assumed lower overall investment in active travel (£4.4 billion in 2021 prices) and a lower pre-COVID-19 pandemic baseline counterfactual of cycling and walking stages (1 billion cycle stages and 16 billion annual walking stages).
- 3 The high scenario assumed higher investment (£7 billion) and a maintenance of pandemic cycling levels (1.2 billion stages) and recovery of walking to pre-pandemic levels (19 billion stages) as the baseline counterfactual. The £7 billion includes an estimated contribution of around £0.9 billion from local housing developers.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information

**2.8** DfT has made progress against most (22 out of 33) actions (**Figure 9**). The most progress has been made on measures targeting capability, including the formation of ATE. There has been less progress on actions around integration, partly because measures to increase and stabilise dedicated funding for longer-term planning have not been achieved.

### Figure 9

Progress in implementing actions from *Gear Change*, since July 2020

The Department for Transport (DfT) has made progress for 22 out of 33 actions set out in the Government's *Gear Change* Plan



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport (DfT) information and Department for Transport (2020) *Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking*, July 2020, available at: [Gear change: a bold vision for cycling and walking \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking)

**2.9** In 2020, DfT announced it would expand its Bikeability programme with a commitment to offer cycling skills to all children in England. Cycle training is an important behavioural intervention to develop cycle skills and confidence. To increase the proportion of children receiving training, DfT needs more schools to participate in the programme and more instructors to deliver training. DfT planned to develop a business case for the expansion of the Bikeability programme, expecting this to be completed by January 2021. DfT has not completed this business case yet because, it says, it has not been able to secure multi-year funding. In December 2022, ATE proposed changes to the Bikeability delivery model as part of its expansion plans intended to make the programme more efficient. It recommends that more cycling interventions are delivered earlier and in school, thereby releasing instructors to deliver road-based training.

**2.10** The proportion of children outside London receiving basic road training by the end of primary school was just over half (51%) in 2022-23.<sup>8</sup> This is below ATE's planning assumption of 80% of children completing basic road training before leaving primary school, which it says is the minimum required to achieve its active travel objectives. In August 2022, ATE planned to provide £28.5 million of funding for Bikeability in 2023-24 based on DfT's original 2021 Spending Review settlement. However, funding to support the expansion of Bikeability training is uncertain following DfT's reduction in dedicated active travel spending for 2023-24. In addition, ATE's plans for expanding Bikeability training to any adult that wants it are not well-developed.

<sup>8</sup> Provisional data recording Bikeability cycle training provided through local highway authorities and state-funded education institutions outside London. Final Bikeability data for 2022-23 will be published later in 2023-24. Transport for London administers Bikeability provision in London.

## Part Three

### Progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel

**3.1** The Department for Transport (DfT) has identified barriers to the uptake of active travel. In this part we assess how well-placed Active Travel England (ATE) is to address these barriers relating to:

- tackling poor infrastructure and improving safety;
- incorporating active travel into planning decisions; and
- improving local authority capacity and capability.

We also identify barriers which local authorities continue to face in delivering active travel investments.

#### **Tackling poor infrastructure and improving safety**

**3.2** DfT has identified that concerns around safety and confidence to cycle are key barriers to active travel. DfT's *Second Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* describes the role of infrastructure investment in improving road safety, the contribution of road safety training and the benefits of wider policy changes including to the Highway Code. This section looks at what DfT knows about its past investments in active travel infrastructure and ATE's role in improving quality.

#### DfT's assessment of investments in active travel

**3.3** Between 2016 and 2021, DfT spent £2.6 billion on active travel through its dedicated and non-ringfenced grant funds. Of this, it provided £2.3 billion (around 90%) to local authorities to build new active travel infrastructure through capital funds.

**3.4** DfT expected local authorities that received its dedicated funding to complete periodic returns describing progress made with implementation of the active travel schemes and the outputs achieved. We found that while around nine in 10 local authorities had provided returns, they were often incomplete. In addition, local authorities were not required to monitor or evaluate schemes costing less than £2 million. This means that DfT has an incomplete understanding of the active travel infrastructure it has supported during this time.



**3.5** DfT cannot say whether the infrastructure it funded between 2016 and 2021 meets the standard set in the national guidance. DfT reviewed scheme proposals at the point local authorities submitted them for funding approval but undertook limited assessments once they had been built. It commissioned some programme evaluations and asked local authorities to evaluate schemes costing £2 million and over, but it has not taken a consistent or comprehensive approach to monitoring the quality of schemes it funded. Its evaluation evidence provides only a partial picture of scheme quality and impact. It believes that some infrastructure it paid for was largely cosmetic and did not provide a safe space for cycling. This resulted in some poor value schemes and, it believes, potential adverse impacts on active travel in some cases.

**3.6** During the COVID-19 pandemic, DfT saw a chance to roll out active travel schemes more widely given the disruption to normal traffic flows and public transport, and public health messaging around social distancing. In May 2020, DfT announced a £250 million emergency active travel fund for local authorities and published new guidance on reallocating road space to encourage cycling and walking.<sup>9</sup> DfT provided funding through:

- a first tranche of £45 million which was allocated for mainly temporary schemes in late May 2020, and for which local authorities were given less than two weeks to submit their proposals. Around £42 million was provided through this tranche;
- a second tranche of £175 million for permanent active travel infrastructure was announced in July 2020, and for which local authorities were given four weeks to submit bids. Payments were made to local authorities in November 2020 with around £183 million provided through this tranche;<sup>10</sup> and
- a £25 million bike voucher repair scheme.

9 Department for Transport, *£2 billion package to create new era for cycling and walking*, May 2020. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking); Department for Transport, *Network management duty guidance: reallocating road space*, May 2020. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities)

10 Of the £225 million provided through both tranches, £174 million was capital funding and £51 million was revenue funding.

**3.7** In its first tranche of funding, DfT prioritised speed of implementation, making clear that local authorities should start work on schemes within four weeks of receiving money, despite the difficult circumstances in which they were operating. This led to cases of poor implementation and limited consultation with communities. Some active travel schemes which proved to be controversial locally were removed before they could be tested properly. Local authorities often found it challenging to build schemes quickly and to engage their communities during this time.

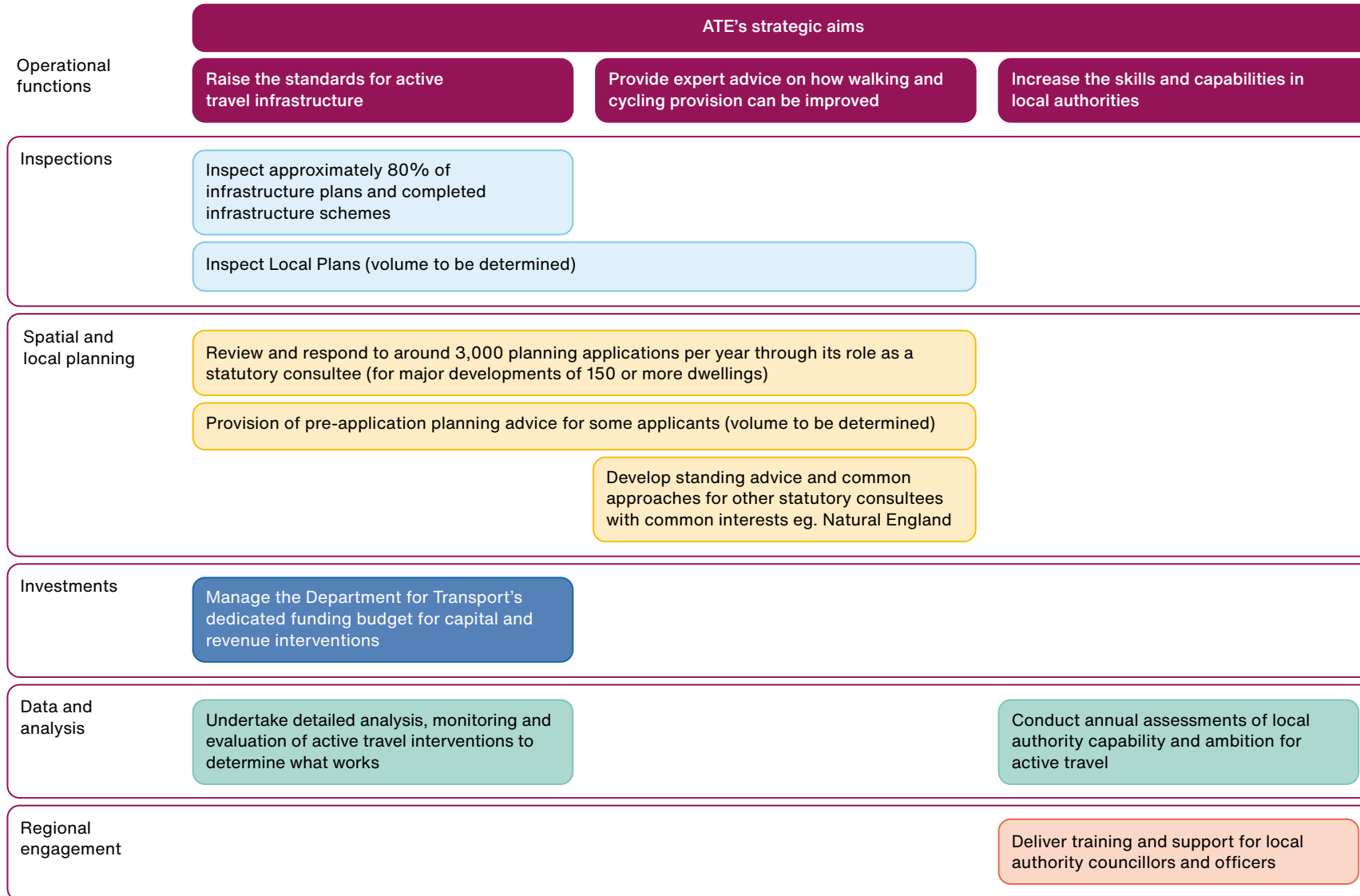
**3.8** For its second tranche, DfT said that to receive funding, local authorities would need to show that they had “swift and meaningful plans to reallocate road space to cyclists and pedestrians”. DfT said that these schemes should be delivered by 31 March 2022. Our review of DfT information found that, to October 2022, of the projects for which information had been provided, half (50%) had not completed construction. One local authority told us that work was still ongoing for some of its second tranche schemes because it had taken much longer to consult with communities.

#### ATE’s role in improving the quality of active travel investments

**3.9** DfT set up ATE to address the areas it identified as needing improvement in its *Gear Change* plan. By improving infrastructure quality, integrating active travel and planning, addressing local authority capability and strengthening the evidence base for active travel, DfT expects ATE to increase the return on investment in active travel. ATE’s range of operational functions require high levels of expertise (**Figure 10** on page 34). Its operational budget for 2023-24 is around £7.5 million, increasing to around £9 million in the following year.

**Figure 10**  
Active Travel England's (ATE's) operational responsibilities and functions

ATE carries out multiple functions to fulfil its strategic aims



Source: National Audit Office review of Department for Transport and Active Travel England information

**3.10** In July 2020, and in parallel with *Gear Change*, DfT published updated national design guidance for cycle infrastructure. This instructs local authorities on how to deliver high-quality cycle infrastructure and complements DfT's existing *Manual for Streets* and *Inclusive Mobility* best practice, which provide wider guidance relevant to active travel. DfT first asked for local authority bids for dedicated funding to be compliant with this guidance in June 2021 as part of tranche 3 of the Active Travel Fund. More broadly, DfT's *Gear Change* Plan (2020) set out that ATE would:

- **review all active travel scheme proposals against national guidance, including from wider DfT and government funds.** ATE plans to exert influence over wider fund allocations by reviewing scheme proposals. For example, it reviewed 43 proposals with an active travel component submitted to DfT and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities' (DLUHC) Levelling Up Fund in 2022. ATE acknowledges, however, that its review was of the overall business case supporting proposals and did not involve a thorough design assessment. ATE is also developing joint working arrangements with DfT and DLUHC, who provide wider funding for active travel, prioritising effort on the largest funds. It is developing a framework and set of expectations for allocation of investment through DfT's City Region Sustainable Transport Fund and plans to use this as a template for the Levelling Up Fund and other wider funding into active travel;
- **provide dedicated DfT funding for active travel only to local authorities who comply with this guidance.** Cycle scheme compliance, at initial proposal stage, has improved but remains low. Out of 590 proposals submitted to ATE for 2022-23 funding, 96 (16%) were compliant with guidance, compared with six out of 352 (2%) proposals in the previous year. ATE attributes this improvement to training sessions and design surgeries held with local authorities during the funding process; and
- **inspect some active travel schemes on completion to ensure compliance with design standards.** ATE is developing its approach for inspecting all schemes built with dedicated DfT funding and wider government funding. In the meantime, it is focusing inspection effort on schemes built with dedicated DfT funding provided since 2021. ATE told us that any scheme outside London, whether funded through dedicated or wider funds, could be subject to inspection by ATE to monitor compliance.<sup>11</sup> There is no formal regulation that requires schemes to comply with the new design guidance. ATE plans to use inspection information to reduce dedicated funding to local authorities who fail to comply and work closely with local authorities at the design stage to influence schemes, regardless of funding source. ATE also plans to share inspection outcomes with those managing wider government funds to inform their decision-making.

<sup>11</sup> Cycling schemes in London are delivered against the standards set out in the London Cycle Design Standards and New Cycle Route Quality Criteria which align with LTN 1/20. Transport for London is responsible for monitoring compliance with this guidance

**3.11** *Gear Change* set a further expectation that all new local and strategic 'A' road investment should include appropriate provision for cycling. This includes where the main element of a new road investment is not focused on active travel. ATE told us that this is currently an aspiration and plans are not yet in place to assess delivery of infrastructure by organisations beyond local authorities, for example National Highways.

### **Incorporating active travel into local planning decisions**

**3.12** In *Gear Change*, DfT identified that local planning decisions do not always make consistent or adequate provision for active travel. Some new housing developments have embedded car dependency with little to no provision for safe walking, wheeling or cycling. ATE has been set up as a statutory consultee in the planning process to improve consideration of active travel in development proposals and provide advice to local authorities on planning decisions. This role came into effect on 1 June 2023.

**3.13** ATE will review all planning applications relating to developments of at least 7,500m<sup>2</sup>, and all applications for housing developments of 150 or more dwellings. In doing so, it expects to review housing applications covering around 60% of new dwellings each year. ATE received advice from its consultants in July 2022 that it would need 44 full-time equivalent (FTE) planning personnel to review applications at these thresholds. In the event, ATE will have fewer than half this number with 21 planning officials assigned. ATE originally intended to review all applications of 50 or more dwellings, covering around 81% of housing developments, but this was revised on advice from DLUHC.

**3.14** ATE will need to manage the resource in its planning function to maximise its influence over decisions that will have the greatest impact on improved provision for active travel. It has agreed with DLUHC that the statutory consultee threshold will be reviewed 12 months after being brought into force. ATE has no formal mechanism through which it can influence decisions made for developments of less than 150 dwellings but ATE told us that it expected to be able to comment on applications as an interested party and provide informal advice to local authorities in some instances.

### **Improving the capacity and capability of local authorities**

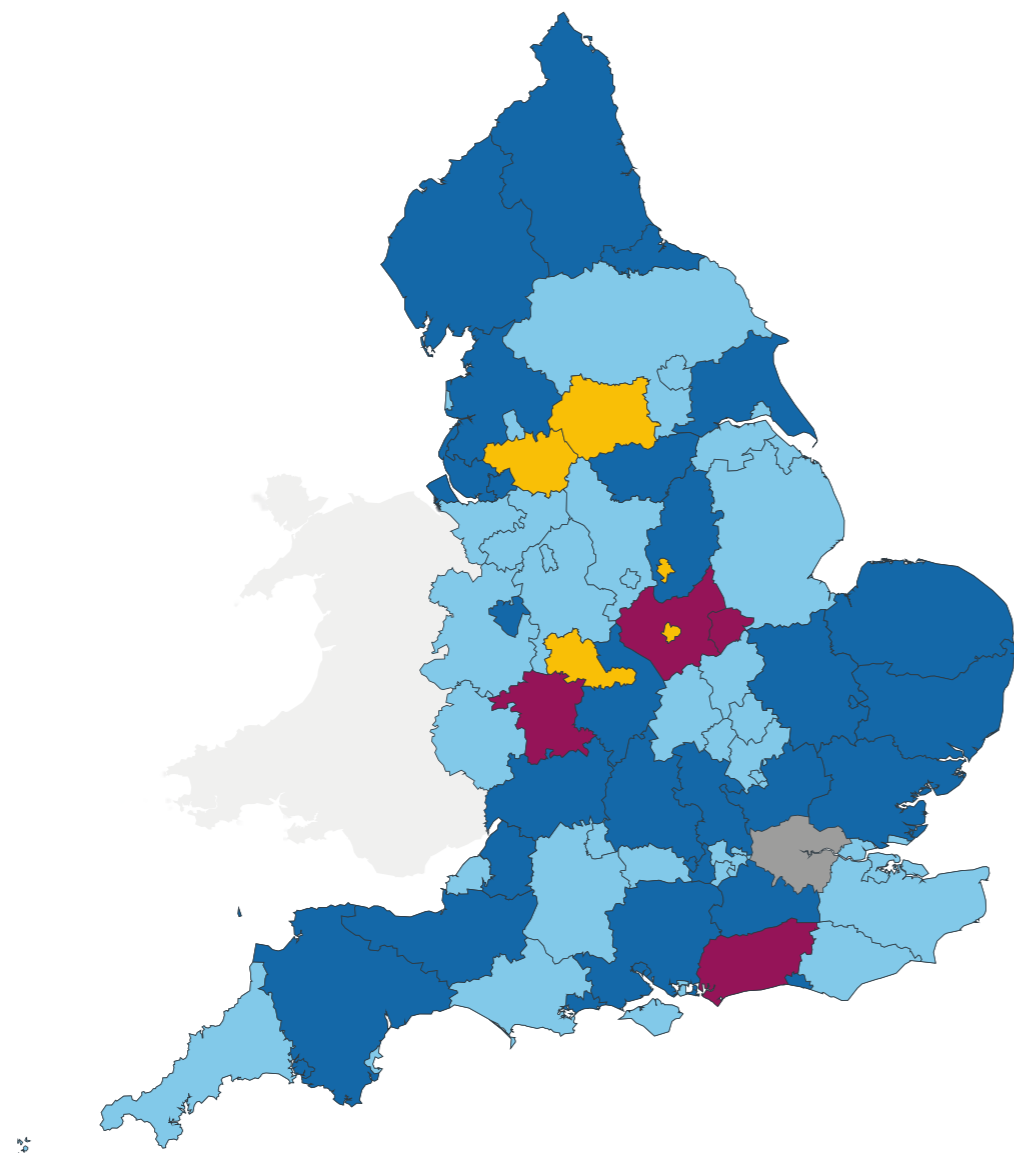
**3.15** DfT expects ATE to have a key role in developing the capability of local authorities. In March 2023, ATE published its first assessment of local authority capability and ambition to deliver active travel interventions (**Figure 11** on pages 38 and 39). The ratings given to local authorities assess their local leadership, active travel plans and past delivery of schemes. More than half (56%) of local authorities were judged to be at 'level 0' or 'level 1', indicating relatively low levels of capability and ambition.

**3.16** ATE is using this rating system to guide its allocation of dedicated DfT funding to local authorities. Higher-rated authorities are eligible to access more funding. In 2022-23, local authorities assessed to be 'level 3' received, on average, £10.05 per head in dedicated active travel funding compared with £3.34 in 'level 1' local authorities. Local authorities rated 'level 0' cannot apply for capital funding but may apply for revenue funding to support capability-building. The assessment criteria consider both the capability of local authority staff, and the quality of existing provision. While this means that funding is targeted at those areas with the existing skills to use it, it also means that local authorities with the worst provision are least able to access capital funding until they improve their capability.

**Figure 11**

Active Travel England's assessment of active travel capability, 2022

No local authority was assessed as 'level 4', the highest level. Four local authorities were judged 'level 0' while most were 'level 1' or 'level 2'. The big urban combined authorities were assessed generally as having more capability and ambition



	Combined authorities	Unitary and county authorities	Total
■ Level 0	0	4	4
■ Level 1	0	40	40
■ Level 2	6	24	30
■ Level 3	3	2	5
■ Level 4	0	0	0
■ No Data			

**Figure 11 continued**

Active Travel England's assessment of active travel capability, 2022

**Notes**

- 1 Active Travel England invited local authorities to assess their capability and ambition in relation to active travel in summer 2022 and combined this with its own analysis to produce a moderated assessment. This assessment was published in March 2023: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-active-travel-capability-ratings/local-authority-active-travel-capability-ratings-accessible-version](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-active-travel-capability-ratings/local-authority-active-travel-capability-ratings-accessible-version)
- 2 A total of 79 local authorities were assessed. London was not included in Active Travel England's review of local authority capability and ambition. Funding provided for active travel in London is managed through and administered by Transport for London.
- 3 Active Travel England expects to update its assessment in summer 2023 and classifications may change at that point.
- 4 Local authorities were classified using the scale below:
  - Level 0: No local leadership or support for active travel, no plans in place, delivered lower complexity schemes only.
  - Level 1: Some local leadership and support with basic plans and isolated interventions.
  - Level 2: Strong local leadership and support, with strong plans and emerging network.
  - Level 3: Very strong local leadership and support, comprehensive plans, and majority of network in place with increasing modal share.
  - Level 4: Established culture of active travel with successive increases in cycling and walking, underpinned by dense integrated network and highly supportive policies to reduce the need for car trips

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Active Travel England information. Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2022

**3.17** To support local authorities to improve their rating, ATE allocated part of a £32.9 million revenue fund in 2022-23 for capability-building in areas such as planning infrastructure, engaging communities and collecting data on impact to inform future active travel investments.<sup>12</sup> Of the £32.9 million, £5.4 million (17%) went to local authorities rated 'level 0' or 'level 1'. ATE is also:

- developing training on DfT's appraisal tools to improve the quality of proposals submitted for investment;
- reviewing actions proposed by local authorities to improve their ratings; and
- pairing 'level 0' authorities with similar but higher-rated local authorities to facilitate peer learning.

ATE plans to undertake a second assessment of local authority capability and ambition in summer 2023.

<sup>12</sup> The 2022-23 Capability and Ambition Fund was also used for behavioural interventions to encourage take-up of active travel.

### **Continuing barriers for local authorities implementing active travel**

**3.18** We have previously reported on the challenges for local authorities in navigating a complex landscape of short-term funding opportunities.<sup>13</sup> Our analysis for this study found 36 different central government funds for active travel since 2016, and some of these have multiple tranches. A lack of funding certainty hampers local authorities' ability to plan for the long-term (because it is difficult to deliver more ambitious multi-year projects if budgets are only confirmed a year ahead), prioritise effort and invest in systematic monitoring and evaluation. Local authorities and active travel representative bodies also told us that strong political leadership in support of active travel is critical for success, especially where schemes to promote active travel reduce space for other road users. We heard that strong engagement with communities was essential to building the case for active travel, drawing on its wider benefits, such as improved air quality, but this takes time and skill (**Figure 12**).

**3.19** Some local authorities recognise that they have more to do to build their capacity and capability in community consultation and in effective appraisal and evaluation of schemes. We also heard that some active travel schemes have been implemented in isolation, reducing their potential to achieve wider network benefits. Local authority officers and executive members need to manage relations across services, with ward councillors and, in some cases, between local authorities to ensure an integrated approach – but this can be challenging.

<sup>13</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *The local government finance system in England: overview and challenges*, Session 2021-22, HC 858, National Audit Office, November 2021. Available at: [www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-local-government-finance-system-in-England-overview-and-challenges.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-local-government-finance-system-in-England-overview-and-challenges.pdf)



**Figure 12****Barriers to successful local authority delivery of active travel interventions****Our work identified several challenges to successful implementation of local schemes**

Challenge	Key issues arising from this challenge	Potential impact of this challenge
Multiple funding sources and lack of longer-term funding certainty	<p>Local authorities secure funding for active travel from a range of funds, each with different conditions and bidding requirements.</p> <p>Funds often provided through one-year settlements and requiring local authorities to submit bids to short timescales, which takes time and effort.</p> <p>Lack of long-term investment certainty, undermining local authority ability to plan strategic, integrated, networks.</p> <p>Lack of regular revenue funding for active travel infrastructure maintenance.</p>	<p>Time and cost spent in preparing bids can be nugatory, taking resources away from delivery.</p> <p>Short-term decision-making is encouraged, inhibiting longer-term planning.</p> <p>'Shovel-ready' and smaller schemes may be prioritised at the expense of projects which have greater strategic value. Peaked annual construction demand inflates costs.</p> <p>Confidence to invest in skills and appoint and retain staff is diminished.</p> <p>Early deterioration of asset, potentially reducing use.</p>
Variable local political leadership and levels of community engagement	<p>Local authorities may lack strong political support for active travel among members.</p> <p>Local authorities will be at different levels of maturity in building consensus within their communities about the merits of active travel.</p> <p>A minority of active travel schemes funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) and implemented during the early COVID-19 pandemic were removed quickly without being properly tested.</p>	<p>Active travel investments not made in places with high potential, contributing to a widening gap in provision.</p> <p>Interventions are delayed or removed prematurely before their impact has been properly assessed.</p>
Varying capacity and capability of local authority teams	<p>Local authorities can have staffing and skills gaps and vary in their capacity and capability to propose, design, consult on, and implement high-quality active travel schemes.</p>	<p>Active travel investments not made in places with high potential, contributing to a widening gap in provision.</p> <p>Poorer-quality schemes are delivered and delivered more slowly and may increase the safety risk.</p>
Approach to active travel not sufficiently integrated	<p>Stakeholders gave examples of active travel infrastructure being implemented in isolation without considering first how schemes fit into a wider network.</p> <p>Local authorities acknowledge that investment in new infrastructure needs to be accompanied with behavioural measures such as cycle training and workplace travel planning, but they can struggle to access resources for this purpose.</p> <p>Stakeholders described the challenge of working between transport and planning functions. In two-tier areas these functions sit in different authorities.</p>	<p>Wider network benefits from active travel are not leveraged.</p> <p>Return on capital investment is not optimised because insufficient attention is paid to changing people's behaviour.</p> <p>Planning decisions which encourage car-dependency.</p> <p>Reduced opportunity to deliver co-benefits.</p> <p>Gains from active travel measures are not realised in full because alternative modes remain relatively more attractive.</p>
Poor local data to inform active travel investment decisions and to promote wider learning	<p>Local data are not of sufficient quality to inform investment decisions and track the impact of active travel schemes.</p> <p>Inconsistency in the types of data collected and varying commitment to evaluation of schemes across local authorities reduces the scope for comparison, aggregation of results and wider learning from active travel interventions.</p>	<p>Investment decisions based on poor information.</p> <p>Slower development of the evidence base on scheme impact and on what works, for whom and in what circumstances.</p> <p>Missed opportunities for learning systematically and wider sharing.</p>

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Transport information, discussions with stakeholders and case study participants and review of our own back catalogue

# Appendix One

## Our audit approach and evidence base

### Our audit approach

**1** This report examines whether the Department for Transport (DfT) is set up to achieve its ambition for increased active travel in England by 2025. We divided our review into:

- an assessment of DfT's strategy for active travel in England;
- an examination of the progress made against DfT's objectives for active travel since 2017; and
- an assessment of the progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel.

**2** Once funded, active travel interventions are largely delivered by local authorities. Our audit examined central government's oversight of local authority investment in active travel interventions and the support provided to local authorities to enable effective and efficient delivery of schemes. We focused on central government oversight and coordination of investment in active travel interventions and did not audit local authority delivery of those interventions.

### Our evidence base

**3** We reached our independent conclusions on whether DfT is set up to achieve its ambition for increased cycling, walking and wheeling by 2025 after analysing evidence collected between December 2022 to April 2023.

### Interviews

**4** We conducted 34 interviews to assess DfT's strategy for active travel; the progress that it has made against its objective since 2017; and the progress made in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel:

- 11 with DfT and Active Travel England (ATE) on key topic areas. We interviewed senior members of DfT's Active Travel Team and of ATE. Interview topics included governance, funding, cross-government working and data. We also interviewed specific team leads within ATE covering the planning, analytics, and inspection functions.

- 10 with other government departments or bodies to understand their involvement with active travel. We interviewed officials from other relevant parts of government including, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Sport England, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, the Joint Air Quality Unit and the Department for Education. We also interviewed officials from other parts of transport, including Network Rail, Great British Railways Transition Team, National Highways, and Northern.
- 10 with other expert stakeholders who were selected to participate because of their relevance to the audit:
  - Campaign for Better Transport
  - Climate Change Committee
  - Cycling UK
  - Green Alliance
  - Living Streets
  - Local Government Association
  - National Infrastructure Commission
  - Sustrans
  - Transport Focus
  - Urban Transport Group.

Drawing on DfT information and the views of other stakeholders we also interviewed.

- Three academics from the University of Oxford Transport Studies Unit, the University of Leeds Institute for Transport Studies and from Transport for Quality of Life.
- 5** Our fieldwork interviews were held virtually over Microsoft Teams.

## Local authority discussions

**6** We conducted discussions with four local authorities. We used these as case studies to understand the local delivery environment for active travel, local approaches to active travel and investment, the relationship between central and local government, and the challenges faced by local authorities.

**7** We spoke with officers from Leeds City Council, Leicester City Council, Norfolk County Council and West Sussex County Council. We selected authorities that represented a range of locations and organisational structures including a city council forming part of a Mayoral Combined Authority, one urban City Council, and two mixed urban and rural County Councils. We used ATE's classification of local authority capability and ambition to inform our selection. We also spoke with Transport for London.

**8** These discussions were conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams.

**9** We also attended the Transforming Cities Fund 2023 conference hosted by Leicester City Council in March 2023. This included sessions on the delivery of active travel investments by local authorities.

## Document review

**10** We reviewed a wide range of departmental documents to develop our understanding of the progress that DfT has made against its objectives since 2017; to examine the value for money of spend to date; and to examine how DfT and ATE are set up to support and oversee future progress. The documents we reviewed spanned 2017-2023.

**11** To assess DfT's strategic approach to active travel since 2017 we reviewed:

- Policy papers published by DfT, including: the first *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* (2017), *Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking* (2020) and *The Second Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* (2022).
- Business cases, including for the active travel programme and for Active Travel England.
- DfT's Cycling and walking investment strategy report to Parliament 2022.
- Published statistics from DfT showing progress against the objectives.
- DfT and ATE Board minutes, management information and supporting documentation.
- Documents detailing government's decision-making process for overall strategy and target-setting.
- Equality Impact Assessments for the overall strategy or specific policies, as per the Department's Public Sector Equality Duty.

- 54 academic papers evaluating active travel schemes. We identified these papers using the key word searches of 'active travel' and 'active transport' in relevant epidemiology, human geography, and transport and planning journals available online and from the bibliographies of papers already reviewed.
- 13 evaluations of UK active travel schemes, modelling studies, or meta studies commissioned by DfT. We identified these evaluations using DfT's online evidence repository.
- An active travel and physical activity evidence review commissioned by Sport England.
- Financial information, including on planned active travel investment to March 2025.

**12** To examine progress made against DfT's objectives for active travel since 2017 we reviewed:

- Published statistics from DfT.
- Other published and internal analysis including outputs from modelling undertaken by DfT.
- Project and performance information recording progress in implementing actions in *Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking (2020)*.

**13** To assess progress in tackling the barriers to uptake of active travel we reviewed:

- Documents describing DfT's and local authorities' approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of active travel interventions.
- Funding guidance and bid criteria documents for funds available to support active travel investment.
- The funding landscape within which local authorities bid for and receive funding for active travel interventions.
- Governance arrangements for the active travel investment programme, including the extent of cross-government collaboration and involvement.
- DfT's framework document with ATE.
- DfT and ATE risk assessments.
- DfT and ATE stakeholder engagement and management plans.
- DfT implementation plans and evaluation outputs.
- Local authority progress reporting.
- Published assessments of local authority capability relating to active travel.

- Documents setting out ATE's plans to work with local authorities going forward.
- ATE's business case and draft corporate plan, which set out the operational functions of ATE including resource and budget for each.
- ATE's recruitment plans and management information on recruitment.
- Financial information on planned active travel investment to March 2025.
- Documents setting out ATE's approach to managing dedicated active travel investment and influencing investment made through wider funds, inspecting active travel schemes, influencing the planning system and supporting local authorities.

### Data analysis

**14** To support our understanding of progress made, we analysed a range of data provided to us by DfT and ATE including:

- Annual financial information on active travel investment between April 2016 and March 2023 and planned investment to March 2025 provided to us by DfT and ATE.
- Annual statistics on walking and cycling participation in England, published by DfT and available at Walking and cycling statistics - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)), as well as wider road usage and road safety statistics published by DfT. Specifically, we drew on data tables: NTS0308; NTS0409; NTS0409a; NTSQ09025; CW0105; CW0302; CW0303; CW0402 CW0404; CW0411; CW0409; CW0412; RAS0102; RAS0402; TRA0403.

### Model review

**15** To inform our assessment of progress, we undertook a review of DfT's Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy investment models. We used our *Framework to review models* to structure our review. We reviewed the model appendices and technical guidance as well as examining the model itself.



## **CORRECTION SLIP**

**Title: Active Travel in England**

**SESSION 2022-23**

**HC 1376**

**ISBN: 978-1-78604-492-1**

**Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 5 June 2023**

### **Correction One:**

In Part Three, paragraph 3.5, on page 32 of the report, post publication we found that an additional sentence was needed to improve clarity and understanding for the reader.

The paragraph currently reads:

**3.5** DfT cannot say whether the infrastructure it funded between 2016 and 2021 meets the standard set in the national guidance. DfT reviewed scheme proposals at the point local authorities submitted them for funding approval but undertook limited assessments once they had been built. It commissioned some programme evaluations and asked local authorities to evaluate schemes costing £2 million and over, but it has not taken a consistent or comprehensive approach to monitoring the quality of schemes it funded. Its evaluation evidence provides only a partial picture of scheme quality and impact. It believes that some infrastructure it paid for was largely cosmetic and did not provide a safe space for cycling.

The paragraph should read:

**3.5** DfT cannot say whether the infrastructure it funded between 2016 and 2021 meets the standard set in the national guidance. DfT reviewed scheme proposals at the point local authorities submitted them for funding approval but undertook limited assessments once they had been built. It commissioned some programme evaluations and asked local authorities to evaluate schemes costing £2 million and over, but it has not taken a consistent or comprehensive approach to monitoring the quality of schemes it funded. Its evaluation evidence provides only a partial picture of scheme quality and impact. It believes that some infrastructure it paid for was largely cosmetic and did not provide a safe space for cycling. This resulted in some poor value schemes and, it believes, potential adverse impacts on active travel in some cases.

BACK

Date of correction: 21 June 2023



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National Audit Office

Design and Production by NAO Communications Team  
DP Ref: 012228-001

£10.00

ISBN 978-1-78604-492-1



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