

North East Active Travel Strategy consultation, March 2023

City of Durham Trust response

The consultation website was at <https://www.transportnortheast.gov.uk/neactivetravel/>

The strategy document can be obtained from:

<https://www.transportnortheast.gov.uk/files/active-travel-strategy-consultation-draft-january-2023.pdf>

The contextual material and questions from the online survey are reproduced below, with the Trust's response.

Survey response

The North East Active Travel Strategy aims for active travel to become the natural first choice for short everyday travel and combine it with public transport for longer journeys.

To what extent do you agree with the key aims of this strategy?

Strongly agree

Please give a reason for your answer

The Trust concurs with the statements made in the Foreword of the strategy. Increasing active travel is good for health, the environment and the economy. Not only is it good for the health of participants, but by reducing the use of vehicles and improving street design there should be improvements in air quality and road injuries. There has been a dramatic national decline in UK cycling rates since the 1950s, when rates were higher per person than they are in the Netherlands today. Since the 1980s there has been a sustained reduction in the number of children walking and cycling to school, with young people far less likely to travel independently, whether for education or social activities. These trends need to be reversed.

The draft North East Active Travel Strategy has set a target of ensuring that over half of all short journeys in the North East will be walked, wheeled or cycled by 2035. To achieve this, we would need a 45% increase in active travel rates across the region.

To what extent do you agree with the targets set in this strategy?

Neither agree nor disagree

Please give a reason for your answer

It is not easy from the information presented within the document to judge whether the targets are set at the right level, or whether they are perhaps unambitious. On page 4 it is stated that the most recent regional figures show 37% of short journeys are by active travel modes. A 45% increase on this would achieve rates of just over 53%, in line with Active Travel England targets. The document does not clearly define what a short journey is, yet this will be crucial for assessing whether the strategy is met. On page 43 journeys of up to 5 miles are labelled as “the opportunity”, but on the following page it states that “short journey” may mean different things to

different people.

The Trust would urge that a clear definition is incorporated in the strategy, together with annual targets that can be measured against National Travel Survey data. A target for improvements by 2035 is worthless without frequent monitoring to assess the progress. As much active travel infrastructure will need to be delivered by the local Highway Authorities, rather than Transport North East, starting and target figures for each authority area should also be laid out so that councillors and citizens can see how their local council is performing.

Other key indicators, such as annual school travel surveys, workplace travel surveys and levels of car ownership, should also be monitored. A public data bank of these measurements would give the evidence to enable individual citizens and charities like the Trust to lobby and work with local organisations to help identify barriers to change and to deliver the objectives.

Pages 49-51 of the strategy sets out a series of key commitment statements to drive forward our aim of getting more people to travel actively. These are to provide active travel friendly spaces, the promotion of a world-class active travel network, greater integration with public transport, supporting people to walk, wheel and cycle, improving access to equipment and working in partnership with communities and key stakeholders to benefit active travel in the North East.

To what extent do you agree with our key commitment statements?

Strongly agree

Are there any key commitment statements which you think are missing? If so, what are they?

The Trust notes that the strategy is almost silent on certain measures which will undoubtedly be necessary for delivery of the strategy, but which could be perceived to be detrimental to car users. This needs to be faced up to. A clear regional commitment in certain areas could assist local councillors in upholding the strategy, and reduce the threats from political opportunism at election times.

A measure which is likely to have broad support is the introduction of 20mph limits on most urban streets with few exceptions, together with enforcement. Some councils, like North Tyneside, have already made much progress in this area. Others, like Durham County Council, have not yet rolled out 20mph limits around all schools. Regional consistency would be highly beneficial in changing driver behaviour.

In order to support climate emissions reductions, Durham County Council's Climate Emergency Response Plan 2 seeks to achieve substantial reductions in vehicle miles before the end of the decade and a future with lower car ownership. The Trust would like a strong regional statement of aims to reduce vehicle miles. There should be a rebalancing of highways capital and revenue spending away from facilitating vehicle flow and towards active travel. The strategy should not be silent on this.

Following the lead of the Welsh Government, all road schemes in the area should be reassessed. No road scheme should be going ahead which has a net increase in vehicle capacity, and all highways schemes including major maintenance, should deliver enhancements for active travel and public transport connectivity. Thinking needs to be more joined up. As an example, in the past three years there has been major resurfacing of Crossgate Peth, New Elvet and Church Street in Durham City. All of these are identified within the LCWIP as requiring cycle infrastructure, and

yet the resurfacing work retained the existing road space allocation in every case.

Through the planning and highway authorities, the Trust would like to see principles established regionally for maintaining active travel access throughout major building development. Again in the centre of Durham each in turn of the two footways across the main Milburngate Bridge has been taken out of use for a prolonged period owing to development work, and the neighbouring arterial route of Framwellgate Peth, one of the key walking and cycling routes into the city, has had the shared-use footway closed for over a year, without the provision of alternative crossing facilities. Active travel should have the highest priority, with part of the carriageway reallocated to active travel for the duration of the work. A more positive example recently related to the New Elvet bridge works in Durham, during which part of Quarryheads Lane and Margery Lane were made one-way to help bus services keep to time. The experience for people walking and cycling was also much improved, though there were difficulties with motorists not being aware of the arrangements.

At a strategic planning level, all authorities should review their policies with regard to out-of-centre retail and leisure development. Previous planning decisions have bequeathed us with a highly car-dependent retail and leisure offer, and damaged the more sustainable town-centre locations. When trip-chaining is taken into account, where people tag a retail trip onto a commute or school run, it is clear that many people will find it hard to switch to sustainable options. To gain permission for further development, sites should have to demonstrate the achievement of modal shift to sustainable transport and a net sustainable transport benefit when the effect on other local centres is accounted for. If environmental aspects are accorded proper weight this approach would be consistent with the NPPF.

In a similar way, the design of new residential developments needs to support active travel. The Trust welcomes reference to 20-minute neighbourhoods and 15-minute cities, but this needs to be applied to any greenfield developments. Denser development helps with public transport viability. Rather than edge of settlement development being wholly lower density, greenfield sites could include new higher density local centres, providing amenities which will help to raise the sustainability of previous suburban extensions.

The other main intervention with regard to planning should be to require better analysis of active travel in major planning applications. Planning authorities are still accepting superficial Transport Assessments which often merely use isochrones to demonstrate accessibility by walking and cycling. The recent major applications for Sniperley Park on the edge of Durham City are an example of this, with the consultants demonstrating that various amenities are within a 2km walking or 5km cycling distance, but failing to acknowledge or downplaying the challenges that people would actually face. Planning officers and their highways development counterparts need to be more aware that current active travel infrastructure is inadequate. Planning authorities could require that Transport Assessments deploy simple tools such as the LTN 1/20 Junction Assessment Tool to assess the barriers to walking and cycling. To address possible traffic increases from development, Section 106 contributions should be directed primarily to public transport and active travel measures, in order to achieve sufficient modal shift from existing flows to accommodate any additional motor traffic generated. Modelling such as the DfT-sponsored Propensity to Cycle Tool can help to evidence the scope for modal change.

The Trust agrees that the region should support local authorities in bidding for funding opportunities, but this should be more forward-looking, with a full programme being developed ready for funding. Local people should be consulted on details while it is still possible to improve designs. We have had examples recently in Durham of badly-designed schemes being rushed forward for funding bids without due consultation. The regional layer of decision-making for

which funding bids are to be put forward must not add an extra layer of bureaucracy, but should support local authority officers in developing successful schemes.

We appreciate that Transport North East has to work in partnership with the local authorities to deliver the strategy and may not have direct powers in all the above areas, but strengthening the regional commitments could help all the authorities to move forwards together.

The region has set out a range of proposed initiatives within the strategy document, worth approximately £500 million to 2035 that will help active travel to become the natural choice for short everyday journeys and to combine with public transport for longer travel.

Pages 52-58 of the strategy sets out the list of proposed schemes that the region is seeking funding for. The proposed investments set out broadly consist of:

- New and upgraded forms of active travel infrastructure such as new and upgraded pedestrian and cycling routes across the region to encourage more active travel.
- Access to equipment schemes such as the introduction of a new cycle hire scheme (including e-bike hire) which will integrate with the transport network.
- Maintenance of the active travel network to ensure it remains safe and accessible to all users;
- Targeted behaviour change initiatives that encourage uptake of the network and sustain these levels of usage.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed regional intervention list?

Agree

Are there any key interventions which you think are missing? If so what are they?

Figure 18 on page 34 shows the motivations causing people to walk or wheel. Convenience was a much more significant factor than cost. For shorter journeys of between 2 and 5 miles it is clear from Figure 20 on page 43 that there is little scope for increasing walking. Figure 19 demonstrates that better cycling infrastructure is the intervention that will yield the most benefit in the 2 to 5 mile journey range, while at more local level, walking can be encouraged by improving footways and crossings. But in conjunction with these, local authorities need to take active steps, steadily year by year, to reduce the convenience of car travel for short journeys. Many of our towns have as much space as possible allocated on-street to car parking, to the detriment of pedestrian and cyclist convenience, safety, and the appreciation of built environment. A gradual reduction in car parking capacity should be the norm. Historic through roads which were theoretically relieved by bypasses and new road building should be reviewed with point closures or congestion charging so that public transport and active travel can take priority.

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the proposed intervention list?

The Trust is glad to see that the vast majority of the interventions are infrastructure-based, with a limited focus on promotion and training. Promotion and training, without infrastructure delivery, has an impact which is limited in effect and in duration, with people often switching back to their previous mode of transport. This is amply demonstrated by the relative lack of progress in the last couple of decades.

Regarding intervention TNE27e, for mapping and promoting the network, the Trust urges that local authorities prioritise contributing data and enhancing existing mapping tools. For example, OpenStreetMap is the basis for several popular apps and route-planning websites, but it is updated largely via volunteer efforts.

In terms of detail, it is very disappointing to see that walking and cycling improvements in Durham City Centre (scheme DU03) appears to be planned only for 2029-2035, a full ten years after the authority consulted on its LCWIP for Durham City. The lack of cycle infrastructure, and the poor quality of the congested pedestrian routes in the city have been identified in one strategy after another for a quarter of a century. The Durham City Travel Study of 1997, which led to the congestion charge, Park and Ride, and controlled parking zones, included a number of walking and cycling measures, including a proposed cycle network, which have still not been implemented. Since then we have had a couple of county-wide cycling strategies, an aborted County Plan, the Durham Integrated Transport Approach and the Durham City Sustainable Transport Delivery Plan, all of which have covered the same ground. While there have been isolated enhancements, there is still nothing approaching an actual cycle network.

*The urban areas must be prioritised. It is all very well doing the easy stuff, like improving links alongside main roads where the highway space is available, but if people cannot walk or cycle from the edge of towns to the key destinations in the town centres, that investment will be wasted. The first key commitment statement under the heading of the “World-class active travel network” on page 49 is to “promote more safe, continuous, direct routes for cycling **in towns and cities**, physically separated from pedestrians and volume motor traffic, **servicing places that people want to go**” (emphasis added). This list of schemes should be assessed for compliance with that principle.*

In your view, what would most help people to travel actively in the North East?

The culture within highways authorities, planning, and the police needs to change if the large-scale interventions which are required are to be delivered swiftly and effectively. Those responsible for delivering improvements to active travel must be forward-thinking and show enthusiasm for change and the promotion of new priorities.

Please use this space to write any final thoughts on the strategy you would like to share with us

With only one exception, the people depicted cycling in photographs throughout the document are wearing helmets. Helmet use remains a personal choice within the UK, and while helmets clearly offer protection against head injury in certain types of collision, over-emphasis of their use could be counter-productive, particularly for short urban journeys which are the focus of the strategy. A better balance of images will be needed in any promotional material. There are not very many pictures of people walking within the strategy, and many of these are more leisure-oriented. Town centre locations, and busy education sites could provide a more representative picture.