

Debate on active travel

House of Commons

9 July 2019



KEY MESSAGES

- Councils support active travel. Getting people to use more active travel will improve congestion, air quality and obesity rates, which in turn have substantial benefits such as for local economies, education and taxpayers.
- The Government's overall support for active travel is welcome and has seen some results over the past couple of decades. The most powerful way the Government could improve local active travel infrastructure is to allow councils to get on with delivering it.
- There has been a 54 per cent increase in the distance travelled by bicycle since 2002, due to sustained investment in cycling infrastructure and other measures, especially in big cities.ⁱ Increases in the number of people cycling have been inconsistent across the country, as has the Government's approach to funding.
- The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) has yielded impressive results in some cities.ⁱⁱ Councils would be best placed to act on this agenda if they were given more freedom and funding certainty to pursue their own transport programmes.
- All elements of government policy should support the ambition of getting more travel by active means. There must be closer coordination between separate departmental policies which impact local health and wellbeing.
- The next Spending Review will be make or break for some local transport services. As our recent survey shows, a third of councils fear they will run out of money for legal duties by 2022/23, unless urgent additional funding arrives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Councils' support for active travel

Councils support active travel. It is a key way of tackling many transport and health public policy problems. Getting people to use more active travel will improve congestion, air quality and obesity rates, which in turn have substantial benefits such as for local economies, education and taxpayers. Councils have been effective at identifying the means to get more people walking and cycling. There is nevertheless much more work that still needs to be done.

The Government's overall support for active travel is welcome and has seen some results over the past couple of decades. The most powerful way the Government could improve local active travel infrastructure, is to allow councils to get on with delivering it. Too often funding is provided in the form of short-term capital grants linked to bidding processes with strict criteria. This stop-start funding, developed for specific policy interventions, does not allow councils to develop long-term sustained plans.

All elements of government policy should support the ambition of getting more travel by active means. This means that there must be closer coordination between separate departmental policies which impact local health and wellbeing, and the funding targeted at councils to facilitate active travel. Changing people's behaviour, and a legacy of central government support for car travel is a long-term project that requires not only financial investment, but consistency and stability. There is no immediate silver bullet that will transform the status of active travel, but we need to continue to support positive interventions that will deliver incremental gains.

Trends in walking and cycling

It is positive that more and more people are taking journeys by bicycle. There has been a 54 per cent increase in the distance travelled by bicycle since 2002, due to sustained investment in cycling infrastructure and other measures, especially in big cities.^{iv}

Despite the overall positive trends, increases in the number of people cycling have been inconsistent across the country, as has the Government's approach to funding. The focus has been on funding for 'cycling demonstrator towns', 'cycling towns' and then 'cycling ambition cities'. We have seen positive results in those areas that are not being replicated nationally. Whilst it is understandable that the Government has sought to focus on building up an understanding of what works, by working intensively in a small number of areas, there should now be sufficient evidence from over a decade of this approach.

The lessons from this concentrated activity now need to be applied nationally. Underpinning a consistent policy approach should be greater certainty over long term funding to councils from the Government. More rounds of competitive bidding is unlikely to achieve the increase in uptake we would like to see nationwide.

We surveyed our member councils last year on their views of the framework in which we promote sustainable and active transport. Of the 38 councils that responded, 36 had introduced 20 mph zones to promote sustainable travel, 35 had provided secure cycle parking or changing facilities and 35 had promoted cycling or walking through schools. The estimated level of spending dedicated to sustainable travel in the financial year 2018/19 was expected to remain broadly

the same as in 2017/18 for cycling, walking and public transport, according to 21 of the 38 councils.

The main sources of funding for councils' spending on sustainable travel for 2018/19 were: proceeds from Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy (30 out of 38 councils); central government grants; council core funding; and funding via Local Enterprise Partnerships.

The main barriers stopping councils from doing more to invest in sustainable travel were: lack of revenue funding; uncertainty over continued levels of funding; and lack of capital funding.

The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

Individual cities across England have been the recipients of grants related to Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS). Whilst the projects have seen some impressive results, councils would be best placed to act on this agenda if they were given more freedom and funding certainty to pursue their own transport programmes.

Councils are concerned about the significant funding pressures and huge financial uncertainty over the next few years. Recent LGA analysis reveals that local government in England faces an overall funding gap of almost £8 billion by 2025, just to maintain services at current levels.^v By 2020, local authorities will have faced a reduction to core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion over the preceding decade. In this context it is difficult to argue funding has been sufficient to start providing a comprehensive change to travel behaviours.

The solution to greater cycling infrastructure is not ring-fenced funding from central government. Councils would benefit from a holistic approach to infrastructure that allows them the freedom to set their own priorities many of whom see active travel as a key means to achieve a wide variety of public policy goals.

The most appropriate types of active travel vary hugely across the country, which is why centrally-directed funding pots are unlikely to result in the best local solutions. Making money available for a specific type of intervention merely funnels councils towards implementing that specific, centrally-prescribed solution, regardless of its local applicability. Councils rightly decide that receiving some funding for interventions which are not best suited for their areas is better than no funding at all.

Measures that encourage local changes to behaviour need to be sustained over the long-term. Ring-fenced central funding tends to be time limited before changing its criteria for future funding rounds. The frequent changing of central government funding criteria means that projects that could have delivered results in the long term are abandoned too quickly.

The Government's overall approach to funding for roads is fragmented, uncertain and centralised in its decision-making. On roads funding alone there are at least 11 different Government funding streams.

Each funding source comes with different rules and timescales – some are allocated by formula, others through competition. This general approach makes it very difficult for councils to plan for long-term improvements in their roads infrastructure, as well as attract private sector investment.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729521/national-travel-survey-2017.pdf

ii <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy>

iii <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/one-three-councils-fear-funding-legal-duties-will-run-out-within-three-years>

iv https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729521/national-travel-survey-2017.pdf

v <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/councils-face-almost-ps8-billion-funding-black-hole-2025>