

ATW02 Senedd Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act

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Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus a Gweinyddiaeth Gyhoeddus | Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee

Teithio Llesol yng Nghymru | Active Travel in Wales

Ymateb gan: Grŵp Trawsbleidiol y Senedd ar y Ddeddf Teithio Llesol | Evidence from: Senedd Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act

Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act response to PAPAC inquiry into Active Travel

The Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act (CPGATA) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into active travel. We have set out our submission below in accord with the themes set out in your letter, along with a short introduction and conclusion. Much of our submission is based on our June 2022 'Review of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013' which was a major influence on the WAO's own inquiry into active travel. A copy of our review is attached.

Introduction

Active travel contributes to all seven of Wales' national well-being goals. It strengthens our economy by reducing congestion and improving the health of the workforce. It helps our environment by reducing carbon emissions and other harmful pollutants. It makes Wales healthier by encouraging and enabling physical activity, which helps to combat diabetes type 2, and, by displacing car journeys, improves air quality and road safety. Investing in active travel contributes to a more equal Wales by providing an affordable alternative to motorised travel. By getting more people out and about in our communities it leads to more social interaction and greater community cohesion. As the cheapest way of getting about, it enables many more people access to cultural activities and centres. Finally, as the lowest carbon form of transport, active travel helps Wales meet its global obligations in reducing climate change.

It was to realise these benefits that in 2013 the Welsh Assembly unanimously passed the Active Travel Act. Wales took a lead on active travel when it passed the Act, there is no reason why it could not restore that lead if it is consistent in

resource allocation and applies an outcome focussed approach to its development and application of a long-term strategy.

The Welsh Government's new active travel delivery plan, including any perceived gaps in coverage.

A new national delivery plan was the central recommendation of the CPGATA Review of the Active Travel Act. We believed it was essential that there be a national delivery plan 'setting out what needs to be done, by whom and by when'. The new plan has a greater chance of succeeding than the Welsh Government's previous plan, the 2016 Active Travel Action Plan, since it includes provision for its own scrutiny by the Active Travel Board and contains a reasonably detailed schedule of actions required for its implementation, ascribing responsibilities to the appropriate institution. We are pleased that the Cabinet Secretary has reaffirmed his commitment to the plan.

There are some weaknesses in the plan that could still be corrected, in particular the lack of defined timelines for the development of detailed targets and local active travel plans. A key recommendation of the CPGATA review that the plan fails to address is the issue of pedestrian crossing availability and timing, both key barriers for to increasing journeys by foot. Another major concern is that it is unclear how the devolution of active travel funding to the Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), without ring-fencing, can be reconciled with the plan.

The acid test for the plan is the effectiveness of its implementation and there is already concern that the commitment to the development of active travel demonstration towns seems to have stalled.

Opportunities for improved mainstreaming of active travel considerations in wider policy and programmes.

There has been good progress in prioritising active travel within the Welsh Government's planning policy, with PPW12 setting out clear requirements for active travel provision in new developments. However, there is an urgent need for an updated TAN 18 and revised guidance on transport assessments, both of which pre-date PPW12 and fail to reflect its priorities.

Active travel to school is a Welsh Government priority, unfortunately there has been slow progress in persuading the education department to assume at least some degree of joint responsibility for its delivery.

There are still too many instances of the transport department issuing guidance that does not seek to promote active travel. A particularly egregious example of this was the Welsh Government sponsored Common Standards guidance for the adoption of streets on new estates which worked counter to the Active Travel Design Guidance and took several years of pressure from the CPGATA to correct.

Increasing active travel to work was an important aim of the Active Travel Act. The public sector workforce, given its size and the ability of the Welsh Government to influence it, was an obvious target. However there has been little consistent effort to encourage modal shift amongst public sector workers. It is to be hoped that the new statutory guidance arising from the 2023 amendments to the Act will lead to positive change. Though there is now considerable doubt as to whether the Welsh Government will deliver on the promise it made to the Senedd to set out exactly how it will extend the guidance from local authorities to other public bodies.

The developing role of Transport for Wales (TfW) as part of the delivery arrangements for active travel.

Perhaps the biggest contribution TfW has made to active travel in Wales is the establishment of a national active travel team, which now numbers over a dozen members of staff. Throughout the previous development of active travel in Wales, the national team within the Welsh Government has rarely numbered more than three full time equivalent staff. Delivering change to the level envisaged in the Active Travel Act inevitably requires investment in a well-resourced team dedicated to implementation and management of the project. The impact of this new TfW team can be seen in its effectiveness in ensuring that the Active Travel Fund is used in accord with established priorities and design standards are upheld. However, there is considerable uncertainty about how these roles will continue once TfW's management of the Active Travel Fund is ceded to the CJs.

TfW's development of the Active Travel Academy to train local authority staff and the creation of an expert design team are meeting long standing needs for active travel delivery. TfW has delivered the active travel promotional toolkit, which had been promised by the Welsh Government in 2013. The TfW team are also developing extensive plans to better integrate active travel with public transport, enabling walking and cycling to be used more easily as part of a longer journey and further enhancing the sustainability of rail travel by reducing its dependence on car travel for journeys to and from stations. Earlier this month TfW delivered the long-awaited Active Travel Monitoring Framework, a mechanism that should have been in place many years ago.

The role and activities of the Welsh Government's Active Travel Board.

The CPGATA believes it is important that there is an independent body with the power to scrutinise, on a continuous basis, the Welsh Government and other agencies' effectiveness in delivering active travel. In our proposals for an Active Travel Delivery Plan, we saw a key role for the Board in scrutinising its implementation. The board was revamped in line with the recommendations in the CPGATA review, with the addition of a number of independent members, which has significantly enhanced its capacity to scrutinise. We also recommended that it be required to produce an annual report documenting progress on active travel in Wales, which it has done.

The Board has demonstrated a willingness to scrutinise the government though its capacity to do so has been weakened by its loss of its independent secretariat and limited access to resources for research.

Because of its crucial role in monitoring active travel delivery, the CPGATA believe it is important that the effectiveness of the Board should be kept under review. Consequently, our review recommended: 'Should the restructured Active Travel Board fail to enthuse and change practice in local authorities, and to hold the Welsh Government to account over active travel progress, such that there is insufficient progress in achieving the aims of the Act, then the position should be reviewed within three years. Consideration should then be given to appointing a commissioner, as in Manchester and England.'

The Welsh Government's active travel spending and how it is distributed and prioritised between different schemes and types of intervention.

The 2018 report by the Senedd's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee determined that an investment level of £17 - £20 per head per annum was required if Wales was to realise its active travel ambitions. That figure has only been reached in the last four years. Prior to 2018-19 the per capita spend was less than £5.00. The significant uplift in investment in recent years is very welcome, however there are still significant structural issues hampering delivery. Firstly, the allocation of funding on an annual basis significantly complicates the delivery of projects that almost always require more than one year to complete. This creates a number of problems. Delivering active travel routes in one-year tranches, with no guarantee of funding for the next year's tranche, means that routes are delivered in unusable sections, since people are unlikely to use a route that does not enable a safe journey from departure to destination. Uncertainty over the duration of funding also means that local authorities can be reluctant to invest in building their own expert active travel teams rather than using expensive

consultants. Secondly, almost all of the funding for active travel is capital. This lack of revenue funding severely hampers development of effective behaviour change programmes.

Prioritisation of active travel interventions is key but has been slow in being systemised. TfW have now developed effective prioritisation guidance and mapping, though there is still more work to be done in highlighting small but important network gaps. Unlike with many road improvements, investment in active travel does not only benefit those located close to the improved infrastructure. Focusing on densely populated urban areas where the potential for active travel and modal shift from the private car is highest will provide the maximum benefit for Wales as a whole, and thus also for people in more remote rural areas, since the impact on climate change and health costs will be much greater than if the investment was made in sparsely populated rural areas.

There is also still a tendency to prioritise routes that will cause the least inconvenience to motorists (i.e. no reduction in parking spaces or road width) rather than those that will produce the greatest modal shift. Net Zero Wales contains Wales' only active travel target: of 'increasing trip mode share of active travel from a current estimated proportion of 27% to 33% by 2030 and at least 35% by 2040' this can only be achieved if active travel routes are constructed where they will enable and encourage people to walk or cycle rather than drive.

TfW's prioritisation tool should have helped overcome these issues, but it is now not clear whether the CJsCs will use that tool when allocating funding.

The extent to which local authorities are prioritising active travel and related investment, capacity constraints, and potential impacts from an increased emphasis on regional transport planning.

Local Authorities' prioritisation of active travel has varied considerably from council to council. Factors influencing this variation include political decisions on transport policies, rurality, and the capacity within the authority to undertake new projects. It is difficult to tabulate the impact of these differences since, whilst the Active Travel Act required local authorities to regularly report on their progress, this duty has not been consistently enforced and those reports that have reached the Welsh Government have not been published.

However, across Wales it is evident that a lack of significant, secure funding at the beginning of the project led to few local authorities being willing to invest in the development of inhouse active travel expertise, or to produce maps of future active travel routes that encompassed the ambition of the Act. As stated above,

the allocation of active travel funding on an annual basis has also been a major obstacle.

Our primary concern with the devolution of active travel funding to the CJs is that it is to be accompanied by an end to the ring fencing of funding for active travel. This will mean walking and cycling having to compete with other transport modes for what funding is available with no guarantee of future investment.

Given that active travel is primarily designed for shorter journeys, it is by its very nature local. There is therefore understandable concern that a shift to a regional structure will complicate the delivery of hyperlocal but important and effective interventions such as dropped kerbs and small filtered permeability projects. Such interventions can currently be funded from a local authority's core allocation from the Active Travel Fund; there has been no indication that this type of core funding will continue. It is also unclear whether TfW will maintain its current role in administering and monitoring active travel spend to ensure the design guidance is adhered to. We fear these uncertainties will make some local authorities reluctant to invest in the development of inhouse active travel teams and revert to the use of external consultants.

There is also a major question mark over the Welsh Government's ability to meet its target in Net Zero Wales of 'increasing trip mode share of active travel from a current estimated proportion of 27% to 33% by 2030 and at least 35% by 2040' unless CJs are themselves given specific active travel targets to meet.

Whether the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 itself remains fit for purpose, including its requirements around active travel network mapping.

The Act was an innovative approach to increasing Wales' very low rates of walking and cycling for everyday journeys and has inevitably taken time to become effective. It has provided local authorities with meaningful plans for the development of comprehensive active networks and, perhaps most importantly, provided design guidance to help ensure that walking and cycling infrastructure is fit for purpose and capable of encouraging people to make a modal shift from the private car. Prior to the Act, infrastructure often failed to join up into complete routes and was frequently too narrow to provide safety.

A number of the provisions in the Act have still not been properly implemented. Notably:

- The requirement to enhance facilities for active travellers when maintaining or creating highways has still not been built into highways' departments operations.
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- The requirement to give proper consideration for active travellers during street works continues to be widely ignored. In 2021, the Welsh Government, put in place clear guidance on how the duty should be implemented but it is not routinely enforced.
- The requirement to report on developments in active travel has had little impact to date as there has been no standardised monitoring framework, inconsistent reporting by local authorities and the Welsh Government, and the results have not been published.
- The duty to promote active travel as set out in the original Act was too narrowly defined and has had no impact. The amendments made to the Act in 2024, via the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Act, were intended to correct this.

The first round of map compilations was hampered by uncertain guidance and a lack of the commitment to adequate long-term funding needed to justify the mapping of ambitious future networks. The second mapping round was much improved. The duty to review the active travel network maps every three years was necessary to make early progress when the Act was first implemented, however now that all local authorities have reasonably comprehensive plans in place, that frequency is no longer necessary and the CPGATA strongly recommend moving to five yearly reviews, significantly reducing the administrative burden of the Act.

Whilst the design guidance put in place by the Act is highly regarded and has dramatically improved the quality of active travel infrastructure in Wales, the guidance is not statutory and compliance with it is only maintained by it being a condition of Welsh Government funding. This means that infrastructure funded from S106 or other sources does not have to comply with the guidance. This is a significant weakness in the Act. It is particularly relevant at the moment when funding is being devolved from the Welsh Government to the CJs.

The CPGATA view is that the Act has produced positive benefits for Wales. Having legislative backing for the development of active travel has helped establish it as a mainstream part of the Welsh transport system and facilitated its significance in the new WelTAG, Llwybr Newydd, PPW etc. However, the Act can be improved as a result of experience, and it is important that it is reviewed regularly with a view to amending and strengthening its provisions.

How best to drive behaviour change in support of active travel, and current barriers.

Building safe infrastructure that allows people to make complete journeys by bike or on foot, is the most effective way of bringing about behaviour change, this is borne out by extensive evidence from multiple surveys. However, it is vitally important that people are informed of the available infrastructure and encouraged to use it. Unfortunately, many excellent new active travel routes have not been accompanied by even the most basic signage and wayfinding. It is to be hoped that the new statutory guidance on the promotion of active travel will help remedy this problem.

The biggest barrier to developing safe infrastructure is uncertainty over long term funding.

Ensuring active travel is accessible and inclusive, including around scheme design.

Active travel is intrinsically more accessible than the private car. 20% of Welsh households do not have access to a car. Many disabled and elderly people are unable to drive a car. Young people under the age of 17 are not allowed to drive a car. Car ownership is beyond the means of many, and the more sustainable electric cars are currently even less affordable. Active travel is therefore a vital travel option for many people, but its effectiveness is dependent on the quality of the design guidance and, most importantly the effective application of the guidance. The CPGATA review made a number of recommendations for improvements:

- Equality Impact Assessments need to be overhauled and properly applied.
- Early engagement with the community and particularly groups representing the disabled is vital.
- Barriers that impede access for people using mobility aids, adapted bikes or trikes should be removed from all active travel routes in Wales.
- Active travel data should capture information about people with protected characteristics.

The review also lauded the work of the organisations such as Pedal Power in Cardiff and Cycling 4 All in Wrexham that enable people with a wide range of disabilities to enjoy riding a bike or trike, including those who find walking difficult.

It is deeply concerning that far fewer women than men choose cycling as a way of getting about. There is ample evidence that the key deterrent to women cycling

is lack of safe infrastructure, further emphasising the need for investment in quality in cycle routes.

There are also significant issues outside of the realm of active travel infrastructure that have a major impact on the accessibility of walking and cycling, for example the lack of public conveniences is a major limitation for the elderly and pregnant women.

Improving monitoring and evaluation and the Welsh Government's plans for enhanced data collection through a new National Travel Survey.

Accurately assessing the success or otherwise of the Act is complicated by a lack of reliable data - a problem for all modes of transport in Wales given that we have been without a National Travel Survey since 2012 - and the absence of a uniform monitoring system for active travel infrastructure. It is also important to put in context the extent of the development of active travel in Wales to date. During the first 20 years of devolution, the total sum invested in active travel across the whole of Wales was less than that recently spent to widen 8km of the A465. The recent increases in investment will take time to deliver significant numbers of complete new routes. The percentage of the population that will have access to active travel infrastructure to design guidance standards is therefore, at this point in time, low and it is unrealistic to expect an increase in use of this infrastructure to impact on data collected at a national level - which is all the data we currently have.

There needs to be a consistent approach to monitoring the impact of all new active travel infrastructure, with a baseline and continued monitoring for at least two years. Each local authority should be required to monitor several of their significant routes on a permanent basis. The data from these provisions and other local authority monitoring needs to be easily publicly accessible.

There is a particular need for more consistent data on active travel to school, an issue which we understand the Active Travel Board is currently considering.

Any other issues of concern in relation to delivery of the Welsh Government's active travel ambitions.

A key factor in the lack of effectiveness of the Active Travel Act's duty to give proper consideration for active travellers during street works is that many contractors continue to use the UK wide 'Red Book' guidance on street works, which fails to take account of the duties in the Welsh Act. The CPGATA has been informed that the Department for Transport, working with the devolved nations, is to review the Red Book. It is important that the Welsh Government take this

opportunity to ensure that the revised Red Book respects Welsh law by bringing its provision for active travel into line with the Welsh guidance. London already has its own guidance on a par with that of Wales.

Conclusion

The Active Travel Act set out to make walking and cycling the most 'natural and normal way of getting about'. Given many decades of normalising the private motor car as the default means of transport, achieving this aim was never going to be easy or quick. The scale of the challenge could be seen in how Wales led the UK in a number of indices of car dependency. The importance of succeeding was apparent in Wales also topping the tables of physical inactivity, with all its consequent health problems and costs.

Bringing about this degree of change requires a long-term strategy backed up by significant resources. Unfortunately, these two factors have only been in place for the past four of the Active Travel Act's eleven-year lifespan.

If we can maintain the momentum of the last few years, then the CPGATA is convinced that significant progress can be made and the targets for active travel in Net Zero Wales can be achieved. But this requires:

- Sustained, ring-fenced funding
- Clear definition of the respective roles and obligations of each delivery body
- Rigorous prioritisation
- Comprehensive and systematic monitoring of active travel developments
- Continued development of in-house expertise
- Sustained promotional activity
- Thorough implementation of all the provisions of the Active Travel Act

With unwavering commitment and effective implementation, Wales has the potential to solidify its position as a global leader in active travel, paving the way for a healthier, greener, and more prosperous future for all our communities. It is imperative that policymakers and stakeholders continue to prioritise active travel as a cornerstone of Wales' sustainable development agenda.

About the Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act

The Cross-Party Group on the Active Travel Act is an organisation established by Senedd Members representing all four political parties. The Group is a forum for cross-party policy debate and discussion related to the implementation of the Active Travel Act and the achievement of its ambition of making walking and

cycling the most natural and normal way of getting about. The Group engages with all relevant stakeholders and scrutinises the Welsh Government and other bodies' work on this issue. The Group also seeks to raise awareness of the important role active travel can play in creating the healthy, prosperous, and resilient Wales we all wish to see. The Chair of the Group is John Griffiths MS and the Secretary is Chris Roberts.
