

Is the Active Travel Act working for Wales?

1. Not as well as many might have hoped. I have no doubt that the legislation is well-intended but can see little or no evidence that people in significant numbers are leaving their cars at home and making active travel journeys on foot or by cycle. I believe that the Act is unduly restrictive in that it is focused on 'utility' cycling i.e. on short journeys to and from work, schools and community facilities. It does little or nothing to encourage or to assist medium and longer-distance cycling, including that which is made for recreational (exercise) or tourism-related purposes. This form of cycling is important in Wales, particularly in our rural and coastal areas. It offers health, well-being and economic benefits. There is not, so far as I am aware, a similar distinction made in respect of the use of motor vehicles for recreational or tourism-related purposes. Furthermore, the Active Travel Act is focused on designated (urban and suburban) areas, which again is unduly restrictive. We should be seeking to establish, maintain and enhance a truly integrated network that encourages and assists a wider range of active travel journeys i.e. those within and, perhaps more importantly, between our urban and suburban areas. Walkers and cyclists (of all kinds) are vulnerable road users and highway authorities will need to reduce differential speeds and, where possible, to provide safe (segregated) facilities and traffic free trails if they are to encourage more people to leave their cars at home and to walk and/or cycle.

The Committee, I understand, is looking at the following issues:

- How far the stated objectives of the Active Travel Act are being achieved;
 - The effectiveness of subordinate legislation and guidance made under the Act;
 - Any action which should be taken to improve the effectiveness of the Act and its implementation, and
 - How far the Act has represented, and will continue to represent, value for money.
2. Four years have passed since the Act came into operation and whilst it is true to say that local authorities in Wales have developed and published their integrated network maps, these are little more than lines on pieces of paper. There is little sign of meaningful investment in infrastructure and, given the ongoing public sector austerity, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future. It would be encouraging to see more money being made available, to see local authorities committing to well-designed strategies and to be delivering prioritised programmes of improvement with meaningful investment in more and better infrastructure for walking and cycling.
3. The Statutory Guidance for the delivery of the Active Travel Wales Act 2013, which was published by the Welsh Government in October 2014, is helpful. It sets out what needs to be done and serves to remind us all of the powers and the duties that have been created by the Act. But this statutory guidance will only be effective if it is taken to heart and if central and local government abide by the spirit as well as the letter of the Act. The object of the ATA has been neatly summarised by Chris Roberts and is recorded in the minutes of the cross-party active travel group meeting held on 24th October 2017:

'To get more people walking and cycling in order to reap the benefits of improvements in health, air quality and the environment. This was only achievable if the Act encouraged new people to choose walking and cycling in preference to using a car. The main barrier to starting cycling, especially for women, is the perception that cycling is not safe, thus it was essential that the Act provided infrastructure that allowed people to make whole journeys in safety'.

4. The Act, it would appear, has been effective in causing local authorities to produce maps of active travel routes in their designated areas. But I am not at all convinced that it has brought about a meaningful change in attitude in the minds of the majority of opinion-formers and decision-makers or in the priorities for investment in local transport.

5. A meaningful shift in modal choice for shorter trips (from private cars to walking and cycling) and the provision of better and safer (segregated) facilities should deliver value for money through improved public health and well-being and by reducing the costs associated with air pollution and road traffic collisions. Much of the money that has been spent to date is associated with the preparation of the integrated network maps i.e. in management and administration. We will need to see more and better investment in infrastructure, i.e. in traffic calming and in segregated routes and traffic free paths and trails for walkers and cyclists, if we are to obtain real value for money.

The committee, I understand, wants to assess the effectiveness of wider active travel policy in supporting the delivery of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013, including:

- The effectiveness of the Active Travel Action Plan;
 - Whether sufficient funding and capacity are available to support implementation of the Act itself and wider active travel policy;
 - The operation of the Active Travel Board; and
 - Whether active travel is integrated effectively in wider Welsh government and local government policy.
6. The Active Travel Action Plan, (published on 1st February 2016), describes how the Welsh Government will work with others to achieve the changes required and to track progress. It contains a useful summary of actions and the terms of reference of the Active Travel Board. The list of actions appears to be comprehensive but its effectiveness will be measured by the amount of modal change which is achieved which I suspect is minimal (only 2% of trips are made by cycle).
7. The funding which is available for investment in walking and cycling infrastructure in Wales is modest and spending quite understandably appears to be focused on those areas which have been and are more active in promoting walking and cycling. We need to see more consistency (of effort and application) amongst the local authorities in Wales.
8. The Active Travel Board provides a forum for representative bodies to meet with government officials and discuss matters of common interest. Issues can be raised and corrective action can be recommended or taken. But the Board meets infrequently and is largely invisible to the outside world. Changes will need to be made if it is to be regarded as an effective body. The AT Board should meet more frequently (perhaps bi-

monthly) and its communications (briefing papers, minutes and reports) should be available (visible for all who are interested to see). Its effectiveness (in driving change for the better) should be measured, SMART targets should be set and corrective action should be taken if, where and when necessary. The Terms of Reference of the Active Travel Board are set out below:

'The Active Travel Board's purpose is to coordinate activity to support the effective implementation of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013. This will include the following specific tasks:

- *Providing input into a review effective delivery of active travel projects and supporting the implementation of any actions arising following consideration by Ministers*
- *Advising on the development and implementation of the Active Travel Action Plan, including ensuring delivery within organisations' area of responsibility*
- *Advising on wider activity to support the implementation of the Act and the uptake of active travel'.*

9. These are, to a large extent, executive functions and the Active Travel Board as a forum is not well-equipped to deliver them without adequate professional, administrative and clerical support. The Board needs an active, energetic and independent chairman.

10. Regrettably I do not have the evidence at this time to say whether or not active travel is integrated effectively in wider Welsh government and local government policy. But I suspect that Wales is moving in the right direction with the coming into operation of the Well-Being of Future Generations Act and recent/ongoing reviews of government planning policy. I suspect that local government's transport and planning policies may need to be updated and brought into line with central government's aims in order to address the challenges that are currently posed by congestion, carbon and capacity.