

ACTIVE TRAVEL BILL – Enterprise and Business Committee Evidence

Evidence from TAITH

TAITH is the passenger transport consortium for North Wales. It is a formally constituted Joint Committee of the six North Wales County Councils.

To date, local authorities supported financially by TAITH and the other RTC's across Wales, have played a pivotal role in putting in place a significant network of new cycling and walking routes together with their maintenance and promotion. We are therefore broadly supportive of the focus by Welsh Government to improve cycling and walking provision and the proposals in the White Paper.

TAITH has invested heavily in walking and cycling in recent year and has taken positive steps towards the development of an integrated network of routes in many parts of North Wales. We therefore support the intent behind the Bill especially as Active Travel offers an opportunity to reduce local congestion on many routes where it offers an alternative to car based accessibility. Active Travel is only one component of an integrated transport system. It offers real benefits for local journeys, but for longer distance commuting or accessibility there will always be a need for other transport interventions. In promoting Active Travel, we should be aware that other strategic transport projects will also be required.

During the consultation process a number of issues were highlighted by TAITH and where relevant we have included them in the note below. Many of these issues we raised are similar to the questions posed by the Committee in its call for evidence and hopefully the responses cover the issues raised.

Consistency of approach: The Bill encourages local authorities to work with neighbouring authorities to ensure that routes do not stop at authority boundaries, but are part of a wider, interconnected route. TAITH has been promoting this approach over the past year or so and the TAITH Board has received presentations on proposals to develop linked networks across North Wales. We support the further development of this approach but recognise the difficulties and the possible costs associated with this work given the length of many of these routes in our area. It is possible that due to the rurality of much of North Wales, the Bill could promote the development of pockets of Active Travel infrastructure without connecting routes between them.

Practical limitations: There may be good reason why routes do not join up. Land ownership issues can be (and are) a major barrier to joining up routes. This Bill does not set out how this could be overcome. Indeed the publishing of a map explicitly showing the long term intentions to join routes up could be considered to be playing into the hands of local landowners and artificially inflating land prices. Local authorities are bound by legislation to pay the market price in land acquisition deals, this may not (and often does not) satisfy landowners. In some

instances, the only option may be Compulsory Purchase Orders. However, this is a costly and time consuming option.

The topography of a local area can severely limit the opportunities to provide routes which are suitable for everyday journeys as advocated in the White Paper and will significantly increase the costs of provision due to more complex engineering solutions.

The focus on local access journeys to employment and services is positive and emphasises the positive impact that Active Travel can have. Much of the TAITH area however, is very rural in nature and there is a need to consider how longer inter-urban schemes could be delivered, which may not fall within the definition of Active Travel.

Raising Expectations: We have concern regarding the mapping and publishing of route enhancements when additional funding is not being made available for delivery. This approach potentially raises the expectations of users and failure to deliver within a reasonable timescale will be perceived by users as a failure by local government. We accept the approach suggested by the Bill but have continued concerns regarding raised expectations for routes which may be expensive to construct or which cannot be delivered without extensive land purchase.

Also with regards to funding, we are concerned about the push for additional routes without adequately resources for the maintenance of existing routes. These routes are not maintenance free and responsibility for this will lie with local government. The Bill proposes a duty on local government to develop a prioritised list of schemes to deliver the network. This would help uniformity across local authorities and restrict conflict with stakeholders on differing prioritisation of similar type schemes. We believe there is scope to develop prioritised schemes on a regional basis to ensure that routes are delivered across boundaries to ensure access to key sites and locations.

Cost implications: The duties proposed in this Bill could place a considerable burden on local authorities. Specialist mapping professionals and graphic designers may have to be procured and this would be at a cost to the local authority.

The delivery of the enhanced network is not funded but the Bill proposes a statutory link between the proposed maps and the Regional Transport Plans (RTPs), creating a culture of investment over many decades. There is no mention of the priority that this investment will have against other demands on the RTP budget and as highlighted above the issue of maintenance is given inadequate consideration in the White Paper. The only reference to maintenance is a statement that the routes will be adopted by the local authorities under the Highways Act 1980 so Welsh Government is not proposing a new duty. This may indeed be correct but the Act will amount to an additional financial responsibility on local government. Active Travel is only one component of an integrated transport network, and whilst it provides access for local journeys, the RTP needs

to ensure that the whole integrated network is developed to aid and promote economic growth.

Some preliminary discussions have taken place in the region about the mapping implications of the Bill. Gwynedd Council host a regional map of routes along the trunk road network in the region and it has been suggested that adding routes on County roads to this map would be a better solution than for each Local Authority to develop their own map and system. The costs and practicalities of this approach need to be assessed, but it seems a reasonable approach to advocate.

New Road Schemes: We welcome this proposal and agree that this could assist with the delivery of the network. However, it also recognises that the incorporation of walking and cycling routes is not always possible as part of these new road schemes and therefore provision for a departure from this duty is recommended.

Revisions of rights of way definitions: Local authorities should be given the powers (in consultation with the Local Access Forums) to vary the definitions based on the suitability of paths. The suitability should be based on minimum standards with regards to width, construction type, usage etc. The statement in the Bill that any changes to public rights of way legislation would not include retrospective requirements to amend footpath furniture including signage or surfacing should be supported. This statement should include the width of the path as well.

New design guidance is welcomed to ensure a consistent approach across local authority areas. The new design guidance should cover not only detailed design issues such as widths, gradients and barrier widths but should address issues over process and principles. For example, the level of community consultation that local authorities should be undertaking and the status of the different road users at highway junctions.

In summary:-

We support the intention behind the Bill and believe that Active Travel is an important part of the transport mix especially for local access. There are tangible health benefits that could be delivered through the implementation of the Act. Active Travel is however only one intervention that delivers local access and transport and should not be seen as the only potential solution.

We have some concerns regarding aspects of the additional work that will be created for local authorities and their partners, but if there is recognition that delivery will be incremental based on the availability of budget then the approach is reasonable.

There is a need to ensure that unreasonable expectations of an extensive network are not created if additional resource is not available. Many individual schemes could be complex and expensive to deliver and the Act should allow some flexibility for such schemes, to avoid delivery bodies being faced with providing very expensive short lengths of routes.

Detailed guidance and sharing of best practice among delivery bodies should be encouraged as an outcome of the legislation. This is best achieved through the incremental development of guidance by the Welsh Ministers rather than extensive and potentially complex detail in the Bill.

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