

# Media Release



## Active Travel in Northern Ireland

Despite annual spend of around £50m, targets for investing in and developing Northern Ireland's active travel infrastructure will not be met. There is also no evidence that delivery to date has significantly increased active travel rates. These are among the findings of a report published today (Tuesday 30 September) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report considers how the Department for Infrastructure has delivered on its historic active travel objectives. It also summarises steps taken by the Department to improve delivery since the introduction of the 2022 Climate Change Act.

Active travel is the undertaking of journeys by cycling, walking or wheeling, and increasing such journeys is considered important in supporting a wide range of Executive priorities. However, today's report concludes that delivery against active travel objectives has been poor and there is no evidence of long-term increases in levels of active travel.

For example, the 2015 Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland included a target for 20 per cent of all journeys less than one mile to be cycled by 2025. The report notes that the most recent data available (relating to 2021) suggests that only 1.1 per cent of such journeys are being cycled.

Similarly, targets for developing active travel infrastructure are also highly unlikely to be met. A 2016 Strategic Plan for Greenways included an interim target for the delivery of 330 km of primary greenway infrastructure by March 2026. However, by April 2025 only 130 km was in place, representing just 30 per cent of the target.

The 2022 Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) significantly changed the active travel landscape in Northern Ireland by including a requirement for 10 per cent of the overall transport budget (estimated at £850m annually) to be spent on active travel. The Department's current annual spend on active travel is around £50m, falling significantly short of the £85m annual expenditure needed if the Department is to meet its requirements under the Act. The Department does not currently anticipate meeting this requirement until 2030. Whilst it is making organisational changes to increase its delivery capacity, the report notes that these changes are still in the process of being designed and implemented.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

*"Active travel is recognised as having the potential to make a substantial contribution to improving health, protecting our natural environment and supporting our local economy. It is disappointing that, despite significant investment to date, there is no evidence of a long-term trend of increased active travel journeys. This report acknowledges the need for increased active travel expenditure in line with the Climate Change Act, which focuses on making a positive and long term impact on active travel in Northern Ireland. While this represents an opportunity for the Department, it puts greater emphasis on ensuring that investment will be spent efficiently and effectively."*

*"The report identifies a number of areas for improvement, citing the need for improved co-ordination and clarity around how any future plans will contribute to strategic objectives, as well as transparency on how funding will be prioritised. Improved engagement with interested stakeholders will also be vital if the Department is to inspire confidence in its future delivery of active travel."*

ENDS

### **Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report will be available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 30 September 2025.
3. The report cites findings from the most recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (relating to 2021) which show that the car remains the dominant mode of transport. Car journeys account for 69 per cent of journeys made and 84 per cent of the total distance covered by those journeys.
4. The 2022 Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) imposed a requirement to ensure a minimum of 10 per cent of the Department's overall transport budget was spent on active travel. The Act's provisions did not formally establish a definition of what constituted the Department's transport budget. As a result, the Department had to develop an operational definition against which it can plan and its compliance with the Act can be assessed.