

Active Travel in Northern Ireland

**Report by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

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Dorinnia Carville *Northern Ireland Audit Office*
Comptroller and Auditor General 30 September 2025

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Key Facts



**£850
million**

The Department's **current estimate of the overall transport budget** for the purposes of the Climate Change Act



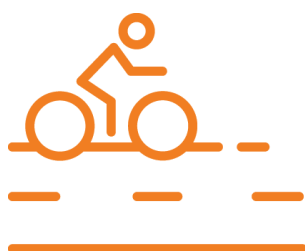
**£50
million**

The Department's **estimated current annual spend on active travel**



**£85
million**

The **estimated minimum annual spend on active travel** needed to satisfy the Climate Change Act's requirement for 10 per cent of the overall transport budget to be spent on active travel. The Department does not expect to meet this target before 2030



1.1%

Proportion of journeys of less than one mile taken by bicycle in 2021, against a target of **20 per cent by 2025** set in the Bicycle Strategy

0.5%

Proportion of journeys of between 1 and 2 miles taken by bicycle in 2021, against a target of **10 per cent by 2025** set in the Bicycle Strategy

1.1%

Proportion of journeys of between 2 and 5 miles taken by bicycle in 2021, against a target of **5 per cent by 2025** set in the Bicycle Strategy

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

1. Active travel is the undertaking of a journey by walking, wheeling or cycling, including journeys made using e-cycles, adapted cycles, wheelchairs and push scooters. Increasing the proportion of journeys made by active travel means is considered to have the potential to make a positive contribution to supporting Executive priorities in a wide range of policy areas, including health, the environment and the economy.
2. **The Department's track record in the delivery of its active travel objectives is poor and has had little impact on active travel levels.** Strategy in active travel has been driven by the Department for Infrastructure's (the Department) 2015 Bicycle Strategy – Northern Ireland Changing Gear. The Strategy established a vision that 20 per cent of all journeys less than one mile in Northern Ireland should be cycled, 10 per cent of journeys between one and two miles, and five per cent of journeys between two and five miles by 2025. To support this vision, the Strategic Plan for Greenways (2016), and the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan (2022) set plans for the development of over 1,000 kilometres of greenway and cycling infrastructure.
3. Our analysis indicates that the Department is not going to deliver against these targets. Significantly less infrastructure has been delivered than planned across both the Strategic Plan for Greenways and the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan. Furthermore, minimal progress has been made towards achievement of the targets set for the proportion of journeys made by bicycle in Northern Ireland.
4. In 2022, the active travel landscape was significantly impacted by the introduction of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland). This imposed a requirement upon the Department to establish plans that would ensure a minimum of 10 per cent of its overall transport budget was spent on active travel. The Act did not include formal definitions of what should be considered to constitute 'total transport budget' or 'active travel expenditure'. As a result, the Department has been required to establish operational definitions against which it can ensure that it meets the expenditure requirement set by the Act.
5. **Achieving the active travel expenditure requirement will need a significant increase in investment.** Current Departmental analysis suggests that, based on expenditure levels incurred in recent years, the average overall transport budget for the purposes of reporting against the Climate Change Act is in the region of £850 million per year. This would require annual investment in active travel of around £85 million. The Department's current estimates suggest that it spends around £50 million per year on active travel. The Department would therefore need to significantly increase its investment to be compliant with the Act.
6. Since the introduction of the Act, the Department has taken a number of steps aimed at increasing its delivery capacity and enhancing its project management. These include:
 - bringing responsibility for active travel under a single directorate within its Transport and Road Asset Management Group;
 - adding key posts to the active travel team and a revised staffing structure;
 - securing additional technical support through its Active Travel Support Office; and
 - making changes to its procurement arrangements to include active travel projects.

It has also developed a draft Active Travel Delivery Plan for settlements in Northern Ireland with a population of over 5,000 to sit alongside the existing Greenways and Belfast Cycling Network plans.

7. **The requirement to ramp up active travel expenditure represents both an opportunity and risk for the Department.** Increased investment in active travel may allow the Department to begin delivering on its targets in relation to active travel, both in terms of delivery of infrastructure and transport behaviour outcomes. However, significantly increasing expenditure in a specific area creates a heightened risk that governance arrangements may not be adequate to ensure effective management of this increased funding in a way that achieves value for money.
8. **New governance arrangements are being designed but are not sufficiently progressed to provide assurance that they will be effective in supporting the future management of the active travel programme.** As part of our review we tested a sample of active travel projects delivered during 2022-23, and identified a set of common issues that we considered would pose a significant risk to the future active travel programme if not addressed. We accept that at the time of this review the Department was already introducing new governance and project management arrangements. The Department told us these changes were intended to support an increase in its delivery capacity and ensure that active travel projects are managed in a way that delivers value for money. It considered that these changes would, when fully implemented, ensure that the issues identified in our testing would not persist.
9. In our review we have assessed these plans, as they are currently devised, and identified a number of areas where there is not yet sufficient detail to be confident that the arrangements that will be implemented will be effective and inspire confidence across the wide range of stakeholders interested in active travel delivery.
10. In particular, there is a lack of clarity around how the various strands of active travel delivery – Greenways, the Belfast Cycling Network and the new Active Travel Delivery Plan – will be managed and coordinated as part of a coherent overall active travel programme. Whilst there are plans for an Active Travel Programme Board to be established and made responsible for oversight and delivery of the active travel programme, these plans have not yet been finalised.
11. Furthermore, it remains unclear at this time what framework the Programme Board will use to coordinate delivery. We consider there is a need for a restatement of what the key objectives of active travel as an overall programme are, an analysis of what contribution each strand of the overall programme is expected to have, and an outline of how this contribution will be measured. We also consider it important that the Department establishes a transparent framework setting out how it intends to prioritise expenditure across different strands of the programme in future years, given the diverse nature of the projects that make up the overall programme.
12. **We found that historic failure to deliver against high profile plans has significantly damaged stakeholder confidence in the Department's ability to deliver significant improvement.** To inspire this confidence, it is essential that the Department ensures it engages stakeholders as much as possible and builds transparency into its arrangements. The proposed Active Travel Stakeholders Engagement Forum provides an opportunity to begin working towards this. However, this will only be effective if those involved, and other stakeholders, are provided with sufficient performance data about how the Department is managing active travel to allow them to constructively challenge the Department and make a positive contribution to the ongoing development and delivery of policy.
13. We have made a number of recommendations intended to ensure that key issues we have identified are addressed as and when the Department finalises its arrangements and begins delivering on its commitments and objectives.

Recommendations



Recommendation 1

Effective governance arrangements are essential for the successful delivery of the Department's active travel plans. The Department should, as a matter of urgency, finalise and implement appropriate programme governance arrangements for the active travel programme.

Once firmly embedded, the Department should undertake a review of the effectiveness of its new governance and management arrangements in improving project management.



Recommendation 2

The Active Travel Stakeholders Engagement Forum provides an important opportunity to improve stakeholder confidence in the Department's ability to deliver against its active travel plans. The forum should be co-designed and set up with a focus on effectiveness of engagement, with key performance information clearly established and reported on a regular basis. The effectiveness of this forum should be reviewed on an ongoing basis.



Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Department produces an overarching strategy statement that clearly articulates to all stakeholders its objectives in relation to active travel, its timetable for achieving these, and the contribution that each major component of the active travel programme is intended to make. This should include clear linkages to strategies already in place where relevant.



Recommendation 4

Linked to the overarching strategy identified in Recommendation 3, the Department should develop an overarching prioritisation framework that will provide a transparent structure for the allocation of funding both between and within the main strands of the overall active travel programme.



Recommendation 5

In order to deliver against its plans to significantly increase investment in active travel, the Department will need to closely monitor the build-up of its activity and spend to ensure that it is adequately progressing in line with its planned spending profiles and progressing towards compliance with the Act.

The Department should develop a high-level annual performance report, that brings together key financial and performance information (including the proportion of transport budget spend in active travel), to provide a clear statement of the impact that expenditure is having. This should incorporate the capture and reporting of information on the proportion of new segregated cycling infrastructure provided.



Recommendation 6

As part of its annual performance reporting in line with Recommendation 5, the Department should ensure that it provides the Stakeholders Forum with appropriate detail about the composition of active travel costs, and discloses and takes the views of the Forum in respect of any material changes in methodology.



Recommendation 7

To be successful, the active travel programme needs to be properly resourced. While it will need to keep its staffing resources under continuous review, in the absence of sufficient internal resources the Department will need to continue to work with its delivery partners to maximise the benefit of their input. Alongside its plans to recruit, the Department should consider how it can, and develop plans to, better harness the input of its other delivery partners.

“The requirement to ramp up active travel expenditure represents both an opportunity and risk for the Department.”

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Part One:

Introduction

Introduction

Active travel

- 1.1** Active travel is generally considered to refer to journeys undertaken by foot or bicycle. The Department for Infrastructure (the Department) defines active travel as *'travelling by physically active means such as walking, wheeling or cycling'*. This definition incorporates trips on foot and pedal-cycle, as well as e-cycles, adapted cycles, wheelchairs and push-scooters. The Department considers that increasing active travel rates has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the achievement of a wide range of positive social outcomes and support wider Executive policy objectives in relation to health, the environment, the economy and society (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Benefits of active travel



Source: Active Travel Delivery Plan Consultation Document (November 2024)

Responsibility for active travel

- 1.2 The Department has statutory responsibility for active travel policy in Northern Ireland and primary responsibility for the delivery and maintenance of active travel infrastructure. This infrastructure includes footways, footpaths, crossings, cycle lanes, cycle tracks, greenways and cycle parking facilities.
- 1.3 Outside the Department, there are a number of other bodies that play an important role in promoting or supporting active travel, and whose involvement reflects the wider benefits associated with active travel. These include other central government departments and agencies (e.g. the Department of Education, the Department for Communities and the Public Health Agency), local councils and voluntary and community bodies.

There is no evidence of a long-term trend of increasing active travel in Northern Ireland

- 1.4 Data on active travel rates is generally obtained through an annual survey. Data for Northern Ireland, however, is not up to date. The most recent results (published in the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland) relate to 2021. Whilst surveys have been conducted since then, the results of these have not been finalised or published because of difficulties in collating data and the need for additional quality assurance work.
- 1.5 The data that is available shows that in Northern Ireland the car is the dominant mode of transport, accounting for 69 per cent of journeys made and 84 per cent of the total distance covered by those journeys in 2021. Active travel accounted for 24.8 per cent of journeys and 6.8 per cent of total distance covered. The vast majority of these journeys, both in terms of number of journeys and distance covered, were walked, with cycling accounting for a very small proportion of journeys made and distances covered (see **Figure 2.1**).
- 1.6 Survey data from 2020 and 2021 would appear to suggest increased rates of active travel in Northern Ireland during these years. However, a number of issues affect comparison of data from those years to previous periods. In both 2020 and 2021, significant changes were made to the methodology applied within the survey as a result of the global pandemic and resulting public health measures that were imposed. The manner in which the survey was conducted changed from face-to-face interviews to telephone-based interviews, and the period covered reduced to a single year compared to the previous three year reporting periods used prior to 2020.
- 1.7 Furthermore, it is highly likely the public health measures imposed during 2020 and 2021 contributed to short-term changes in behaviour that would affect the responses to the survey. Whilst there is no data available yet for Northern Ireland after 2021, data we have reviewed from England and Scotland highlights that whilst active travel rates increased in 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years, there has been a regression in subsequent years (see **Figure 2.2**). As a result the Department would caution against overreliance on the data at paragraph 1.5 above. Figure 2.2 also highlights that for the period in which data is available, active travel rates have typically been lower in Northern Ireland than in England and Scotland.

Figure 2: Active travel rates in Northern Ireland and other UK countries

Figure 2.1: Modes of travel in Northern Ireland¹

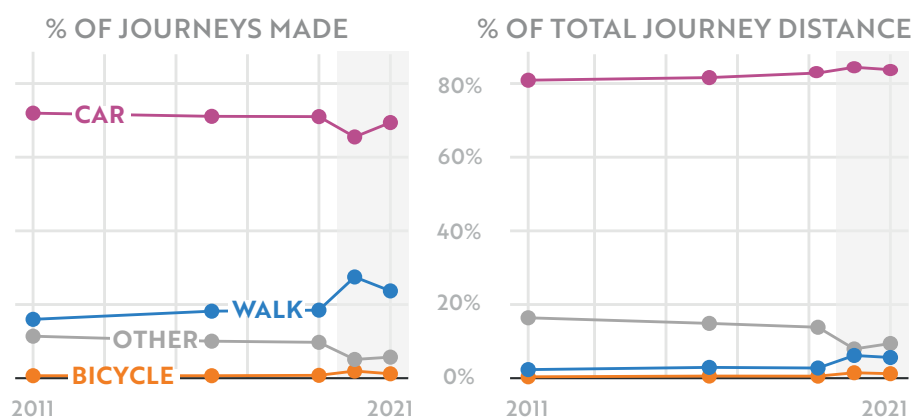
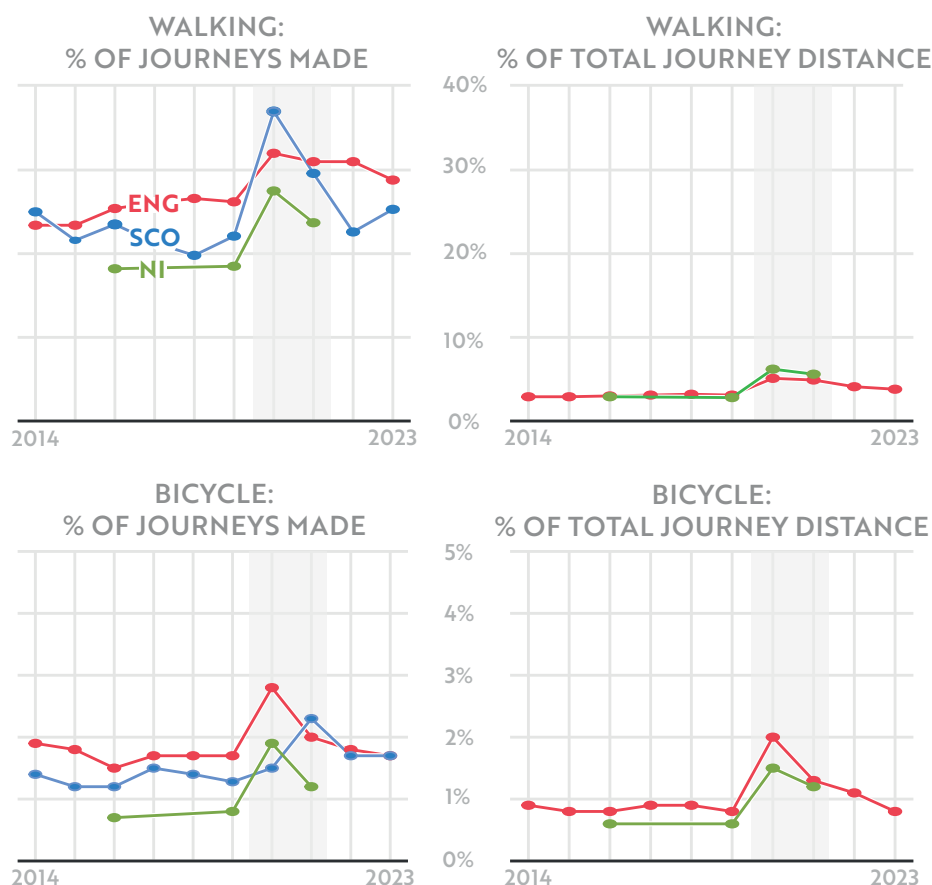


Figure 2.2: Active travel rates in other UK countries^{2,3}



Notes:

¹ Data for Northern Ireland covers the following periods: 2009-11, 2014-16, 2017-19, 2020 and 2021.

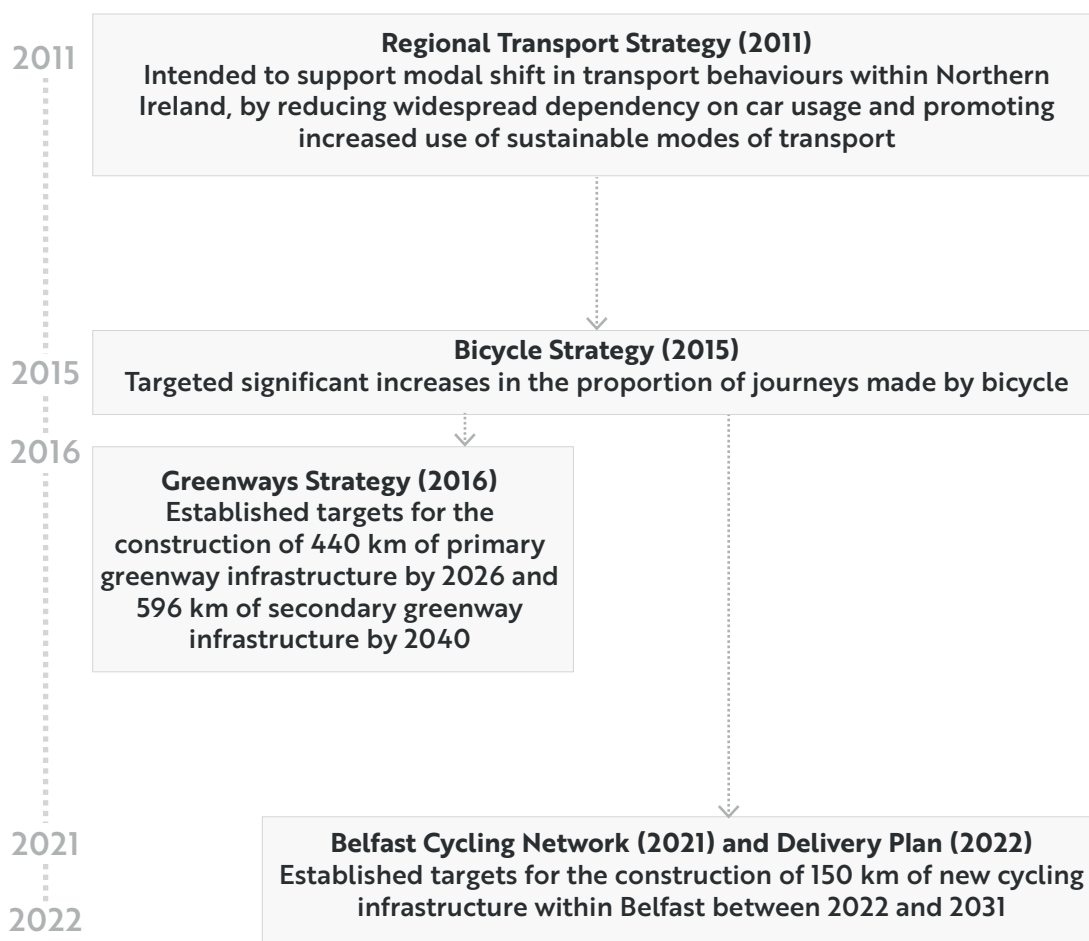
² There were changes in methodology as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic for data collected during 2020 and 2021.

³ The data for Scotland only covers proportion of journeys and not distance covered. Source: National Travel Survey (England); Scottish Household Survey (Scotland); Travel Survey for Northern Ireland

Active travel strategy

- 1.8** Active travel strategy and policy has been driven by the Department's 2015 Bicycle Strategy – Northern Ireland Changing Gear. As set out at **Figure 3**, this Strategy was intended to support the modal shift in travel behaviours towards increased use of sustainable modes of transport and reduced car dependency originally articulated in the Regional Transport Strategy (2011).

Figure 3: Active travel strategy and delivery plans 2015-2022



Source: NIAO from Department of Infrastructure documents

- 1.9** The Bicycle Strategy established a vision to transform Northern Ireland, over the 25 years to 2040, into a 'community where people have the freedom and confidence to travel by bicycle for everyday journeys'. This transformation was to be based upon a three pillared 'Build', 'Support' and 'Promote' approach. Whilst all three pillars are essential for achieving the overall objective, in the first ten to fifteen years the building of infrastructure was considered the key priority. The 'Promote' and 'Support' pillars would then be increasingly important, ensuring that this infrastructure was being used as intended. The Department's particular focus towards cycling at this time – as opposed to more general active travel – reflected the fact that it considered that a comprehensive network of footpaths already existed to facilitate walking and other modes of active travel.

- 1.10** To begin delivering on the 'Build' pillar, two further plans were developed: the Strategic Plan for Greenways (published in November 2016), and the Belfast Cycling Network Plan (June 2021) and associated Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan (March 2022). These focused mainly on the development of new cycle infrastructure, with the Strategic Plan for Greenways setting out intentions to develop just over 1,000 kilometres (km) of greenways over the 25 years to 2040 – a primary network of some 440 km and a secondary network of 596 km. The delivery of Greenways was intended to be council-led, with part funding by the Department towards the development of projects. The Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan proposed the development of approximately 150 km of new cycling infrastructure in the city over the 10 years to 2031.

The Climate Change Act

- 1.11** The active travel policy landscape has been significantly impacted by the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (the Climate Change Act). This introduced a range of new requirements on public bodies intended, primarily, to support the long-term reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. An important aspect of the Act's provisions was the requirement for executive departments to develop sectoral plans intended to support its overall objective to achieve 'net zero' carbon emissions by 2050 within key areas of activity.
- 1.12** The Act requires the Department to establish a sectoral plan for transport, setting out how the sector will contribute towards the emissions targets set by the Climate Change Act. As part of this general requirement, the Department is also specifically required to set '*a minimum spend on active travel from the overall transport budgets of 10 per cent*'. At the time of this report the Department's sectoral plan remains under development and has not yet been finalised and published.
- 1.13** 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. Current Departmental analysis suggests that, based on annual expenditure since the introduction of the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, the average overall transport budget for the purposes of reporting against the Act is in the region of £850 million (based on a three-year average for 2022-23 to 2024-25). This would require average investment of around £85 million per year on active travel to comply with the Act (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Department's estimate for the Overall Transport Budget

| Expenditure area | Outturn 2022-23 £m | Outturn 2023-24 £m | Provisional Outturn 2024-25 £m | Three-year average £m |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Transport and Road Asset Management ¹ | 408 | 418 | 453 | 426 |
| Public Transport | 357 | 460 | 430 | 416 |
| Transport Policy and Other Services | 8 | 7 | 10 | 8 |
| Total² | 772 | 885 | 893 | 850 |

Notes:

1 The Department's TRAM Group is responsible for the maintenance, management and development of the transport network in Northern Ireland.

2 Totals may not add due to rounding.

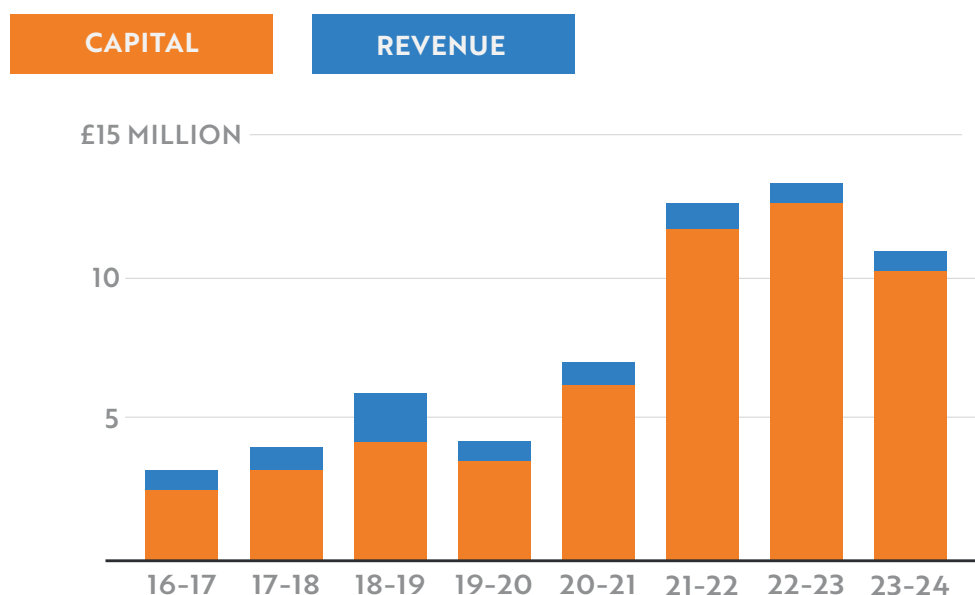
Source: Department for Infrastructure

Meeting Climate Change Act obligations will require a significant increase in investment

1.14

Prior to the Act, active travel was not treated as a discrete function or programme within the Department. As a result, the Department's management information systems were not specifically collating or reporting on active travel expenditure. The absence of such historic information, and the absence of a formal definition of what type of expenditure should be considered as active travel expenditure, has meant the Department has had to undertake work to understand the extent of any deficit between current annual expenditure on active travel and the level of expenditure required by the Act. Initial Departmental analysis, which provided the basis of responses made by the Minister in the Assembly during 2024, estimated that between 2016 and 2024 there had been a total of £61 million expenditure on active travel (see **Figure 5**) with the £13.3 million in 2022-23 the highest amount reported in a single year.

Figure 5: Expenditure on active travel increased significantly over the last 8 years



Source: Department for Infrastructure

- 1.15** Since these responses were provided to the Assembly, the Department has undertaken further analysis and reconsidered how it had been interpreting what expenditure should score as being active travel expenditure. This reconsideration has led to the Department adopting a broader definition than that which underpinned the figures reported in **Figure 5** and which had been previously disclosed to the Assembly and other stakeholders. The Department's current assessment is that annual expenditure incurred on activities such as maintenance and reconstruction of existing footways and cycleways, traffic signal pedestrian crossings, minor pedestrian and cycling enhancements, 50 per cent of street lighting costs, and staff costs associated with the delivery of those activities should all count against the overall expenditure target. This approach was agreed by the Minister in June 2025.
- 1.16** Based upon this new interpretation, the Department's most recent analysis suggests that its expenditure on active travel since 2022 has been around £50 million per year. Whilst this significantly reduces the extent of the gap assessed between actual and targeted expenditure, there still remains a substantial deficit that will require either reallocation of funding within transport budgets or additional investment in future years if it is to be bridged.
- 1.17** The significant increase in future investment that is needed to ensure compliance with the Climate Change Act creates three key risks for the department:
- that it will not increase active travel expenditure to the levels it is statutorily required to deliver. This risk is exacerbated by the constrained budgetary environment faced by the Department over recent years, such that an increase in investment in active travel may necessitate reduction in other areas;
 - that it does not have appropriate governance structures and processes in place to ensure that, while ramping up spend on active travel, it also achieves value for money from its investment; and
 - that when delivered, the planned increase in spending does not achieve the expected impact in terms of increasing active travel levels.

- 1.18** The Department has sought to address these risks through a significant internal reorganisation of roles and responsibilities in relation to active travel. It has developed new structures and arrangements, intended to ensure the effective delivery of active travel going forward. As part of this, the Department has also developed a new plan for the delivery of active travel infrastructure in urban areas outside Belfast - the Active Travel Delivery Plan.
- 1.19** A draft version of this new plan was issued for consultation in November 2024, setting out plans for the development of over 200 km of high-quality active travel infrastructure (walking and cycling routes etc.) in urban areas outside Belfast over the next 10 years. Beyond this, later phases are expected to deliver over 1,000 km of future routes. This delivery plan includes the Department's first formal definition of active travel and what constitutes active travel infrastructure.
- 1.20** The impetus for the development of the Active Travel Delivery Plan lies in the spend requirements set under the Climate Change Act. However, the Department told us that whilst not specifically stated in the consultation document, the draft Active Travel Delivery Plan is consistent with the overall objectives of the Bicycle Strategy, and the stated intention within the Strategy for the development of other urban bicycle network plans (within its 'Build' pillar).

Scope and structure

- 1.21** This report provides an overview of how successfully the Department has delivered on its historic active travel objectives, and evaluates the new governance and management processes that the Department is implementing in response to the Climate Change Act.
- 1.22** In reviewing the Department's historic performance, we have primarily focused on the Department's performance on delivering against the targets set within the 'Build' pillar of its strategy. This is based on the fact that this is where the substantial majority of public money is spent, and also the fact that the success of the other pillars – 'Promote' and 'Support' – are to at least some extent dependent upon the provision of high quality infrastructure. The shortfalls we report in respect of the 'Build' pillar between 2015 and the introduction of the Climate Change Act would put a low ceiling on what could be achieved by the 'Support' and 'Promote' pillars at the current time.
- 1.23** As part of our evaluation of historic expenditure we have reviewed the project management arrangements used to deliver individual projects. In the course of this work we detected a number of governance and project management weaknesses. Whilst we report the issues we have detected in our work, we recognise that the Department is in the process of implementing material changes in the approach it uses to plan and manage active travel projects. The Department has asserted to us that these changes are intended to significantly increase the Department's delivery capacity and also the quality of its project management processes. The Department assured us that it has learned the lessons from past performance, and considers that the changes being made will effectively address the issues identified in this report for future projects. Given this context we have not developed a suite of specific recommendations based upon the findings of this part of our review.
- 1.24** We have instead made recommendations on those areas where we believe the design and implementation of new governance arrangements is incomplete and subject to some uncertainty. These recommendations are intended to support the Department in ensuring its overall framework is designed in a way that maximises the effectiveness of those arrangements and ensures value for money is demonstrably achieved in future active travel expenditure.

1.25 Our report is structured in the following way:

- **Part Two** provides an overview of the Department's delivery against its active travel objectives in the years preceding the Climate Change Act; and
- **Part Three** assesses the measures the Department is taking to ensure it complies with the Climate Change Act in a way that delivers value for money.

Part Two:

Active travel policy, delivery and spend prior to the Climate Change Act

Active travel policy, delivery and spend prior to the Climate Change Act

The Department developed a number of plans targeting delivery of new infrastructure and increasing cycling levels

- 2.1** As outlined at Part One, past policy and strategy in active travel was focused on cycling and has been driven by the Department's 2015 Bicycle Strategy – Northern Ireland Changing Gear, and its vision to drastically increase cycling rates over the 25 years to 2040. The Bicycle Strategy's three pillared approach aimed to build a comprehensive cycle network, support people who choose to travel by bicycle and promote cycling as a mode of transport for everyday journeys.
- 2.2** The Strategy articulated its vision of a '*community where people have the freedom and confidence to travel by bicycle for everyday journeys*' with reference to targets for significant increases in the proportion of journeys made in Northern Ireland by bicycle (see **Figure 6**).

Figure 6: Targets for journeys cycled

| By 2025 | By 2040 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of all journeys less than 1 mile to be cycled • 10% of all journeys between 1 and 2 miles to be cycled • 5% of all journeys between 2 and 5 miles to be cycled | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40% of all journeys less than 1 mile to be cycled • 20% of all journeys between 1 and 2 miles to be cycled • 10% of all journeys between 2 and 5 miles to be cycled |

Source: Northern Ireland Changing Gear: A Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland

- 2.3** Two further plans were developed in support of the Bicycle Strategy, the Strategic Plan for Greenways (published in November 2016) and the Belfast Cycle Network plan (published in June 2021). A delivery plan for the Belfast Cycle Network, for the 10 years 2022 to 2031, was also published in March 2022.
- 2.4** These plans focus mainly on the delivery of respective route networks. The Strategic Plan for Greenways identified the development of just over 1,000 km of greenways over the 25 years to 2040 – a primary network of 7 routes and a secondary network of 20 routes. Targets within the Strategic Plan for Greenways set out intentions to deliver 75 per cent of primary greenway routes and 25 per cent of secondary greenway routes by 2026. The Belfast Cycling Network, and its Delivery Plan in turn, proposed the delivery of approximately 150 km of new cycling infrastructure for the city, together with upgrades to a number of existing cycle routes. Comprising over 50 schemes, the plan outlined intentions for the delivery of 16 short-term schemes in the period 2022-2025, 22 medium-term schemes between 2025 and 2028, and a further 15 long-term schemes between 2028 and 2031.

Delivery against plans to date has been poor

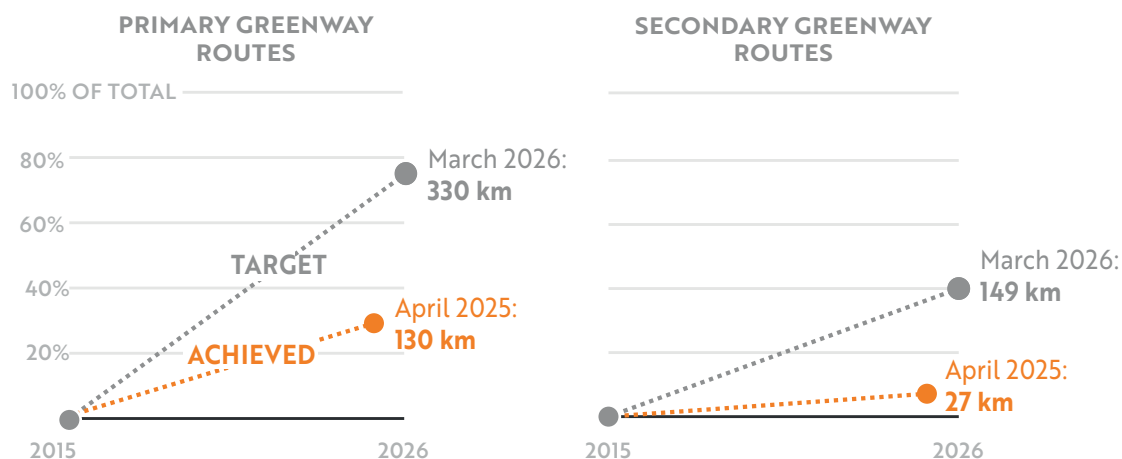
2.5

The Department is not going to deliver against the output targets set in both the Strategic Plan for Greenways and Belfast Cycling Network Plan (see **Figure 7**). Our discussions with stakeholders identified a general frustration at the length of time that passed between publication of the Strategy and the publication of delivery plans, as well as the subsequent gap between target and delivery over the last decade. The Department has noted that, particularly in relation to the Belfast Cycling Network, a more sustainable pipeline of schemes could have been developed had the plan been published earlier. However, it has also highlighted that it is unclear whether this would have led to any increased delivery without the impetus to increase actual investment that has subsequently been provided by the Climate Change Act.

Figure 7: Infrastructure delivery has been significantly lower than intended

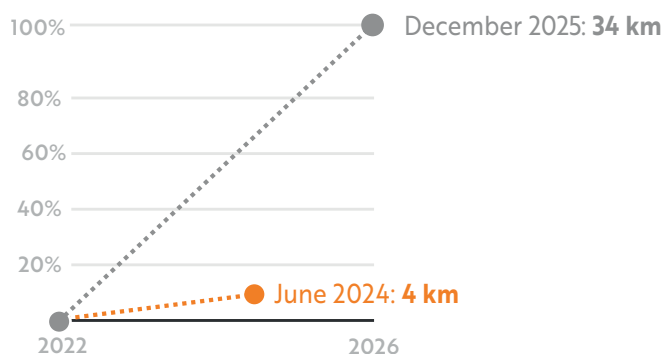
Strategic Plan for Greenways

Targets were set for the delivery of 440 km of primary greenway infrastructure and 596 km of secondary infrastructure by 2040. Interim targets of 75 per cent of primary infrastructure and 25 per cent of secondary infrastructure were set for 2026.



Belfast Cycling Network

This plan was intended to support the delivery of 150 km of new cycling infrastructure within Belfast between 2022 and 2031. Around 34 km of infrastructure was to be delivered by end December 2025.



Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by Department for Infrastructure

- 2.6** In terms of outputs, approximately 130 km of primary greenway network was in place by April 2025, representing just 30 per cent of the 440 km that was targeted in the Greenways Plan. In addition, a further 27 km of secondary routes were in place, representing only 5 per cent of the total of almost 600 km of secondary routes aspired to within the Plan. Further detail on Greenway delivery is provided at **Appendix 1**.
- 2.7** Given this level of progress, it is not possible that targets for the delivery of 75 per cent of the primary network (equating to some 330 km) and 25 per cent of the secondary network (around 150 km) by 2026 will be achieved. Full delivery against the Plan is also at significant risk, in the absence of a confirmed substantial increase in delivery capacity and funding in the short-term.
- 2.8** Reported progress against the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan indicates that, to June 2024, none of the 16 short-term schemes planned for delivery between 2022 and 2025 had been fully completed. However, parts of two schemes had been delivered, representing just over 4 km of network infrastructure. Delivery to June 2024 represents just over 10 per cent of the approximately 34 km of network infrastructure planned for delivery between 2022 and 2025 under the Network Plan. Further detail on reported delivery against the Belfast Cycling Network Plan is provided at **Appendix 2**.
- 2.9** In addition to routes delivered, the Department also noted that a number of other schemes are currently in progress. It identified a total of 13 further schemes in progress by the end of 2024-25, at various stages of development from early design through to commencement of works. These include 10 short-term schemes identified in the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan, while a further three reflect medium-term schemes. One additional scheme, identified as an upgrade of existing cycle infrastructure (at Stranmillis Embankment in South Belfast) was also identified by the Department as underway. Project timeline information provided indicates that many of these schemes will continue through 2025-26 and 2026-27. Therefore, while the majority of short-term Belfast Cycling Network schemes may at least have commenced by 2025, they are not planned to complete within the 2022-25 timeframe envisioned under the Delivery Plan.
- 2.10** The Department has confirmed that, at the time of the publication of the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan, very little detailed design work had been undertaken on most of the schemes in the short-time list for delivery up to 2025. As delivery of infrastructure schemes typically requires a number of years to develop from inception to construction, it is not entirely surprising that the majority of schemes identified for delivery at that time are only now progressing towards construction.

The investment that has been made has had little discernible impact upon behaviours

- 2.11** Whilst not at the level originally intended, the projects which have been delivered have still required substantial investment by the Department. Analysis of reported spend provided by the Department identifies total spend of around £12 million in relation to the Strategic Plan for Greenways over the five years to 2023-24. This incorporates both spend directly by the Department and through grants to local councils. In addition, some £1.5 million was spent in respect of the Belfast Cycling Network over the three years 2021-22 to 2023-24. This direct expenditure was in addition to the other less direct but significant costs that the Department considers it was incurring in relation to active travel at this time (as discussed at paragraphs 1.14 to 1.16).

- 2.12** The evidence available does not demonstrate that the investment made has materially improved cycling rates in line with the Department's intentions. Whilst the Department reports that its evaluations of active travel education and promotion programmes in schools have had a positive impact on behaviours, no significant progress has been made towards meeting the targets set within the Bicycle Strategy (see **Figure 8**).

Figure 8: The significant increase in journeys undertaken by bicycle has not been achieved

Bicycle Strategy 2015

The Bicycle Strategy established targets for increasing the number of journeys undertaken by bicycle



Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland

The Department has not collated information on the level of segregated cycling provision

- 2.13** The importance of quality of provision in terms of perception of safety for cyclists, including the provision of segregated cycle facilities on main arterial routes/heavily trafficked roads, is evidenced in the 2021 UK National Transport Attitudes Survey and highlighted in the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan. The Survey identified that 55 per cent of respondents indicated that off-road and segregated cycle paths would encourage them to cycle more. Our discussions with stakeholders noted a perception of a tendency for provision of shared paths in Northern Ireland and called into question the adequacy of segregated provision to date.

- 2.14** To investigate this issue, we attempted to analyse the proportion of new cycling infrastructure that was segregated. However, the Department was unable to provide this information as it has not been methodically gathering and collating such data. The Department reported to us that it considered segregation to be only one aspect of quality, and that segregation was not necessarily required depending upon the local environment and context of a particular route. However, given the potential significance of this issue within guidance, we consider this to be important information that the Department should collect and report on a regular basis.

Our review of historic active travel projects identified a number of project management issues

- 2.15** As noted at paragraph 1.14, in 2024 the Department reported that total spend in respect of active travel had amounted to around £61 million between 2016 and 2024. We sought to evaluate at a high level how effectively this expenditure had been managed. The purpose of this analysis was to identify any commonly occurring issues affecting project management that, if unaddressed, pose a significant risk to value for money in the context of increased expenditure levels.
- 2.16** To do this we undertook a review of expenditure incurred during the 2022-23 year, sample testing a total of 17 schemes where total reported costs exceeded £200,000. This sample provided coverage of two-thirds of the total £13.3 million reported expenditure in that year. The sample included schemes delivered directly by the Department, through its regional divisions, and those delivered by local councils and funded through grants provided by the Department. While focused primarily towards capital infrastructure spend (cycle lanes, crossings etc.), it also included spend in respect of behavioural change (e.g. the Cycling Proficiency scheme and the Active Schools Travel scheme) and other active travel enabling expenditure (for instance cycle stands and secure cycle parking).
- 2.17** Our review highlighted several project management issues in how expenditure has been managed in the past, which must be addressed within future governance arrangements in order to ensure the effective management of the planned increased active travel expenditure stream. The issues include:
- **deficiency in business case documentation** – most projects reviewed did not have a traditional business case and there was wide variety in approach taken, with differing content and level of detail included in submissions for project approval, and minutes of approval were generally brief. This was particularly the case for projects delivered by the Department's divisional teams;
 - **lack of objectives and measurable targets for projects** – the active travel benefits of schemes were not always clear or explicitly stated or links to active travel strategies made. Where targets were identified these were framed in terms of infrastructure delivery rather than in terms of increased usage/active travel etc. Baselines were not always evident, and in some cases, there were no targets set at all;
 - **insufficient project cost and duration information** – detailed cost and scheme duration estimates were often missing from information presented for project approval. Delays and cost overruns were noted in some cases. Reasons for increased costs included unplanned inflationary increases and unforeseen issues resulting from ground investigations, while delays mainly related to contractor availability/contractor issues;

- **insufficient evidence that risks and uncertainties were adequately considered** – there was a lack of detail in relation to risks and uncertainties and how they would be mitigated, managed, monitored etc.; and
- **poor monitoring of progress and lack of timely evaluation** – particularly with regard to schemes delivered by the Department's divisional teams, there was a lack of evidence around the monitoring of project progress. There was also some evidence of delay in the production of post-project evaluations and a lack of documentation of lessons learned.

In addition, in some cases, option analysis prior to scheme design contained limited detail identifying and justifying the current design as the preferred option. On the basis of the above, we do not consider that the Department is able to demonstrate that historically it has achieved value for money in respect of its active travel spend.

2.18

Whilst we have reviewed project documentation and identified issues within this part of our review, we have not made specific recommendations relating to these findings. The governance arrangements used to plan and deliver active travel infrastructure have been subject to significant change as part of the Department's programme of work in response to the Climate Change Act. In particular, the changes noted at paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6 will, when fully implemented, result in new processes being applied to manage these types of projects. The Department has told us that it considers the changes made will increase the quality of governance and project management across all active travel projects and effectively address the issues identified above in future projects. In our view, it is important that the Department tests the effectiveness of these changes at the earliest appropriate opportunity.

“While not at the level originally intended, the projects which have been delivered to date have still required substantial investment... The evidence available does not demonstrate that the investment made has materially improved cycling rates.”

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Part Three:

Increasing active travel spend and delivery to meet Climate Change Act obligations

Increasing active travel spend and delivery to meet Climate Change Act obligations

Active travel strategy and related delivery plans have been developed over the last decade

- 3.1** The Strategic Plan for Greenways and the Belfast Cycling Network Plan and Delivery Plan were developed over an extended period. Despite this, we consider that there are identifiable linkages between them and the overarching Bicycle Strategy. The Strategic Plan for Greenways is a 25-year plan which aims to encourage a substantial increase in the number of people walking and cycling as part of everyday life, through the development of a network of greenways, in partnership with local councils. This satisfied a commitment under the Bicycle Strategy to develop urban and rural greenways as part of the overall integrated cycle network. Similarly, the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan addresses the Bicycle Strategy's intention to develop bicycle network plans for urban areas – starting with Belfast.
- 3.2** The recently developed draft Active Travel Delivery Plan is intended to complement this existing policy framework. The draft Active Travel Delivery Plan sets out plans for the development of active travel infrastructure (walking and cycling routes etc.) in 42 urban areas outside Belfast over the next 10 years. If achieved, this will result in over 200 km of new high-quality active travel infrastructure (priority routes) being constructed.
- 3.3** While not specifically stated within the document, the Department told us that the draft delivery plan is strategically linked to the 2015 Bicycle Strategy which envisaged the development of other urban bicycle network plans to supplement the Belfast Plan (see earlier at **Figure 3**). The overarching intention is that the different infrastructure networks built across Northern Ireland should ultimately merge into a seamless, integrated network that allows more people to choose active travel.
- 3.4** Furthermore, in November 2024 the Minister for Infrastructure also announced the first stage in a rolling programme of Active Travel Signature Projects. The Department told us that the six initial projects reflect major, impactful schemes identified for their potential to deliver connectivity between settlements or key destinations. Although not specifically identified as Signature Projects within earlier documents, each Project forms a part of a route already identified in either the Strategic Plan for Greenways, the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan or the Active Travel Delivery Plan.

New governance and delivery structures are being designed and implemented

- 3.5** As identified in Part Two, delivery of active travel infrastructure has been well below intended levels historically. To help address this the Department has taken a number of steps since 2022 aimed at increasing its delivery capacity and enhancing its project management. For example, the Department has:
- brought responsibility for active travel under a single Director within its Transport and Road Asset Management Group;
 - added key posts to its active travel team and agreed a revised staffing structure and a complement of 59 posts;

- appointed consultants to provide technical support in developing a delivery programme and to facilitate an increased project pipeline – an Active Travel Support Office; and
- made changes to its procurement arrangements, for both major and minor works, to include active travel projects.

3.6

In addition, the Department is in the process of developing new structures to oversee the delivery of active travel. Whilst these have yet to be finalised and implemented, the Department has informed us that the governance framework is likely to consist of three main groups:

- an **Active Travel Board** – a programme board chaired by the Director of Active Travel (as overall senior responsible officer), with responsibility for the oversight of the design and delivery of the Department's active travel programme, including the monitoring of programme outcomes;
- an **Active Travel Stakeholders Engagement Forum** – an advisory group, chaired by the Deputy Director of Active Travel and with representation from a number of industry, public and advocacy groups, as a platform for engagement with stakeholders, to provide a constructive challenge to the Department and to facilitate greater collaborative working on actions to support the programme strategy and objectives; and
- an **Active Travel Local Council Engagement Forum** – an advisory group, chaired by the Head of Greenways, Technical Support and Behavioural Change and with representatives from all 11 local councils, enabling the co-ordination of council greenway and active travel delivery and providing a collaborative platform for councils.

3.7

The Department also told us that the implementation of its planned governance arrangements cannot commence until key vacancies within its active travel team have been filled – in particular the two divisional delivery lead roles (see later at paragraph 3.36). These staff will form part of the departmental representation on the programme board and engagement forums. Given plans to recruit key staff, the Department suggested that governance groups could be in place by autumn 2025.



Recommendation 1

Effective governance arrangements are essential for the successful delivery of the Department's active travel plans. The Department should, as a matter of urgency, finalise and implement appropriate programme governance arrangements for the active travel programme.

Once firmly embedded, the Department should undertake a review of the effectiveness of its new governance and management arrangements in improving project management.

3.8

During our review we found that the failure to deliver infrastructure at the scale set out in strategy and associated delivery plans has significantly damaged stakeholder confidence in the Department's delivery of active travel. Whilst the Department has supported the development of recent initiatives with stakeholder engagement, it is not clear this has been sufficient to restore confidence. We consider the proposed Active Travel Stakeholder Engagement Forum to be an important component of ensuring new arrangements inspire confidence amongst key stakeholders.

- 3.9** However, if this group is to be effective it is critical that, from its outset, the information that will be provided to the group is clearly defined and agreed with prospective stakeholders. This should be of sufficient detail and quality to enable members to exercise a constructive challenge to the Department, ensuring that opportunities to enhance performance are identified and that the Department's delivery of active travel achieves value for money.



Recommendation 2

The Active Travel Stakeholders Engagement Forum provides an important opportunity to improve stakeholder confidence in the Department's ability to deliver against its active travel plans. The forum should be co-designed and set up with a focus on effectiveness of engagement, with key performance information clearly established and reported on a regular basis. The effectiveness of this forum should be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

There is significant uncertainty as to how the various active travel delivery plans will be managed collectively

- 3.10** Effectively coordinating and managing the various delivery plans within active travel will be complex. The establishment of proper governance arrangements is essential in enabling the Department to co-ordinate the build-up of its investment in active travel and in meeting its active travel objectives. In bringing together these activities as a single programme, the Department has recognised the need to put in place clear structures and processes for decision-making, resource allocation, risk management, oversight, monitoring and evaluation.
- 3.11** However, we remain concerned that at this point there remains uncertainty around:
- how the various delivery plans will interact:
 - their relative priority: and
 - what individual contribution each delivery plan is expected to make to achieving the desired outcomes from the expenditure.
- 3.12** There are no separate business cases for any of the delivery plans and a general lack of identified outcome targets (despite references to broad aims to increase cycling levels and to the wider health, environmental, economic and societal benefits of active travel). The Bicycle Strategy is the only element which incorporates outcome targets, set in terms of increasing the proportion of shorter journeys cycled and not in terms of overall active travel rates. As noted at **Figure 8**, the extent of the gap between the levels of cycling targeted and actual rates is such that it is questionable how realistic these targets are within the timelines set.
- 3.13** Targets in the Strategic Plan for Greenways and the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan are output-focused, determining the overall length of routes to be delivered (and the timescale in which they are to be delivered). Similarly, the draft Active Travel Delivery Plan sets out broad intentions for route delivery over the next ten years but does not contain any specific targets in respect of its expected impact on levels of walking or cycling. The delivery of infrastructure is clearly key to enabling individuals to travel more actively, but is not an effective target in itself. We have observed the minimal impact that the infrastructure that has been built here has had on rates of active travel historically.

- 3.14** In our view the way that delivery plans have accumulated has undermined cohesion and clarity. A consistent issue identified in our engagement with stakeholders was a lack of understanding of what the Department wanted to achieve, how it was setting its priorities, and how it realistically could expect to deliver its stated targets.



Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Department produces an overarching strategy statement that clearly articulates to all stakeholders its objectives in relation to active travel, its timetable for achieving these, and the contribution that each major component of the active travel programme is intended to make. This should include clear linkages to strategies already in place where relevant.

- 3.15** The Department has reported that it has already begun working towards this recommendation. It has indicated that it intends to undertake a benefits mapping exercise to support the development of appropriate targets and measures for the overall active travel programme. It is anticipated that this will result in the development of SMART, outcome-based targets that would reflect three broad themes:

- **People** – the numbers /proportion of the population connected to the active travel network;
- **Places** – the destinations the network connects people to; and
- **Provision** – the quantum and quality of network provided.

Furthermore, it is expected that the Active Travel Board will be responsible for monitoring performance against the targets that are set. The Department also indicated its intention to undertake a review of both the Strategic Plan for Greenways and the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan but there are no details available currently about the intended scope of these reviews.

There is a need for a coherent and transparent approach to prioritising the use of funding that is available

- 3.16** During our stakeholder engagement we encountered a general appreciation of the risk posed to value for money when expenditure on a particular area was intended to increase year-on-year over a long period. There was also a general lack of understanding as to how in practical terms the various delivery plans would be funded, and competing priorities managed in the event of scarce resources.
- 3.17** More specifically, we identified concerns that the approach adopted within the Active Travel Delivery Plan – targeting investment across 42 different urban centres (see **Appendix 3**) – would in itself pose a risk to value. Whilst the routes identified in the action plan remain provisional and have not been finalised, they have been identified on their ability to connect people to places of interest. An emphasis has been placed on connections to local schools, public transport and town centres as those most likely to maximise benefits for individuals, the environment and society.

- 3.18** While stakeholders acknowledge the logic in the Department's focus on connections to schools, public transport and town centres in facilitating active travel, our discussions identified concerns around the spread of activity across so many towns and its potential to dilute the impact achieved from new investment. Stakeholders suggested that greater impact and value could be achieved, in terms of increasing levels of walking and cycling (and modal shift), by focusing investment towards key population areas with greater propensity for increased walking and cycling, for instance Belfast, Londonderry, Bangor and Craigavon.
- 3.19** The Department, however, has indicated that the broad focus of the plan reflects the Minister's stated desire to ensure overall regional fairness and equity, promoting balanced development across the country. The Department further indicated that the prioritisation of funding would be a matter for future Ministerial decision-making as and when departmental budgets were allocated.
- 3.20** It is highly likely that in future years choices will have to be made on which parts of the overall active travel programme will be allocated scarce resources, with some objectives not able to be funded. It is entirely appropriate that these decisions should be made within a decision-making framework that considers a number of different costs and benefits relating to each project against a number of different policy objectives. However, it is important that this framework appropriately emphasises achieving value for money, and also inspires confidence in stakeholders that the decisions made are rational and represent the best choice available to decision-makers in terms of the objectives set within the strategy statement referred to in recommendation 3.



Recommendation 4

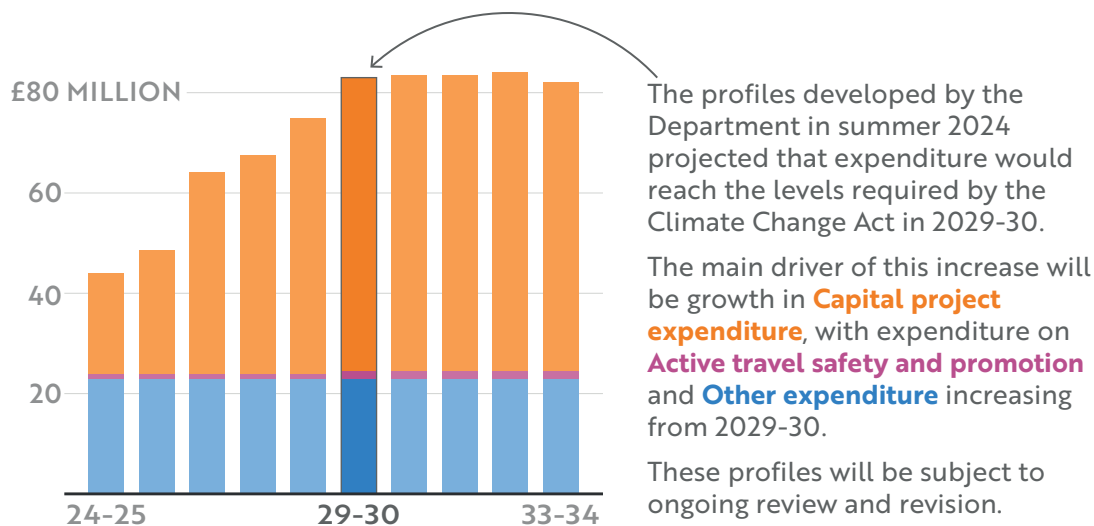
Linked to the overarching strategy identified in Recommendation 3, the Department should develop an overarching prioritisation framework that will provide a transparent structure for the allocation of funding both between and within the main strands of the overall active travel programme.

The Department does not expect to meet the Climate Change Act expenditure target before 2030

- 3.21** As identified at paragraphs 1.13 to 1.14, the Climate Change Act did not provide definitions of what constituted the overall transport budget or what should be considered as active travel expenditure. In the absence of such definitions the Department has been required to interpret the legislation and establish its own operational definitions of both in order to work towards compliance with the Act.
- 3.22** Currently, the Department has calculated its overall transport budget predominantly based on the costs associated within its Transport Road Asset Management Group (responsible for the maintenance, management and development of the transport network in Northern Ireland), and public transport. Based on a three-year average from 2022-23 to 2024-25, the Department has estimated the average overall transport budget to be in the region of £850 million (see **Figure 4**). This comprises both capital and revenue costs, including some staff costs and other administrative overheads, and represents approximately 55 per cent of the overall Departmental budget. A transport budget of this level would require annual active travel expenditure of £85 million per year to be compliant with the Act. This is significantly higher than the £50 million the Department considers that it currently spends annually.

- 3.23** The Department intends to meet the expenditure target set within the Climate Change Act by increasing delivery against the action plans which form the overall active travel programme. It is intended this will involve increasing activity (and spend) over a number of years, taking a managed approach to building and maintaining a pipeline of projects for future delivery whilst also ensuring value for money is achieved.
- 3.24** This managed approach recognises the significant constraint on the Department's budget over recent years and the fact that, without increased allocations to meet the Climate Change Act requirement, additional allocations towards active travel would necessitate a reduction in other business areas across the Department's full range of responsibilities. It also takes account of its internal capacity to manage and deliver the increased level of project activity anticipated. In particular, this reflects wider staffing issues across the Department in recruiting technical staff and funding uncertainty.
- 3.25** Departmental estimates for the 10 years to 2033-34 agreed by the Minister in summer 2024 identified the expansion of construction delivery (and thereby spend) from year 3 (2026-27) onwards (see **Figure 9**). In terms of capital infrastructure investment, this would require the Department to more than double the scale of its investment, with the planned rolling programme of Active Travel Signature Projects and delivery of priority routes within the various delivery plans making up a substantial proportion of capital spend at peak levels. The Department's ability to increase spend in line with these plans will not only be dependent upon the overall funding levels available into the future, but also the success of its design pipeline in bringing projects forward for delivery.

Figure 9: Departmental expenditure on active travel is projected to increase significantly over the next decade



Source: *Departure for Infrastructure*

- 3.26** Under its planning scenario, the Department said that subject to available funding in future years, a credible plan existed to meet the 10 per cent target by 2030. If this scenario is implemented as planned it would enable the Department to meet the requirement in advance of the second sectoral planning period (2030-2040). Spend against the target could then be monitored and reported on an annual basis across the remaining sectoral plan periods.

- 3.27** As a requirement set in law, the Department has a duty to meet the 10 per cent active travel spend requirement. We do, however, recognise that the Department is operating within a recent historical context of not delivering against its targets and uncertainty about whether it currently possesses the capacity to manage and deliver an increased number of projects. Within this context, the Department's cautious approach in building up towards the level of activity and spend necessary to meet the Climate Change Act's requirement represents a reasonable and practical effort to ensure value for money is maintained whilst expenditure increases.
- 3.28** Our discussions with the Department have identified its intentions to report on an annual basis against the Climate Change Act's spend requirements. The Department has collated figures in relation to 2024-25 and worked backwards to analyse overall spend in the years since the introduction of the Act. However, at the time of this report the Department has not yet finalised its plans for reporting or publishing financial information relating to active travel.



Recommendation 5

In order to deliver against its plans to significantly increase investment in active travel, the Department will need to closely monitor the build-up of its activity and spend to ensure that it is adequately progressing in line with its planned spending profiles and progressing towards compliance with the Act.

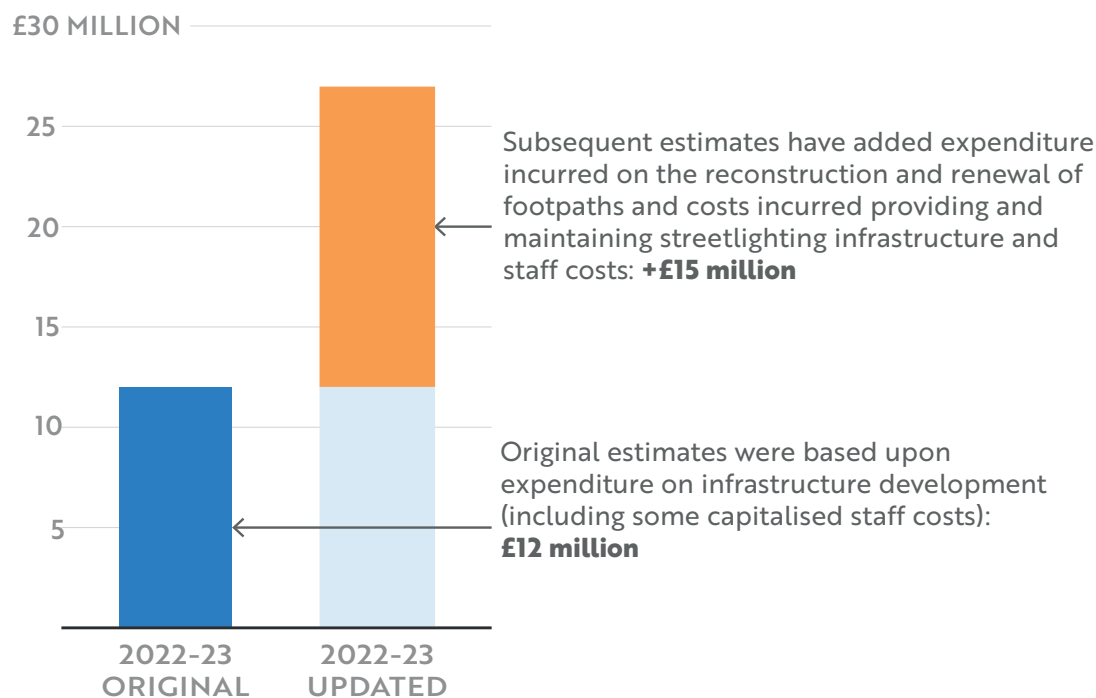
The Department should also develop a high-level annual performance report, that brings together key financial and performance information (including the proportion of transport budget spend in active travel), to provide a clear statement of the impact that expenditure is having. This should incorporate the capture and reporting of information on the proportion of new segregated cycling infrastructure provided.

Some of the activities incorporated into planned future expenditure may be contentious

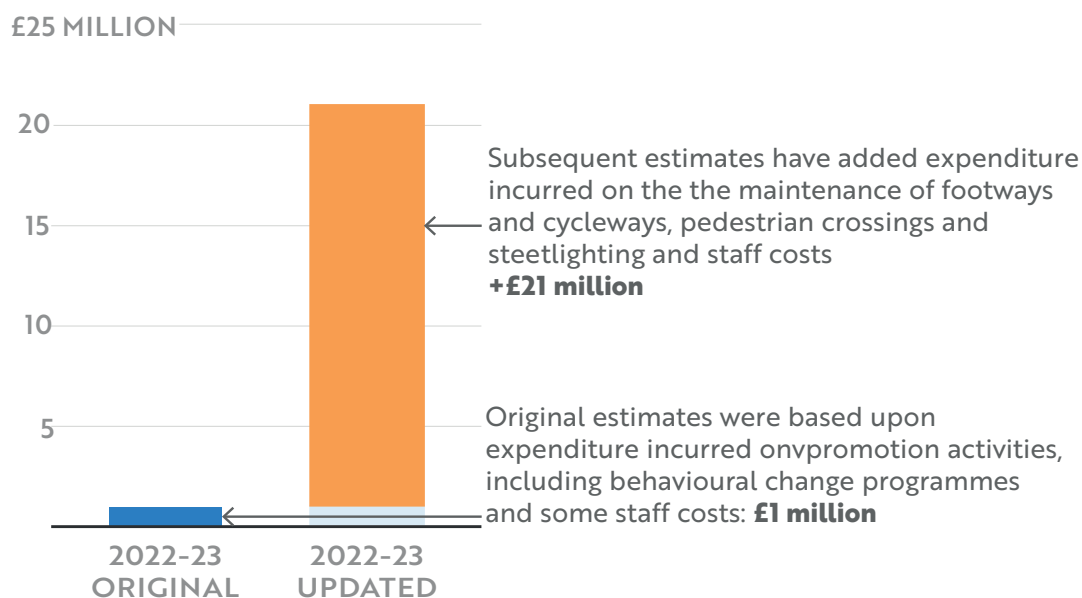
- 3.29** As noted at paragraph 1.14, the Department's active travel activities were previously not managed as a discrete function. As such, it did not consistently collate or report active travel expenditure separately. With the renewed impetus around active travel associated with the Climate Change Act (and its spend requirements), the Department has undertaken detailed analysis of historic expenditure, in an effort to understand the full extent of previous expenditure, and the true scale of the increase necessitated by the Act.
- 3.30** The Department's early analysis of its previous expenditure on active travel primarily focused on identifying expenditure directly related to the delivery of new active travel infrastructure and programmes. The outcome of this analysis was that it was estimated that the Department was spending £13 million on active travel in 2022-23. This analysis provided the basis for the figures included in responses made by the Minister to Assembly questions prior to October during 2024.
- 3.31** Since then the Department has carried out detailed analysis of expenditure that is considered to be related to active travel. This has led to the inclusion of significant expenditure streams which the Department considers benefit pedestrians and cyclists (see earlier at paragraph 1.15), which result in an estimate of £50 million of investment during 2022-23 – some £37 million higher than earlier calculations and public statements (see **Figure 10**). This approach was approved by the Minister in September 2024.

Figure 10: Recent Departmental analysis indicates baseline annual expenditure on active travel has been £50 million

Capital Expenditure



Revenue Expenditure



Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by Department for Infrastructure

- 3.32** In response to our audit queries the Department has justified the classification of these costs through reference to survey data identifying barriers to walking and cycling that it considers evidence the appropriateness of its current thinking. In relation to footway maintenance, the Department cited results reported in the UK National Transport Attitude Survey to support this change in approach. Respondents to this survey reported that well-maintained pavements (even, clean, uncluttered, well lit) were the number one factor that would encourage people to walk more, and that maintaining road surfaces for cycling was the third highest factor to encourage more cycling (after safer roads and more off-road, segregated cycle paths). The Department also indicated that some 40 per cent of all traffic signal equipment is provided for pedestrian amenity and safety.
- 3.33** With regard to street lighting costs, the Department highlighted that street lighting in urban areas provides amenity and security and, in particular, is a significant factor in making people feel safer when travelling alone at night. Without it, people are less likely to travel and more likely to feel unsafe. As such, where street lighting is provided to light a footway, cycleway or footpath, it is an important piece of active travel infrastructure. In the Department's view, attributing 50 per cent of street lighting costs to the benefit of pedestrians and cyclists could be reasonably argued as being a robust position.
- 3.34** The impact of including these new costs within the estimates of baseline active travel expenditure significantly decreases the additional investment needed to meet the Climate Change Act target compared to 2024 baseline estimates. These revised estimates have been developed internally by the Department, and were not subject to consultation or formal engagement with external stakeholders. There is a key risk that these revisions could create an impression of the Department's actions not being within the spirit of the Act, and instead applying a window-dressing approach to comply with the Act but not truly delivering increases in expenditure on the scale intended by the Act and expected by stakeholders. In our view, such an approach would be self-defeating in that simply reclassifying existing and ongoing expenditure lines could not be reasonably expected to deliver improved outcomes and may further damage stakeholder confidence in the Department's ability to deliver modal shift.



Recommendation 6

As part of its annual performance reporting in line with Recommendation 5, the Department should ensure that it provides the Stakeholders Forum with appropriate detail about the composition of active travel costs, and discloses and takes the views of the Forum in respect of any material changes in methodology.

Staffing resources represent a risk to planned delivery

- 3.35** As noted at paragraph 3.5, one of the key changes the Department is making in how it manages active travel projects is through the establishment of an Active Travel Team. Management of active travel projects will be centralised within this team, and will comprise of three main units:
- a unit focused on central policy development, programme management and monitoring;
 - a unit responsible for council engagement and greenway delivery, technical support and delivery of behavioural change programmes; and

- an operational delivery unit with responsibility for the management and oversight of active travel project delivery through staff embedded within the Department's operational (roads) divisions.

- 3.36** Planned staffing structures include four lead officers heading up the three active travel units – divisional operations responsibilities being split between two officers. Both the Greenways unit and Divisional Operations unit comprise professional and technical staff involved in the management and delivery of active travel projects. These projects will be delivered through a combination of teams embedded within the Department's operational divisions, other delivery partners such as local councils, and engineering consultants appointed to support the Department in the delivery of the infrastructure programme.
- 3.37** The Department has experienced significant levels of staff vacancy across its range of responsibilities over recent years, with particular difficulties recruiting professional and technical staff. As at February 2025, just over half of all posts in the active travel team had been filled.
- 3.38** The Department's ability to properly resource its active travel activities will be a critical factor in relation to its capacity to deliver the intended build-up of active travel activity towards meeting its Climate Change Act obligations. In the absence of internal resources, it is important that the Department makes best use of all available resources, including those provided through other delivery partners.
- 3.39** The Department told us that it intends to fill posts through a number of ongoing and planned department-wide recruitment exercises. The Department also pointed to its appointment of consultants to provide additional engineering expertise during the ramping-up period to support in-house resources – the Active Travel Support Office. The creation of the Active Travel Support Office, the Department told us, reflected learning from its engagement with other jurisdictions that have increased active travel activity in recent years (notably the Republic of Ireland), and represents a resource that can be flexed as the number of projects increases (or where the recruitment environment improves).



Recommendation 7

To be successful, the active travel programme needs to be properly resourced. While it will need to keep its staffing resources under continuous review, in the absence of sufficient internal resources the Department will need to work with its delivery partners to maximise the benefit of their input. Alongside its plans to recruit, the Department should consider how it can, and develop plans to, better harness the input of its other delivery partners.

“Effective governance arrangements are essential for the successful delivery of the Department’s active travel plans.”

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Appendices

Appendix 1: Reported delivery against the Strategic Plan for Greenways, at April 2025 (see paragraph 2.6)

| | Overall length (kms) | Length delivered (kms) | Percentage complete (%) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Primary Route | | | |
| (1) Belfast – Newtownards | 19 | 11.4 | 60% |
| (2) Belfast – Larne | 36 | 13.9 | 39% |
| (3) Craigavon – Newry | 37 | 38.9 | 105% ¹ |
| (4) Belfast – Craigavon | 39 | 31.9 | 82% |
| (5) Craigavon – Enniskillen | 97 | 5.4 | 6% |
| (6) Dungannon – Coleraine | 97 | – | – |
| (7) Craigavon – Derry-Londonderry | 115 | 28.4 | 25% |
| Total | 440 | 129.9 | 30% |
| Secondary Route | | | |
| (1) Ballymena – Cushendall | 30 | 1.5 | 5% |
| (2) Belfast – Bangor | 19 | – | – |
| (3) Coleraine – Giants Causeway via Portrush and Bushmills | 24 | – | – |
| (4) Derry-Londonderry – Coleraine | 54 | 18.3 | 34% |
| (5) Macfin – Ballycastle via Ballymoney | 30 | – | – |
| (6) Belfast – Carrickfergus | 12 | 2.2 | 18% |
| (7) Belfast – Carryduff | 9 | – | – |
| (8) Comber – Newcastle and Ardglass via Downpatrick | 55 | – | – |
| (9) Mossley – Carrickfergus via Greenisland | 12 | – | – |
| (10) Omagh – Enniskillen | 40 | – | – |
| (11) Trillick/Ballinamallard (Bundoran Junction) – Belleek | 24 | – | – |
| (12) Bangor – Newtownards Loop | 32 | 5.0 | 16% |
| (13) Ballyclare (Doagh) – Draperstown via Antrim and Magherafelt | 53 | – | – |
| (14) Ballyclare – Ballymena | 25 | – | – |
| (15) Limavady Junction – Dungiven | 14 | – | – |
| (16) Caledon – Maguiresbridge via Clogher Valley | 51 | – | – |
| (17) Armagh – Newry via Markethill | 28 | – | – |
| (18) Ballymena – Kilrea | 25 | – | – |
| (19) Banbridge – Newcastle (including connection to Scarva) | 36 | – | – |
| (20) Lisburn – Banbridge | 23 | – | – |
| Total | 596 | 27.0 | 5% |
| GRAND TOTAL | 1,036 | 156.9 | 15% |

Note 1: Delivered greenways may not follow the exact routes proposed in the Strategic Plan for Greenways document; proposed route lengths and existing route lengths may vary in reality.

Source: Department for Infrastructure

Appendix 2: Reported delivery against the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan, at June 2024 (see paragraph 2.8)

| Scheme | Description | Length of scheme | Amount complete | Detail |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Beechill Greenway Phase 1 (Lagan Gateway – Belvoir Road) | 1,900m (in 3 sections) | 600m | Re: Section 1 Lagan Gateway Bridge (100m) and Section 2 Lagan Gateway Bridge to Belvoir Park Forest (500m) |
| 6 | Forth Meadow Greenway Phase 1 | 5,100m (in 5 sections) | 3,700m | Re: Section 1 – Bog Meadows and Milltown Row (1,150m), Section 2 – Falls Park (1,750m) and Section 5 – Springfield Dam paths (800m) |
| Total | | | 4,300m | |

Note: While not included as part of the short-term schemes identified in the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan, lighting along a 7.4km section of the Comber Greenway in East Belfast has also been delivered.

Source: Department For Infrastructure (as reported in publication DFI/2024-170)

Appendix 3: Urban settlements included within the Draft Active travel Delivery Plan (see paragraph 3.17)

The 42 urban settlements included within the Department's draft Active Travel Delivery Plan include:

- in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Area: Antrim, Ballyclare, Crumlin, Newtownabbey and Randalstown
- in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area: Bangor, Comber, Donaghadee, Holywood and Newtownards
- in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area: Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon and Dromore
- in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area: Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady, Portrush and Portstewart
- in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area: Derry/Londonderry and Strabane
- in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area: Fermanagh and Omagh
- in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area: Lisburn, Carryduff, Metropolitan Castlereagh and Metropolitan Lisburn
- in the Mid and East Antrim District Council area: Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Greenisland and Larne
- in the Mid Ulster District Council area: Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon
- in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area: Downpatrick, Kilkeel, Newcastle, Newry, Warrenpoint and Ballynahinch

Source: Active Travel Delivery Plan Consultation Document (November 2024)

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