

Active Travel England

K Timmis

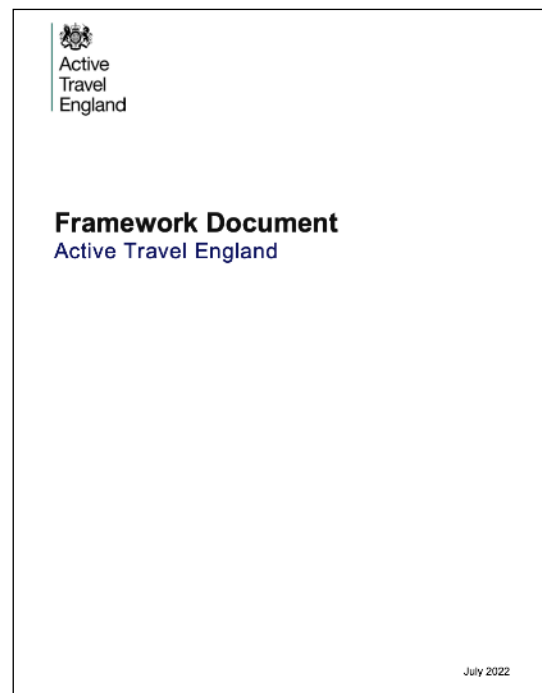
Active Travel England (ATE) has been set up as an executive agency of the Department for Transport (DfT), with the object to enable achievement of the vision set out in the long-term walking and cycling plan, Gear Change. Chris Boardman (CB), formerly Olympic cyclist and Cycling and Walking Commissioner for Greater Manchester, was appointed as the National Active Travel Commissioner in June 2022. Danny Williams (DW) was appointed as CEO and other positions started to be filled during the summer, to a maximum of 98 posts: drawing expertise of active travel from the scarce resources found in charities, authorities and consultancies.

ATE's roles and responsibilities are set out in the Framework Document Active Travel England. ATE will deliver executive functions that require high levels of expertise that are not available in the DfT, such as highways design specialists, engineers and town planners. ATE will have direct relationships with local authorities, enabling them to focus on technical advice, review and inspection functions. The role will be achieved through:

- Holding the active travel budget, including behaviour change and cycle training, assessing all applications for capital and revenue funding, other funding, awarding funding to schemes only if they meet the standards and principles set out in LTN 1/20.
- Inspecting schemes on completion. Delivering training, developing best practice and sharing knowledge.
- Reviewing major planning applications as statutory consultee and being a repository of expert advice.
- Inspecting highway authorities on their performance on active travel.
- Increasing skills and capacity in local authorities, promoting best practice and enabling authorities to learn from each other.
- Influencing key stakeholders and the public debate, to see value in society, individuals and business of active travel.

ATE's strategic aims to increase levels of walking and cycling by 50% of journeys in towns and cities by 2030 are summarised as;

- Creating better streets and networks for cycling and walking - LTN 1/20
- Putting walking and cycling at the heart of transport, place-making, and health policy
- Empowering and encouraging local authorities who manage their roads to incorporate active travel improvements into all aspects of their functions



- Enabling people to cycle and protecting them when they do by reducing road danger through the creation of safe infrastructure based on the key design principles.

ATE has started its operation with the Local Authority Capability and Ambition Self-Assessment being sent to all authorities, as an initial part of the process for the 2022/23 ambition and capability funding worth £30m, also part of further assessments and inspections. Responses have started to appear in the media indicating both the self assessment and ATE's considered evaluation.

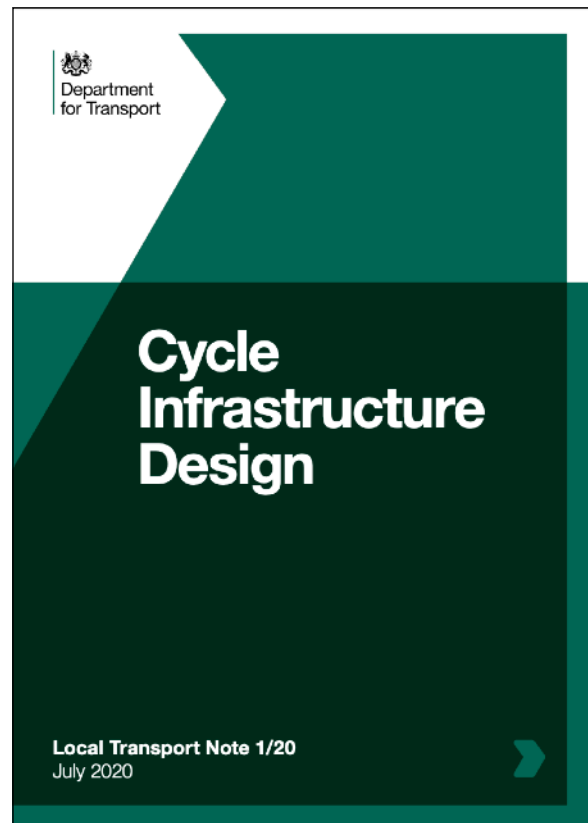
Having trawled the ATE webpage and the internet for information on what progress had been made I found a lead to the Transport Select Committee where Chris Boardman and Danny Williams provided an update on 7 September 2022. A transcript of the meeting is published on the UK

Parliament's Committees pages¹, which helps to explain ATE's function but also their aspirations. The committee discussed a wide range of issues related to ATE, the following are some key points:

CB made the point that ATE is a delivery agency and not a campaigning agency. When communicating with the public he emphasises that, *"it is not about cars and people riding bikes as separate species, but is about how you would like your kids to get to school. Would you like not to have to drive them to school? If we choose and utilise the right language, we can connect with the values that the vast majority of people have."*

When asked about the media's perception of cyclists breaking the law, eg riding through red lights, CB responded *"We are not an enforcement agency. People breaking the law, regardless of how they are travelling, should be prosecuted. Where you do not have the resource to prosecute everybody, it would be logical to start with those who can do the most harm and work backwards. That seems to be the most robust position that I can think of."* Also, *"It is people, and people will behave badly whether they are walking, driving a car or on a bicycle, in roughly the same proportions. We just have to focus first on those who can do the most harm to others."*

Ruth Cadbury MP asked, whether they believed that some authorities are willing to reallocate road space for active travel in order to obtain funding? CB indicated that 28 billion more miles have been driven on minor roads around our homes in the last 10 years, an increase of almost 30%. The space for alternatives has been filled and



¹ House of Commons, Transport Committee, Oral evidence: Work of Active Travel England, HC640. Wednesday 7 September 2022.

changing is not pain-free. There are authorities who are prepared to make changes and others who are not prepared to touch traffic flows. ATE need to create examples of good schemes.

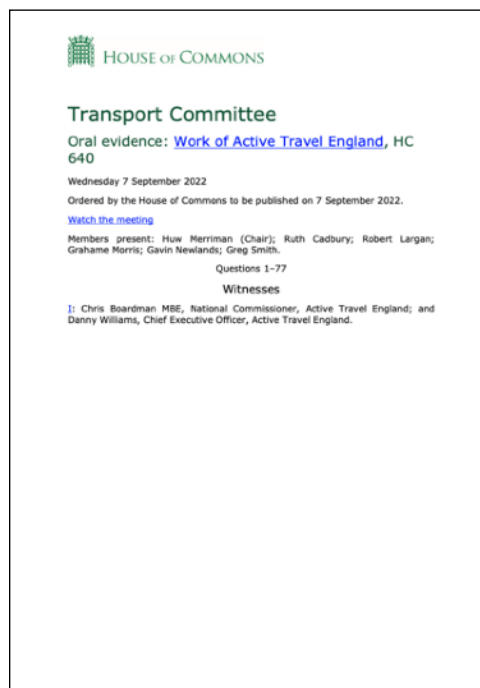
When questioned about the ATE training role, DW responded *“The first step is funding, so providing funding for local authorities to train up their officials essentially to get their planning skills or delivery skills up to scratch”* and *“Secondly, what we are already doing is looking at individual schemes. If it is a cycling or walking scheme, we are looking at it and assessing it. We are then providing written feedback with suggestions of how to improve it. We are becoming almost like a centre of excellence that can provide help to them.”*

Responding to questions about how active travel varies around the country and what can be done to encourage greater participation from women, people with disabilities and people from ethnic communities, CB commented *“saying, “If I’m not feeling safe, I’m very unlikely to do it.” Where that*

has been provided, active travel is very equitable. In Holland, 51% of people who travel by bike every day are women”. He continued *“Once you have safe space, if a council or local authority has the courage to do that, that is where we should focus the activation work. That is where we will get the best return for public money. It comes down to political will and regional leadership to actually want to do it. It is an uncomfortable change in the use of street space, but if somebody wants to do it then we will help them.”*

When questioned about pavement parking CB emphatically supported the ban on pavement parking, indicating *“Walking is more important than cycling. It will need to do all of the heavy lifting. It is critical. Clear pavement is a huge part of that, and not just enough. We need enough that it is a pleasant experience and one that I would choose”*. He further explained that *addressing junctions with side road zebra crossings, as in the rest of Europe and most supermarket car parks in the UK is essential to increase active travel. The Chair commented that “anyone who doubts this (negotiating vehicles parked on pavements) should go out with somebody who has lost their sight and see what they have to deal with all the time.”*

The Chair asked *“what if the authority do not care enough about active travel and they are just not going to deliver anything?”* CB responded *“It is a leadership lottery perhaps, but it is not our job to force people to behave differently. It is a horrible cliché, but we work with the willing. We do not have the funds or the capacity, or the time, to work with people who fundamentally do not believe and do not want to.”* To emphasise the importance of engaging and committing to active travel he indicated that ATE will be publishing who is doing what, depicting on a map of the country who is excelling and who is not interested. Making the evidence available for all to see, then local leadership has to own that, be that good or bad!



More information about ATE's aims and approach has come from the Transport Select Committees transcript than virtually all of the other published documents and is well worth reading. An early demonstration of their commitment is the authorities assessment feedback that has started to filter out to the media, some authorities receiving level 0 ratings such as Worcestershire County Council, causing some dispute. The reasons being:

- Lack of evidence of ambition (not demonstrating minimum levels of leadership and/or delivery track record)
- No track record of delivery.

The consequence is that funding will be withheld until improvements are made and also means the council is banned from making new bids for walking or cycling money.

Is walking and cycling in safe hand with ATE? The first indications are very promising and if this commitment is shown in all of their activities then we can expect to see significant improvement but this still depends on the political direction from above and the funding that is allocated to active travel.

At local levels any improvements in active travel depend on the local authorities ambition and track record, clearly demonstrated in the transcript stating that ATE '*will work with the willing*'. What does this mean for Derby? The results of the assessment is yet to be published, though the removal of the emergency cycle lanes installed during Covid will surely be taken into consideration. When ATE publish their map of who is excelling and who is not interested then we shall gain a view of what to expect in the future. Ultimately if the people want better cycling and walking infrastructure then we must make representation to our councillors and council emphasising that existing facilities are not adequate, otherwise we will remain a car dominated active travel desert.

