

The Golden Age of Cycling

Active travel – cycling and walking – has been brought to the forefront by the pandemic. Now there is the need to build on the progress made during the initial lockdown, reports **Laura Laker**

As the global pandemic raged, forcing restrictions on citizens' movements and fundamental changes to our daily lives, the Government announced what seemed a sea change in how we move about, day-to-day. 'Gear Change' was Boris Johnson and his team's long-term vision for cycling and walking in England. Meanwhile, an emergency active travel fund (EATF) would help protect social distancing on streets, enable safe daily exercise and fend off a post-Covid boom in car use.

Gear Change was a raft of measures to switch everyday trips to active travel modes. These included new tougher design standards for cycling and walking infrastructure, a re-announcement of "thousands of miles of protected cycle routes in towns and cities", and heralded a new inspectorate, Active Travel England, to manage the programme and help ensure quality standards are met.

Also announced were a long-awaited Highway Code review to better protect vulnerable road users, universal cycle training to include adults, funding for cycle parking, 12 showcase cycling and walking zones or 'Mini-Hollands', and low traffic neighbourhoods. There was even talk of a "national e-bike programme", along with £50 vouchers for bike repairs, and additional funding for a mobile cycle repair programme, delivered by national cycling charity, Cycling UK – as well as a trial "cycling on prescription" scheme.

For those familiar with London, all these will seem familiar, some of it mirroring what Johnson, as London mayor, and Andrew Gilligan as his cycling commissioner, implemented in the capital between 2012-2016. Now the pair, with a much larger remit, a larger team and bigger challenges, are looking to harness a growing national desire for active travel, along with a pressing need to prevent gridlock as people seek to avoid public transport.

The document set out four main themes:

- 1 Better streets for cycling and people.
- 2 Cycling at the heart of decision-making.
- 3 Empowering and encouraging local authorities.
- 4 Enabling people to cycle, and protecting them when they do.

This could also be interpreted as infrastructure, politics and behaviour change, i.e. a vision to fundamentally alter the way we view and plan for active travel as well as how often we do it.

The question is, are we ready for it, as a nation, and are we in a position to deliver it?

As Cycling UK's Duncan Dollimore ►



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Laker is a freelance journalist with 10 years' experience writing on cycling, active travel and, more recently, micromobility for national and specialist titles. She is also working with the University of Westminster's Active

Travel Academy – a new mobility think tank.



Highway Code review is key

The Highway Code consultation, which follows an earlier review announced in 2018 is crucial, according to campaigners. The three most important proposed changes, which are subject to the consultation, are: an explicit road user hierarchy, which puts vulnerable road users at the top; priority for people walking and cycling over turning traffic at side roads; and rules on giving cyclists enough space when overtaking.

There's also detail on road positioning while cycling, and clarification that those cycling can ride two abreast – a common source of conflict and confusion, and something even road police get wrong sometimes.

Cyclists are explicitly advised to ride in the centre of a traffic lane to make themselves as visible as

possible, unless it's safe to move over.

Cycling UK explains the hierarchy of road users as "pedestrians, in particular children, older adults and disabled people, followed by cyclists, horse riders and motorcyclists".

The charity says this "wouldn't remove the need for all users to behave responsibly or give priority to pedestrians and cyclists in every situation, but it would ensure their needs were considered first".

Plus, the 'Dutch Reach' could be introduced, in which those in a vehicle open its door with the opposite hand, to ensure they look at the road, and any potential passing cyclists, to avoid hitting them.

These measures will help protect the most vulnerable and clarify the care other road users need to give.



► put it: "Gear Change was one of those fantastic documents, if you looked at it from a perspective of vision and aspiration. It would be very difficult as an active travel advocate or cycling campaigner to criticise the vision, or the aspiration, or the wording and the comments in it – or the tone to be perfectly honest."

However, he warned: "The detail for delivery was pretty light" – another famous hallmark of Johnson's.

CAR DOMINATES SHORTER JOURNEYS

In 2018, 58% of car journeys of less than five miles were driven, as were 40% of trips less than two miles, distances that most could easily cycle. The pressure these unnecessary short car trips puts on our road infrastructure are palpable, from dirty air to unsafe streets, to physical and mental health problems, and inactivity – and those trips have grown in the least appropriate places. Minor roads, such as residential streets, that weren't designed to be motor vehicle thoroughfares, have taken much of the slack in recent motor traffic growth, thanks to navigational programmes like Google Maps and Waze.

TRAFFIC TURNED OFF OVERNIGHT

During lockdown, cycling levels increased by up to 300% on some days, as people dusted off cycles and took what they saw as their daily Government-mandated exercise on their local roads. This, arguably, changed how many people saw their neighbourhoods, while motor traffic dropped to 50-year lows.

In order to capitalise on this growth, the Government, utilising its EATF, released statutory guidance in May, instructing councils to instal emergency cycle lanes and expanded pavements for social distancing at pace, or have a good reason why not.

The fund was to be released in two parts, at a ratio of roughly 20:80, the first tranche released in May for temporary measures.

Liverpool City Region was one combined authority already looking to active travel via both a 2017 strategy to shift local trips to cycling and walking, and as part of a longer 10-year plan to connect 400 miles of cycle routes, putting those modes on a par, in planning terms, with other transport.

Huw Jenkins, Liverpool City Region lead officer for transport policy, says one of the few "green shoots" from the crisis was a growth in walking and cycling in the region. According to Strava Metro data, Liverpool topped the charts for cycling growth during lockdown, albeit from a very low base.

Jenkins says the first tranche of the EATF was perfectly timed to enable social distancing, while sustaining some of these new behaviours, and Gear Change "cemented essentially the views that walking and cycling must now be a mainstream mode of transport – that paying lip-service is not acceptable and we'll ultimately be penalised financially and in reputation (if that were all we did)".

Liverpool City Region, like many local and combined authorities, installed temporary cycle lanes and expanded footways, with its EATF funding, bringing forward implementation of some of their long-term plans.

Even for an authority already thinking in terms of active travel, rapid delivery is a huge ask. Shane Fitzpatrick, Liverpool City Region's director of integrated transport, says: "I think part of the challenge... is that to get everything done from tranche one in eight weeks from development, procurement to delivery, you have to compromise on something, and to a large extent, some of the engagement was compromised, because of the nature of the timeline to achieve those objectives. But there was always going to be further dialogue."

As a result of that engagement and dialogue some of the new cycle lanes, which were installed in each of Liverpool's local authorities, were adjusted and improved following "teething problems", and some were removed entirely.

ANGER OVER ROAD SPACE ALLOCATION

While new statutory guidance permitted rapid installation, with the trials forming the consultation period that, in theory, allowed people to see how changes might work before deciding, it acted as a lightning rod in some cities and towns for anger over road space reallocation.

These complaints often don't reflect reality. A recent YouGov poll of 2,010 British adults, on behalf of campaign #bikesbest,



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DAVID JANNER-KLAUSNER,
COMMONPLACE

found cycling and walking measures were supported by 77% of the public, and for every one person against, there were 6.5 people for them. Analysis by Dr Ian Walker, of the University of Bath, demonstrated people tend to overestimate others' opposition to cycling measures.

However, such opposition is enough to send politicians running scared. Some feel the Government could offer more support for councils amid complaints from residents, the media and even politicians.

As Dollimore puts it: "There's not been a great deal of support from Government to beleaguered councils. What we've got is Conservative MPs criticising councils for things that have been done – criticising really the idea of schemes, not realising or reflecting that this is actually Government policy the councils are implementing."

"We have to acknowledge that, among the infrastructure that's gone in, some is great, some is okay and some isn't, but that was the nature of things being done at pace. It doesn't mean the principle isn't good."

Commonplace is an online platform that crowdsources opinion – and the company hopes it offers a more nuanced picture than the shouting on display on social media. Commonplace offered free licenses to local authorities during the Covid crisis, and 40 took up the offer.

Councils without pre-existing cycling and walking plans can ask for 'heat-maps', where residents suggest problem areas and potential solutions. From there, councils can identify interventions, make a shortlist and, once implemented, use Commonplace to gather public feedback.

By June, 200,000 comments had been generated from 150,000 visitors to the site.

Commonplace's customer success manager, David Janner-Klausner, says: "The issues people were highlighting really indicated they wanted more space for walking and cycling. Back in June, for instance, in Leeds, 46% of more than 4,000 comments identified a need for space for cycling, 27% of comments identified a need for wider pavements, with similar numbers in Bath and north-east Somerset."

"There's a lot of support; there's also a lot of opposition. You don't need Commonplace to tell you that, but ... the sheer volume of people who come to the websites, who put very loud objections in some kind of proportion – that's probably useful."

He adds that "it's not a single source of truth", rather "a tool for communication and large-scale engagement". While you can 'up-vote' other people's comments, if you want to disagree, you have to say why.

Janner-Klausner, adds: "If people want to attack you, they will attack you, they will launch a petition, they will launch a Facebook page, they will campaign in all sorts of other ways. The benefit of using Commonplace is, to an extent, you can't control what people say. But you can curate it in a way that gives you some more ►

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He contends that Commonplace allows for transparency, because all comments are public, while turning people's thoughts into data that councils can use to make changes.

Fitzpatrick says that in Liverpool while lessons from the trial phase were learned and shared, delivering 80% of its second tranche of EATF measures by the current April deadline will be challenging, even for a region with existing cycling plans.

As winter looms, taking up cycling no longer seems as attractive and with no sign of the money, or date for its delivery, the

window of opportunity may have already blown shut.

Further ahead, Dollimore says there is no timeline for when the £2bn funding package supporting Gear Change will appear, either.

Cycling Minister Heaton-Harris says there were plans for a "long-term cycling and walking programme and budget to ensure a guaranteed pipeline of funding. We expect to provide funding to local authorities through... a mixture of formula and competition but the aim is... a proper long-term funding stream up to 2024/2025".

When asked about funds for cycling and walking beyond the £2bn, how much or when that might appear, however, he simply says: "I think let's spend this wisely first."

This worries campaigners. "That's a recipe for putting stuff in that doesn't link together, and then trying to evaluate it as an incomplete network," says Dollimore.

ACTIVE TRAVEL ENGLAND

Active Travel England would, in the words of Heaton-Harris, "hold the budget, approve and inspect schemes and inspect high-way authorities, lead on training, and good practice". While new design guidelines aren't enforceable, this body would ensure standards by training and guiding councils on active travel schemes, and withholding funds if the new standards aren't met.

In other words, it is pivotal to delivering Gear Change. Without it, not only is temporary cycle infrastructure a stab in the dark for inexperienced councils and officers, it could mean longer-term schemes don't meet new design guidance, and therefore don't reap the kinds of rewards safe cycle infrastructure can bring. For example, new government guidance warns against use of white paint-only bike lanes, and shared use pavements, as evidence shows they can actually be worse than nothing, in terms of making cycling safe and attractive.

Those involved with the former Cycling England, a body scrapped in 2010 by then Transport Minister Phillip Hammond in the bonfire of the quangos, say Active Travel England could take at least a year to set up, if it is to be done properly and avoid the fate of its predecessor. There are some that argue, if ministers wanted it done quickly,

or at least a precursor of it, they could do it tomorrow. Without it, however, councils' ability to spend that £2 billion, let alone on time, is under serious threat.

Phillip Darnton, former chairman of Cycling England, says it would take the rest of the year to set up, at a minimum, and at least 12 months for any demonstration town, or Mini Holland, to get going.

"The besetting evil of all things cycling has been the stop-start, short-term nature of things," he says. "The destruction of Cycling England was the destruction of the ability of councils to produce cycling programmes – and a lack of continuity has hampered cycling ever since."

Another issue is a general dearth of active travel expertise in local authorities that leads to poor, if well-intentioned, results. Lucy Marstrand-Taussig is a transport planner, who says: "I think decision-making around transport should be evidence-led. We know what the evidence is on low traffic neighbourhoods. We need central expert advisors in the same way we have for health."

Marstrand-Taussig warns Active Travel England's reach may only extend to larger, Government-funded schemes, making more acute the need to embed new design standards throughout transport, saying "part of the solution is better training".

She reviewed the number of Masters Degrees taken in transport planning in 2016 and found that few universities covered walking and cycling design in any detail. Reading lists of some engineering modules were limited to standards such as the Design Manual for Roads, effectively trunk road design, which, she says, is then wrongly applied to urban, residential streets, introducing high traffic speeds and unnecessary danger.

She says: "There's a lot of misconceptions about traffic flow, assuming it's a fixed amount. We've spent decades increasing capacity to create 'better flow', but traffic expands to fill the space it's given. Creating traffic with big road schemes was the easy part. Reducing traffic is harder – but the evidence shows it's possible and we now have to do this on a national scale."

Liverpool City Region has sought to embed active travel expertise within the council, rolling out training on cycling and walking infrastructure to cabinet members, senior officers, a range of professionals and decision-makers. This was delivered by a man behind the excellent London Cycle Design Standards, cycling and climate safe streets designer, Brian Deegan.

The future of freight

Van use has grown with lockdown, as people order goods online for home delivery, adding to increasingly congested roads. Cargo bikes are claimed to be faster, more efficient (using 94% less energy than an electric van, according to one study) and cheaper to run, with none of the environmental disbenefits – and larger companies like DPD, Fedex, DHL and the Post Office are rediscovering them.

Cycle-friendly infrastructure further tips the balance in favour of cargo bikes, with cycling cities like Cambridge boasting long-standing and successful cargo bike delivery firms.

Pedal Me runs electric cargo bikes to both deliver goods and carry people as a taxi service in London. Founded in 2017 with just two people working part-time, by 2020 they were 55 people, mostly full-time, their growth only hampered briefly by Covid-19. Ben Knowles, one of the company's founders, estimates, based on publicly available data, that in London alone they could see revenues of £1bn a year by shifting work done by van and taxi to pedal power – including replacing the two-thirds of vans estimated to be less than 25% full, along with 10% of taxi and private hire trips. That's without last-mile work, the natural fit for cargo bike delivery. The company is looking to expand



into large warehouse spaces in Central London and Hackney, to offer storage, distribution and deliveries on demand.

Ultimately, Knowles says in central London cycle deliveries are faster than vans because of congestion, while cycle-friendly infrastructures in boroughs like Waltham Forest and Hackney, such as low traffic neighbourhoods and bike lanes, help prioritise cycle transport over motor vehicles.

"Cycle lanes," he says, "help pull us out of the line of traffic, which is the main cause of delay for us."

The main thing holding the industry back, says Knowles, is lack of understanding of what a cargo bike can carry. On a combination of bikes and trailers, Pedal Me can shift anything from sofas to a cement mixer, to crates of food for shielding residents in one London borough.

CONCLUSION

Of the triumvirate of infrastructure, politics and behaviour change, none are entirely resolved by Gear Change. Certainly for the latter to succeed, and if Government is serious about long-term planning and delivery for cycling growth, more than capital investment is needed.

Fitzpatrick says: "If you put the infrastructure down and you don't give the revenue support for the training or the ability to have access to a bike, assistance and support... that won't support that initiative, so that's one area that definitely would need some support from Government to maximise that investment level."

Long-term funding is another issue, with councils on tighter budgets understandably less willing to spend time and money on planning or designing for active travel, not knowing if or when money will appear.

Jenkins adds: "Our very clear ask is, give us long-term certainty. That way, we can plan ahead, and we're not just reacting to a specific Government-led fund, with a set of conditions associated with it, we can plan what we need for the city region based on our evidence, based on consultation."

Jenkins regrets the delays to tranche two of EATF. "Had we had this funding available

much earlier, we would have been able to deliver an awful lot more during the spring and the summer. Cycle lanes are being seen in some areas as leading to congestion, which is not the case."

He says Metro Mayor, Steve Rotherham's agenda is "crystal clear: to build back better from the Covid crisis so that's a green recovery, a low carbon recovery" – and a more equitable one. He points out some of the most disadvantaged communities suffer the worst impacts of Covid, due to poor air quality and health, and the region has 11 air quality management areas that also urgently need tackling. Not all councils are on board, however, creating a postcode lottery for clean air and active travel.

Behaviour change messaging may need to be part of a plan to change behaviour, says Jenkins. "It needs a long-term, concerted approach... to change people's habits. It took 60 years to change our approach to tobacco... from recognising it's dangerous to banning it. And we shouldn't underestimate what went on to do that." ST

77%
of the public supported new cycling and walking measures

TURN OVER FOR THE PEER REVIEWS

