



**To/
Councillor Andrew Stevens
Cabinet Member for Environment &
Infrastructure**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2023-24/3

26 October 2023

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 19 September 2023. It is about Active Travel. A formal written response is not required but please see further information required by 16 November.

Dear Councillor Stevens,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 19 September Scrutiny of Active Travel

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focussed on a specific aspect of your Cabinet portfolio responsibilities, namely Active Travel. This was subject of previous Committee discussion in February 2021, with then Cabinet Member, Mark Thomas, on the Active Travel Consultation Process following some public concerns raised at the time.

We thank you for attending the meeting and providing a written report covering Active Travel. We thank Jack Palmer, Active Travel Officer, for his contributions, taking us through the detail, as well as the input of other officers in attendance. Your report provided an overview of the statutory requirements of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 and an overview of the various strands of work that make up Swansea Council's Active Travel delivery programme. It explains what is meant by 'Active Travel', how Active Travel schemes are identified, funded, and developed, and how the Council monitors the uptake and impact of Active Travel in Swansea.

You highlighted to the Committee that:

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- 'Active Travel' is about planning, improvement and promoting routes for walking and cycling (and other active modes of travel) to displace private car journeys for purposeful journeys to a destination such as work, school, or the shops. This is a legislative requirement under the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013.
- Councils are required to produce Active Travel Network Maps (ATNM) - most recently these Maps were developed in Swansea throughout 2021 with various consultation and engagement carried out in the process, and Swansea's ATNM was approved in August 2022. ATNMs are to be revisited every 3 years.
- The Council bids for Welsh Government funding to improve / expand its Active Travel network. The Council has an ambitious Active Travel programme which has a record of securing high levels of Welsh Government capital grant funding. There is just over 141km of walking and cycling routes, with over 7km being added or improved in the last financial year (2022/23).
- Issues raised during Scrutiny of the Active Travel Consultation Process in February 2021 have been taken on board, to strengthen stakeholder / public engagement.
- In accordance with the Act, the Council submits annual reports to the Welsh Government on spending on Active Travel, how it is being promoted, and levels of use. These reports are available to view publicly on the Council's [webpages](#).

The Scrutiny session enabled the Committee to consider the Council's responsibilities / priorities, work / plans, achievements, impact, and improvement on 'Active Travel' and provide challenge on actions and performance, as well as helping to inform future thinking. We were particularly interested in how things have developed over the years, including improvements to community consultation / engagement, Active Travel take up / usage (impact on numbers cycling / walking); costs / benefits, and relevant issues. Ultimately, we wanted to know how successful this has all been.

It was a very helpful and useful session, and this letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - key issues are summarised below.

Consultation & Engagement

We discussed the experience over the years. There was a recognition that consultation and engagement processes are subject of continuous improvement with learning from experience. We noted that the Council has always adhered to Welsh Government Guidance, but in line with growing community awareness and interest in Active Travel the Council has stepped up its activity and efforts to engage as many people as possible to inform plans and schemes, which the Committee has welcomed.

We noted that Swansea's ATNM was informed by extensive early engagement with Councillors and stakeholders, and by a 12-week public consultation. An initial engagement exercise, funded and implemented across Wales by Welsh Government, used an interactive online mapping tool for people to map out issues and opportunities in the network which received 3,782 visitors and 3,210 contributions made by 785 respondents. This feedback informed the creation of a draft ATNM alongside wider stakeholder engagement. As a result of the formal 12-week public consultation, a further 346 responses were submitted and several detailed letters and emails from stakeholder groups received. Consultation was widely promoted through newsletters, social media posts, briefing notes to all ward members, a series of press releases, lessons and surveys in schools, publicity materials such as posters and five face-to-face drop-in events. It was clarified that consultation on what may actually be delivered on specific routes can only take place if the route is approved for funding. Where routes are taken forward for development, there will be scheme-specific engagement with local Councillors, interest groups, and local communities.

The creation of a new role of Active Travel Officer (in 2022) to recognise the increased workload and increasing importance of the Active Travel programme in recent years, has helped to improve public information / awareness of Active Travel, and consultation and engagement activities.

Challenges associated with dealing with conflicting opinions / views during consultation were discussed. We acknowledged it was a difficult balancing act and it may leave some people unhappy despite a viable scheme, but it was important that anyone concerned is able to have a say and that the Council / department / decision-makers are mindful of all views.

Safety

Active Travel guidance stresses the need for routes to be safe and comfortable. We reflected experiences with certain routes where busy carriageways have been narrowed to create room for Active Travel routes, e.g., Mayals, increasing the risk of collision between road users, cyclists, and pedestrians. We sought assurance that the Council was monitoring the issue of safety across Active Travel routes, and acting where necessary.

You explained there was clear design guidance around the allocation / re-allocation of road space, which may necessitate slower traffic and conditions that road users must adapt to. It was stressed that the Council has statutory obligations regarding road safety and regularly monitors the situation across Swansea (in conjunction with the Police) and would respond where there is an incidence of accidents. It was noted that there is no specific speed limit for cyclists in law, however there would be an expectation that cyclists have regard for the safety of those around them. Any incidents regarding road users / pedestrian safety would need to be reported to the Police.

Community Benefits

We asked about the 'Community Benefits' programme, delivered through Active Travel schemes using local contractors from the South West Wales Regional Civil Engineering Construction Framework, providing a number of local benefits as part of the construction of Active Travel routes, including free Active Travel equipment to local schools. We noted that in the past this has included free bikes, shelters, scooters, and toolkits for teachers, and has benefitted a significant number of schools across the Swansea area. Active Travel schemes have also delivered new seating, heritage information, placemaking features and greenery which make walking and cycling through communities more attractive and enjoyable. You provided examples where new benches have been installed (Townhill), greenery has been planted (Gorseinon), and interpretation boards have been put providing information on local history / heritage (Pontarddulais / Grovesend, Hafod, Gowerton, Clydach).

Active Travel and Tourism / Leisure

We discussed the links between Active Travel and Tourism / Leisure, given that Active Travel routes have the potential to attract visitors keen on cycling and walking. As such we asked about the possible use of Core Allocation Funding for Minor Work, referred to in your report, for enhancements to routes such as information boards and/or signage on local places of interest along routes across Swansea.

You recognised the link between Active Travel and Tourism / Leisure and would consider anything that would make routes more enjoyable and add value, however highlighted that there were stringent parameters to be adhered to when applying for Active Travel funding – as recreation / leisure is secondary to the main objective of routes being used for purposeful journeys to a destination such as work, school or the shops, shifting away from car use.

Nevertheless, Active Travel routes will be used for leisure (if not created for that purpose) and the Committee felt that with growing interest in eco-tourism the Tourism Department could help to promote our Active Travel network, and maximise usage and the wider benefits to our area. We noted that the Council's Countryside Access Team supports residents wishing to maintain, improve or expand walking and cycling routes which are primarily used for leisure or tourism, including the expansive Public Rights of Way network. Working together with Tourism and Countryside Access may also help identify any gaps in the network, where there is potential for both 'purposeful' journeys and tourism / leisure. We would encourage you to discuss further with your Cabinet colleague(s).

Maintenance

Your report stated that the Active Travel Fund provides 100% grant funding to secure the development and delivery of schemes. But any revenue costs (e.g., cost of maintaining new Active Travel routes or infrastructure) arising from capital schemes, must be met by existing internal revenue budgets, with no additional funding available to meet these costs, i.e., Active Travel routes are to be treated as part of the overall highway network. Clearly this places additional pressures on both already stretched Highways Maintenance and Cleansing budgets, and, with a growing Active Travel network, was a concern to the Committee.

We were told that there is a small sum with maintenance budgets (£24k per annum) set aside for Active Travel assets. This is in stark contrast to the £23m funding allocation spent in Swansea between 2018/19 and 2022/23. Whilst many routes are new and may have limited maintenance requirement now, at some point in the future we will need the resources to avoid our network going into disrepair, and at worst becoming unsafe. This needs to be addressed in future budgets. It was also important that the Active Travel network is incorporated into cleansing regimes. You recognised maintenance is an issue, and told us that every opportunity to raise with Welsh Government officials is taken.

Monitoring & Evaluation

We noted that the main objective of Active Travel is described as achieving modal shift by displacing private car journeys with walking and cycling. As such, this must be considered the main factor when assessing the success, or otherwise, of Active Travel. We asked about evidence locally to indicate whether this modal shift is indeed taking place. It was unclear from the discussion whether we can definitively point to this outcome, though acknowledged that it is part of a generational / longer-term strategy to improve the health and well-being of our citizens, and a more sustainable future. Nevertheless, it is important to monitor and analyse usage, and have data that can show the effect that Active Travel is having, and trends, that will build more confidence in this work. Otherwise, there is a danger that the public will see Active Travel as a 'white elephant'. We noted challenges associated with changing behavioural habits in terms of travel preferences, and that Active Travel routes were being used in a variety of ways, some by people not necessarily forsaking car travel.

The Committee heard that the Council actively monitors existing and newly delivered routes on the walking and cycling network, enabling it to assess and respond to any issues raised, gather information for future development of the network and to meet reporting requirements set out by the Welsh Government. We noted that user satisfaction / travel habit surveys are also carried out.

We discussed measures in place to record walking and cycling usage (before and after a scheme has been delivered), and asked how this has informed plans. We were told that there are 23 fixed cycle / pedestrian counter units positioned at strategic locations across the Active Travel network which collect data on usage levels which inform both the Council's reporting duties and provide baseline data which contributes toward the business case of future schemes. Nine of these counters were installed over the last year, and work has been undertaken to upgrade the older counters to count pedestrian as well as cycle numbers. Furthermore, within the Highways and Transportation service area, a Survey Team is also tasked with undertaking ad-hoc temporary cycle counts using pneumatic tube technology, camera surveys and conducting face-to-face surveys with those travelling on routes. It was reported that as part of the 2023/24 Active Travel programme, the Council is due to commence a programme of work with walking and cycling charity Sustrans to engage with schools in Swansea which are either near recently completed Active Travel routes or where new schemes are being developed. The aim of this is to ensure that young people have a say in how new proposals are informed and are engaged in evaluating how effective they have found recently completed schemes in changing their travel habits.

The Committee was told that the Council can see trends and, over the period pre-Covid pandemic to present, usage is on the up. The Committee would like more information on the data / statistics / feedback that the Council has available regarding Active Travel usage, which you indicated could be provided. We would be grateful if you can send this information to scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk by 16 November.

Future Plans

We asked about plans for the next wave of Active Travel Projects, and decision-making. We noted that there is an annual cycle of funding bids to Welsh Government based on the agreed Active Travel Network Map. Schemes ready to be taken forward will be in this year's bid. You stated that the outcome of the bid would be reported to Cabinet usually around June / July each year, for approval to proceed with expenditure on associated projects and adding to the Capital Programme. Scheme specific local Councillor, stakeholder, and community engagement would then follow on the detail.

Some Committee members took the opportunity to ask you about schemes in the pipeline affecting their area(s) e.g., the Newton – Mumbles Scheme which is still in its early stage. Individual Councillors can of course contact you / officer directly to discuss local Schemes further.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within; however, we do not expect you to provide a formal response, but please provide the further information requested on monitoring and evaluation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Black', written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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