

CENTRAL MANAGEMENT BRANCH



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Dear Paul

DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO THE COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE INQUIRY INTO THE BENEFITS OF CYCLING TO THE ECONOMY

This letter provides the Minister's formal response to the recommendations included in the Committee's report into the benefits of cycling to the economy following the debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly on Monday 23 March 2015. The response to each of the Committee's recommendations is set out below.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department considers re-working the vision and respectfully suggests the following as a starting point:

"A Northern Ireland where people from all sectors of the community cycle for transport and enjoyment"

The Committee believes that striving towards this vision will help to ensure a healthier population, connected and cohesive communities, and a more affordable, integrated, safe, responsive and sustainable transport system (paragraphs 46 – 48)

Agreed – the vision contained in the draft Bicycle Strategy will be reviewed and amended to make it shorter and more focussed. The revised vision will take account of the recommendation made by the Committee and the comments received during the consultation on the draft Bicycle Strategy.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Department urgently established objectives and targets within the revised strategy document which are relevant to the vision espoused in the revised document (paragraph 49).

The Minister is still considering whether his aspirations for increasing levels of cycling across Northern Ireland should be more clearly and explicitly reflected in the finalised Bicycle Strategy.

As has been previously stated it is the Minister's intention to develop a series of 'specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound' (SMART) objectives, policies and actions for inclusion in the Bicycle Strategy Delivery Plan. As well as this specific city wide or local area targets will be identified through the proposed Bicycle Network Plans.

Recommendation 3

Whilst the draft Bicycle Strategy does not contain any targets, as yet, the Committee recommends, those baselines specific to Northern Ireland are established before the implementation of any proposed actions arising out of the draft Bicycle Strategy. This will allow for a meaningful measurement of the success (or otherwise) of the strategy and progress against other Executive strategies, such as reductions in levels of obesity and reductions in green-house gases (paragraph 50).

Agreed – we are aware of the importance of establishing a clear baseline against which future progress can be benchmarked. The Department is taking two approaches to do this.

Firstly, the Committee will be aware of the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) which is conducted over a calendar year (from January to December). The Department publishes survey results annually and these cover a combined three year period (to ensure that the analysis carried out is robust). This is due to the sample size being relatively small for journeys made by bicycle. The TSNI publication provides baseline data.

Secondly, the Department is participating in a project with Sustrans to develop a Belfast Bicycle Account. The published report will provide high quality research data including comprehensive information on cycling attitudes and cycling infrastructure provision. The Bicycle Account, which originated in Copenhagen (Denmark), has a tried and

tested methodology and is produced on a biennial basis. It is a very significant source of data and is the standard which many other cities adopt in order to provide data on cycling.

The Bicycle Account will provide baseline data for Belfast – useful evidence and data which will inform policy development and evaluate the success or otherwise of interventions.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Minister seeks to ring-fence an appropriate level of funding for the delivery of the strategy as opposed to individual projects (paragraph 51).

Agreed – the Minister welcomes the Committee’s support for ensuring that cycling has the appropriate level of funding for the effective delivery of the strategy.

Allocation of funding for the Strategy will be done in line with the Executive’s budget process, which only lends itself to short term, four or five year allocations. The regime in operation has the tendency to require the allocation of funding for individual projects, rather than the 25 year life span of the Bicycle Strategy.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that rural proofing be undertaken as a matter of urgency to ensure that the draft strategy achieves a more equitable balance between urban and rural provision (paragraph 52).

The Department sought advice from DARD counterparts who confirmed that ‘it is for each Department to decide how best to fulfil its commitment to rural proof its strategies and policies and their implementation’. DARD has agreed that it will be more meaningful to rural proof the Bicycle Strategy Delivery Plan.

The Committee may be interested to note that DARD officials indicated that ‘the Bicycle Strategy does refer specifically to rural routes which demonstrates that the Department has done some thinking in respect of the impacts in rural areas at a strategic level’.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Department provides a more meaningful and authentic definition of what constitutes a rural cycle route to allow for accurate measurement of future performances targets for provision of cycling tracks and lanes in rural routes (paragraphs 53 – 54).

Accepted

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the reference at Section 4.1.2 in respect of piloting greenways is amended in the revised strategy to clarify that the Department's intentions are focused on connecting the existing greenways rather than piloting a new one (paragraphs 55 – 57).

Accepted

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that all roads should be designed to protect all users and recommends that, where cycling provision in urban centres is being considered and designed, there should be an emphasis on providing some form of segregation from other vehicular traffic (paragraph 58).

Accepted.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that Translink establish targets within their corporate plans with respect to increasing the number of bicycles accessing trains and buses (paragraph 59).

The Minister welcomes the Committee's enthusiasm for facilitating and increasing the number of multi-modal journeys involving use of the bicycle. Translink continues to increase the number of bicycle parking facilities at stations and the Minister is confident that as his cycling revolution takes hold, and greater numbers of people choose to travel by bicycle, Translink will work to encourage other opportunities to facilitate multi-modal journeys in the medium to long term.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Cycle to Work Scheme should, in the first instance, be compulsory in the Northern Ireland Assembly, all Executive departments, Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB). In line with this, the Committee further recommends that all public sector organisations ensure that adequate cycle parking and changing facilities are available for their staff (paragraphs 60 – 62).

The Committee will be aware that the Cycle to Work Scheme is available to staff in all Northern Ireland Departments. Policy responsibility for the scheme within the NICS rests with DFP. A number of Departments have advised that their ALBs and NDPBs are either already offering the scheme or have expressed an interest in offering the scheme.

A small number of Departments highlighted 'the current challenging financial environment' as a barrier to some of their ALBs offering the scheme and suggested that further information on costs would be required to inform any future consideration by them.

Properties Division within DFP has responsibility for providing bicycle parking and changing facilities within the NICS office estate. There are currently 114 NICS buildings with showering facilities available to people choosing to walk or use the bicycle. 31 buildings have covered bicycle parking.

With regard to the Northern Ireland Assembly the Committee clerk undertook to follow up Assembly references.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Minister and his Executive colleagues explore the means by which the scheme can be extended and tailored for those on lower incomes (paragraph 63).

DFP have advised that issues relating to the availability of the Cycle to Work Scheme are covered in the FAQs which are available with the scheme information on the HR Connect portal.

These are included below for ease of reference:

What if I am likely to fall below the minimum wage by joining the scheme?

This is not an issue for the vast majority of NICS staff. If your circumstances mean that you might fall below the minimum wage, your Department will check

when processing your application. If this is the case you can still participate in the scheme, but you may need to select a lower value cycle and equipment in order to keep your pay above the minimum.

Does the salary sacrifice affect my entitlement to benefits/ tax credits etc?

For most people the reduction in gross salary will not have an impact; however, if you are on a lower salary and close to the earnings limit or claiming benefits or tax credits, you should check how using Cycle to Work will affect your situation. HMRC may be the most helpful starting place for you to find out more (<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/>)

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and other public sector bodies that the schemes be open to applications throughout the year (paragraph 64).

The Department would encourage all employers to operate the scheme and to make it easy to access. However, the Committee will be aware that the Cycle to Work Scheme is an HMRC scheme and it is for each individual employer to sign up to the scheme. Employers cannot be compelled to commit to the scheme and to decide upon which terms they will operate the scheme.

The NICS Cycle to Work Scheme is open to applications throughout the year.

With regard to the Northern Ireland Assembly the Committee clerk undertook to follow up Assembly references.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the Minister adopts “Park and Cycle” facilities, including bicycle storage lockers, at all current and future Park and Ride/Share sites, railway and bus stations (paragraph 65).

Agreed – Translink has identified capital expenditure within its Capital Plan for bicycle shelters and it maintains a register of the number of bicycle stands available at its transport facilities. The company appreciates that people who use bicycles can potentially make multi-modal journeys, hence the emphasis placed on the provision of bicycle parking facilities at transport facilities.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that any potential legislative changes are identified with the Action Plans deriving from the revised draft strategy (paragraphs 66).

Accepted

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the Department explore its options for delivering Primary Legislation similar to the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013. This might ensure a coordinated and joined-up approach to cycling (and walking) within Northern Ireland (paragraph 67).

The Department's Cycling Unit is drafting a policy paper on options for the delivery of an Active Travel Bill for Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the Department establish a baseline showing the current value of cycling to the economy. Regular monitoring of this baseline should be undertaken to assess progress (or otherwise) (paragraphs 68 – 71).

Establishing a baseline for the current value of cycling to the economy would be desirable although it is an issue that cuts across the responsibilities of other Departments. The Department will explore with them the possibility of research being commissioned to consider mechanisms for establishing such a baseline.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that, in the light of the restrained budgetary period facing the Executive departments, DRD produce imaginative proposals and appropriate bids to enhance the cycling experience within Northern Ireland. At a minimum, the Department should ensure that funding is ring-fenced for the Active Travel schools programme. Consideration should also be given to funding, for example, a cycling equivalent to "Walking with Communities", currently being delivered by Outdoor Recreation (paragraphs 72 – 75).

As the Committee are aware the Department is seeking to be innovative with the design of cycle related projects and is working cross-sectorally to achieve maximum buy in and the broadest possible range of benefits.

The Minister welcomes the Committee's enthusiasm and support for the Active School Travel Programme. The Department is keen to develop this programme further and to make it more cross cutting.

Details of specific proposals and schemes will be set out in the draft Bicycle Strategy Delivery Plan which will be published later this year.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, NITB produces and publicises the Giro Legacy Plan (paragraphs 76 – 79).

Officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) have advised that Tourism NI has commenced and is leading on the development and production of the Giro Legacy Plan.

The first major event to arise from this is the Giro Gran Fondo, which will host its inaugural event on Sunday 21 June 2015. This event has been awarded funding by Tourism NI covering the 3 year period to 2017.

In addition, Tourism NI has initiated meetings in relation to a Northern Ireland Festival of Cycling. The Department, in addition to others such as the PSNI, Visit Belfast and Titanic Quarter Limited are involved in the plan to create this cycling festival. The intention is to create a NI wide festival for 2016 and beyond.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, particularly given the success of securing the Gran Fonda for the next three years, the NITB should compile a Cycling Tourism Strategy (paragraphs 80 – 83).

Officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) have advised that Tourism NI is actively aiming to develop and promote cycling in all its forms as a tourism opportunity in Northern Ireland.

Tourism NI will be commissioning a Mountain Bike market research study in 2015, and has met with DRD officials to explore opportunities for partnership and to discuss terms of reference for a study on cycle tourism development opportunities in Northern Ireland.

It is intended that this study will assess the potential for Northern Ireland to strengthen its positioning, both nationally and internationally, as a global destination for cycling tourism, identifying opportunities which will lead to sustainable growth in the cycling tourism sector and help direct future investment in cycling infrastructure, capability, marketing and events.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), NITB, Sports NI, Outdoor Recreation and other relevant organisations proactively pursue the hosting of UCI World Cup and other prestigious mountain bike events in Northern Ireland (paragraphs 84 – 86).

Tourism NI has advised that it is proactively looking at a range of major global events, including cycling events, as part of their Events Bidding Strategy in partnership with the Major Events Bidding Group. The UCI Mountain Biking World Cup is one of a number of events currently under discussion and review.

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that other trails, in particular Roe Valley, Redburn and Scrabo Country Parks are developed to allow for the mountain biking (and walking) trails (paragraph 87).

Department of the Environment (DOE) officials from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) recognise the range of benefits from cycling, including as a recreational activity. NIEA have cooperated with other bodies to make provision for family cycling in Crawfordsburn Country Park and Castle Archdale Country Park.

NIEA Officials have advised that consideration has been given to the provision of cycle trails in all three of the country parks identified by the Committee.

Each of the sites mentioned by the Committee has geographic features or existing user profiles which raise health and safety risks which make the provision of mountain biking cycle trails unsuitable.

NIEA has previously commissioned Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) to evaluate the potential of **Redburn Country Park** for outdoor recreation and visitor provision. The report concluded that downhill mountain biking is not a feasible or financially sustainable option for future development in the park for a range of reasons. These include the limited extent of trails, health and safety risks and uplift (a vehicle uplift service to transport riders / bikes back up to the top of the hill). In addition, NIEA has stated that given the steepness of the path it is not practical at reasonable expense to make **Redburn Country Park** suitable for family cycling.

As a direct response to the Committee's recommendation, NIEA has undertaken to review the potential for providing safe family cycling at **Roe Valley** and to evaluate the possibility of providing a cycle trail from the South Quarry along existing trails to and around the North Quarry at **Scrabo Country Park**.

NIEA have stressed that should they find that family cycling could safely be provided at any of these country parks, a capital funding bid would be required to implement any proposals.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends that future roads capital investment projects, cycle trails and lanes should be “health-proofed” by means of a health impact assessment tool, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT) to ensure that health and wellbeing benefits are to the fore of all cycling provision (paragraphs 88-92).

The importance of capturing and communicating the benefits arising from capital investment in cycling and cycling related projects is recognised. It is clear that health improvement is one of the key benefits of greater levels of cycling. However, the HEAT tool only takes into account all-cause mortality for cycling (and walking), and this method is likely to produce conservative estimates, since it does not account for disease-related benefits.

It must be fully recognized that physical activity has beneficial effects on many aspects of morbidity as well, and currently the HEAT tool does not account for this.

The Department undertakes transport appraisal on all large scale transport schemes (those with a value greater than £5 million) in accordance with WebTAG appraisal Guidelines. This approach includes the use of the Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT).

In response to the Committee’s recommendation, DOE has confirmed that in the event that NIEA is in a position to make further provision of cycle trails within its Country Parks, it will apply the WHO’s Health Economic Assessment Tool. DSD has advised that they will continue to be guided by DRD colleagues on opportunities to enhance cycling infrastructure in its remaining public realm schemes.

The contents of this reply are fully disclosable under FOI.

Yours sincerely

[SIGNED]

ALAN DOHERTY

Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer