



Wise in 5: Active Travel

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published in June 2025. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.

	Legislation/ Statutory duty	Active Travel national strategy	Dedicated department or agency	Commissioner	Dedicated data monitoring?
England		+	+	+	
Northern Ireland		▲			
Republic of Ireland					
Scotland		+		+(Until 2023)	+
Wales	+	+			💡
Key		+ Yes	▲ In Draft	💡 Proposed	

Wise in 5: Active Travel

Overview

Active Travel commonly refers to the use of physically active or 'people-powered' modes of transport – such as cycling, walking or wheeling – in order to make every-day journeys and get from place to place (not including the pursuit of such activities for purely leisure purposes).

In recent years, Active Travel has emerged as a distinct policy and research field in response to an array of social challenges related to transport, climate change, health and wellbeing, and community infrastructure.

Active Travel features visibly as part of the policy agenda of all the Governments in the UK and Ireland, but with differing and manifold approaches to legislation, strategy, intervention, and promotion. Many regionalised approaches and interventions related to Active Travel have also been implemented across the UK and Ireland in recent years, supported and funded by national government policies.

The objectives set out in legislation and other policy range from climate mitigation to health benefits. [The Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) highlights the pivotal role that active travel plays in addressing climate goals. Public Health England provide guidelines about the health benefits of promote Active Travel and improve infrastructure. A different focus in Active Travel Policy is the growing consideration of those approaching later life and '[ageing better](#)' in the UK, with the [Minister for Older People and Equalities](#) in Scotland expressing that "programmes to enable older people to enjoy travelling more actively" can reduce isolation and loneliness.

According to Sustrans' [Walking and Cycling Index 2023](#), which looks at data from 18 urban areas across the UK and Ireland, more people choose to walk or wheel for 5 or more days a week (49%) than those who choose to drive (40%), use public transport (14%) or cycle (5%). But participation is not equal and not all residents feel safe, with only 10% of women cycling once a week compared to 21% of men, and 39% of disabled residents not feeling welcome and comfortable walking, wheeling or spending time on the streets of their neighbourhood. Residents want to engage more in active travel and drive less, with 57% of residents wanting to see more funding to enable walking and wheeling, and 47% wanting the same for cycling.

[Cycling UK](#) highlight that it is currently difficult to compare data on Active Travel across the nations due to differences in collection methods and parameters. Figures in recent years have also been skewed by the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on modes of travel.

In September 2023, speed reductions to 20mph were implemented along 22, 000 miles of road in Wales. Though [100 fewer people were killed](#) or seriously injured in the year following implementation, the same time period saw [10, 500 complaints about the changes to Welsh councils](#).

Nation by Nation

England

[Active Travel England](#) is the UK government's 'executive agency responsible for making walking, wheeling and cycling the preferred choice for everyone to get around in England.' The agency was formed in 2020 and is sponsored by the UK Government's Department for Transport. [Chris Boardman MBE](#) was appointed National Active Travel Commissioner in 2022 with overall responsibility for the leadership of Active Travel England.

Active Travel England is responsible for delivering the [UK Government's 'Gear Change' strategy](#), which was published in 2020. The strategy sets out a vision that "cycling and walking will be the natural first choice for many journeys with half of all journeys in towns and cities being cycled or walked by 2030" with £2billion of funding ringfenced. It sets out actions related to transport planning, accessibility and safety, health, and support for local governments.

[Active Travel England](#) is also responsible for driving and challenging standards in Active Travel delivery, ties, administering the Active Travel budget, and funding and delivering walking and cycling initiatives.

Increasing active travel through walking and cycling is also a key commitment of the UK Government's [Transport Decarbonisation plan](#), and part of Sport England's [Active Design guidance](#) for built and natural environments.

Local authorities play a key role in achieving Active Travel goal and are encouraged to develop plans for Active Travel and [Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure plans](#) supported by [the Cycling and Walking Investment strategy](#).

Data on Active Travel in England is currently collected through the National Travel Survey (NTS), administered by the Department for Transport, and the Active Lives Survey (ALS), carried out by Sport England. The [NTS measures cycling and walking in 'trips' and 'stages'](#) with the latest data showing that people are walking more often and cycling at similar levels to previous years. [The ALS](#) figures show that the proportion of adults walking for travel purposes at least once a week is higher in 2022 (35%) than in 2021 (28%) but remains lower than pre pandemic. Cycling for travel at least once per week increased to 6% in 2022 compared to 2021, similar to pre-pandemic levels.

A [recent \(Nov 2023\) inquiry by Public Accounts Committee](#) reported that the Government was "not on track" to meet its active travel objectives by 2025. This is in part due to funding cuts but also due to a lack of understanding and evaluation of

the impact of funded schemes. In June 2025, the [Court of Appeal ruled that the Treasury's decision](#) to reduce funding for cycling and walking was unlawful because it did not adequately consider legal duties related to climate, air quality, and equality.

In November 2024, new guidance was published by the Department of Transport and Active Travel England to support local authorities to set up and manage 'School Streets' schemes. The schemes intend to reduce congestion and traffic from school drop offs by increasing active travel methods which reduces pollution "at the same time as improving the mental and physical health of pupils and their parents/carers".

Northern Ireland

Responsibility for Active Travel policies sits in the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland who, in November 2024, published the first draft of a [dedicated national strategy on Active Travel](#). Before this, Active Travel policy had only featured in related strategies or regional policies.

In 2016, the Department for Infrastructure published, '[Exercise, Explore, Enjoy: A strategic plan for greenways](#)' that aimed to improve the network of greenways across the nation, linking villages, towns and cities.

Active Travel is recognised as a key area for improvement in the [Planning for the Future of Transport: Time for Change](#) strategy published in 2021, and underpins a number of the actions laid out.

In 2021, '[Making Belfast an Active City – Belfast Cycling Network](#)' was also published, which 'sets out a blueprint for the development and operation of the cycling infrastructure in the city for the next ten years.' This was followed by a [Delivery Plan 2022-2031](#) to identify key schemes throughout the city.

Intended to compliment the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan and the Strategic Plan for Greenways, The Department for Infrastructure [opened a consultation](#) in December 2024 on their new Active Travel Delivery Plan. The plan proposes cycling infrastructure for 200km of priority routes to be delivered within 42 urban and rural settlements over the next 10 years, focussing on shorter, everyday journeys.

The Department for Infrastructure and The Public Health Agency have been funding Sustrans to run the [Active School Travel Programme](#) since 2013, which has worked with over 500 schools to encourage pupils to walk or cycle to school.

Nation by Nation

Figures on walking and cycling in Northern Ireland are currently collected through the [Continuous Household Survey](#), with the latest results published in March 2024. For 2022/23, 12% of respondents reported to walk to/from work, while 2% reported to cycle to/from work (not including those who work from home).

Cycling UK has in the past commented that Northern Ireland is [‘lagging behind’](#) the rest of the UK when it comes to Active Travel, highlighting a lower spend per head in 2021/22. In [Sustrans’ Northern Ireland Assembly Elections Manifesto 2022](#) they also asked for Northern Ireland to be made ‘equal’ to Scotland and the Republic of Ireland in terms of investment in Active Travel, and to legislate for an Active Travel Act, similar to Wales.

Republic of Ireland

In 2021, the [National Investment Framework for Transport](#) was published by the Department of Transport and includes a guaranteed €360m per annum investment in Active Travel. The plan also has a decision-making hierarchy for travel infrastructure which places options for active travel and public transport solutions first.

In April 2022, the Department introduced a [National Sustainable Mobility Policy](#), which increases focus on accessibility to walking, cycling and public transport for those who are disabled, have reduced mobility and the elderly. The policy promises an effort toward planning and development of roads and housing which allows better access to active and public transport, and ease to switch between these modes when travelling.

The National Transport authority published a [Cycle Design Manual](#) and webinar series in 2023. Its guidelines focus on improved safety and implementation of international learnings such as cycle-friendly roundabouts and protected junctions. Their 2024 publication on [equitable infrastructure](#) sets out active travel planning guidance to address design features can disadvantage certain groups such as lack of dropped curbs, narrow paths or lack of CCTV.

A [public consultation](#) was launched by the National Transport Authority in September 2024 for the [‘CycleConnects’](#) plan which aims to construct the routes set out in the National Cycle Network [interactive maps](#). The proposed routes will be built in stages, connecting centres of employment, education, leisure and tourism,

and over 200 cities. [Transport Infrastructure Ireland](#) have a 2040 deadline to create 3,500km of additional cycle path.

Scotland

[Scotland’s Active Travel Framework](#) (2020) was produced collaboratively by Transport Scotland and key delivery partners, with input from Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) and local authorities. It has the ambition that by 2030, Scotland’s “communities are shaped around people and place, enabling walking and cycling to be the most popular mode of travel for short, everyday journeys”. The framework has strategic objectives related to climate, health, communities, equality and economic growth.

Scotland’s local authorities are also encouraged to produce their own [Active Travel strategies](#) to demonstrate their alignment with the Active Travel Framework.

Scotland also has a [Cycling Framework and Plan for Active Travel](#) published in 2023 to support the Scottish Government’s vision for Active Travel. As a top priority it proposes the “delivery of more dedicated, high quality, safe cycling infrastructure, effectively resourced, where fair access is ensured, and uptake is supported with training and education”. The Scottish Government has also committed to [reducing car use by 20% by 2030](#).

As part of the [Bute House agreement](#), Scottish Government agreed that by 2024–25, at least £320million or 10% of the total transport budget would be allocated to Active Travel. The budget for Active Travel has continued to rise since, but has been [short of what was promised in 2024, and in the draft 2025–26 budget](#). As part of the same agreement, Patrick Harvie from the Scottish Green Party was appointed Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenant’s Rights between 2021–2024. Following the dissolution of the agreement, there is no longer a ministerial role with named responsibility for Active Travel.

Between 2022–2023, Lee Craigie was Scotland’s Ambassador for Active Travel (having previously been Scotland’s Active Nation Commissioner), a role that aimed to broaden public conversation on active travel. Upon completion of her role, Lee Craigie wrote a [Final report](#) that argued that “real transformation in active travel is possible” but “bureaucratic process” still inhibits progress and innovation.

Nation by Nation

Feeding into Scotland's National Performance Framework, the Active Travel Outcomes Framework includes indicators such as the 'journeys by active travel' National indicator, with data collected through the Scottish Household Survey (SHS). In 2022, 46.2% of journeys under 2 miles were on foot, and 2.1% of journeys under 5 miles were on bicycle. The Hands Up Scotland Survey, run by Sustrans and funded by Transport Scotland, also looks at how children travel to school and nursery. In 2023, nearly half of pupils travelled to school in an active way, but numbers had fallen from the previous year.

Wales

The Active Travel Act (2013) places a duty on the Welsh Government and local authorities to continuously improve active travel provision through securing new and improved active travel routes and related facilities.

In 2016, an initial [Active Travel Action Plan](#) set out the actions that Government planned to take in order for 'walking and cycling to become the preferred ways of getting around over shorter distances.' Actions included, among others, the establishment of an Active Travel Board and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

In 2021, the Welsh Government published [Llwybr Newydd: the Wales transport strategy 2021](#), with a vision for an 'accessible, sustainable and efficient transport system', including significant focus on increasing active travel with a 'target of 45% of journeys to be made by walking, cycling and public transport by 2040.' This was accompanied by updated [Guidance on the Active Travel Act](#) to recognise related changes and commitments that had occurred since its original implementation, including the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and Welsh Government Net Zero targets.

A [review published in 2022](#) by the Cross Party Group on the Active Travel Act stated that the ambitions of the legislation 'have yet to be realised. Levels of active travel are at best static.' The primary recommendation of the review was the establishment of a new National Delivery Plan for Active Travel in Wales.

In 2024 Welsh Government published the [Active Travel Delivery Plan 2024-2027](#) taking into account the recommendations of the review, with updated actions on how to implement the active travel commitments of Llwybr Newydd. The plan has four key delivery areas: Leading the Change; Stepping up our Delivery; Demonstrating what Active Travel can Achieve; Making Active Travel the First Choice.

Alongside dedicated strategies and plans, the 'Percentage of journeys by walking, cycling or public transport' is included as a [national wellbeing indicator](#) as part of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. In the [Wellbeing of Wales 2023](#) report, 9% of Welsh residents reported walking to work while 35% of young people reported walking or cycling to school.

The Active Travel Act also requires Welsh Government to report annually on the number of active travel journeys made in Wales. [The National Travel Survey](#), developed by Welsh Government and Transport for Wales, has been piloted, with a full data collection carried out in late 2024, and result publication expected in 2025. Transport for Wales stated in the [Active Travel Delivery Plan](#), that they will, "develop a national monitoring and evaluation framework for active travel to track how we are doing against a broad range of indicators."

Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we have learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. Active Travel overlaps with many other policy areas (e.g. climate, health, ageing population) resulting in multiple standalone and interlinking strategies and objectives. There is opportunity for policymakers to strengthen resource and outcomes through coordinated action.
2. Approaches to increasing Active Travel are national, regional and local, often with a focus on towns or cities and limited rural attention.
3. The primary active travel target for most of the nations is to increase the number of journeys made by foot or bike, but no nations have identified significant progress. A better understanding is needed how change can be effectively delivered for Active Travel.
4. With varied data and collection methods and indicators between nations, policymakers might consider what types of data collection most represents the progress of Active Travel in their respective jurisdictions.
5. There is significant scope for policy learning and comparative policy research in the field of Active Travel in order to support all nations to make progress. Scoping is needed to uncover whether this is best done on a regional or national level, or both, and how to best compare the current data and evidence available.



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The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



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Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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