



# ENGLAND PEDESTRIAN POUND UPDATE

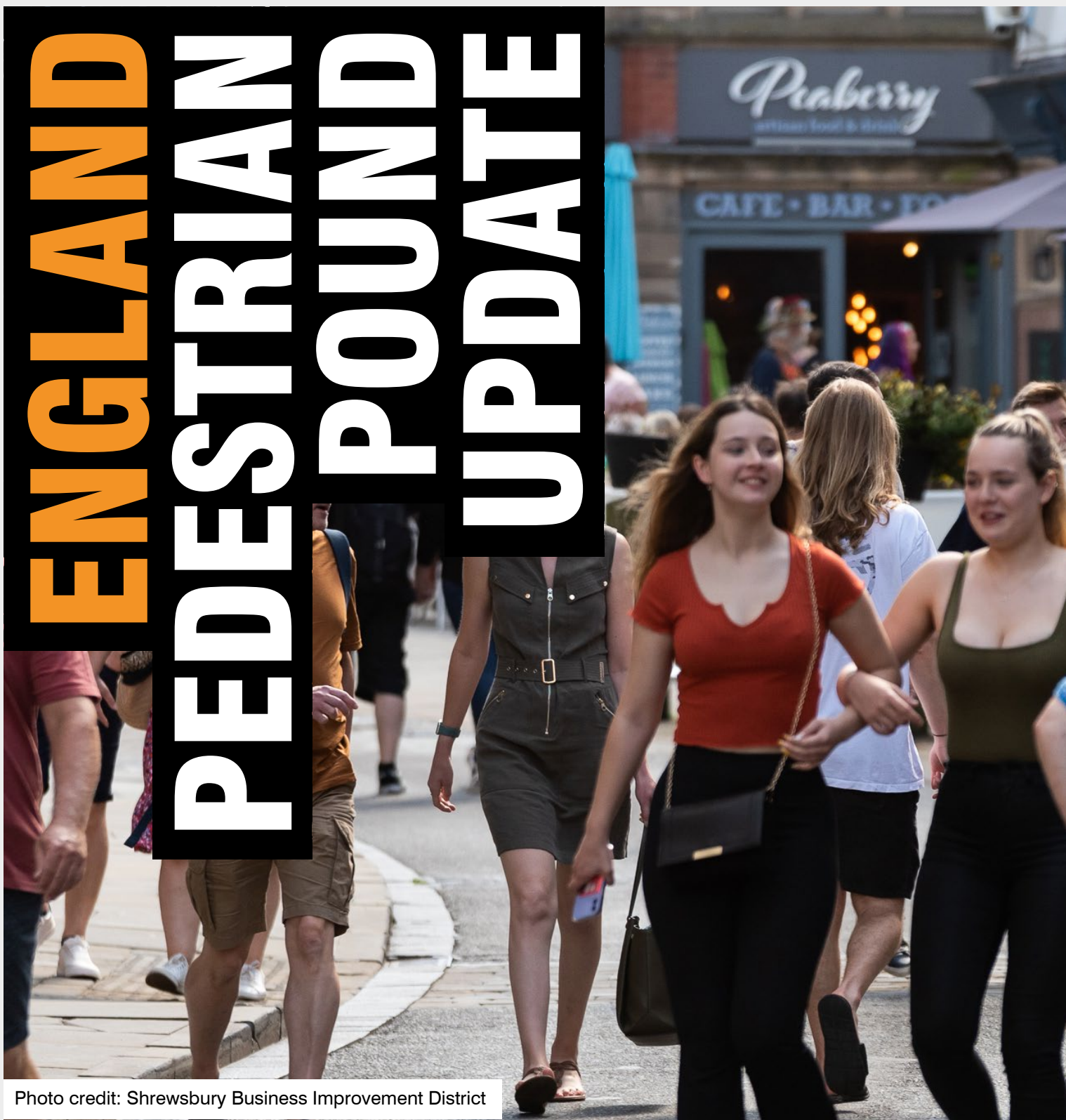


Photo credit: Shrewsbury Business Improvement District

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## Introduction

This Annex sets out the context for public realm and walking improvements in high streets in England, including the geography and social context, as well as key targets, policies, funding and delivery mechanisms for such schemes. The evidence for greater investment in walkable high streets can be found in the main report which includes examples of case studies from England. The aim of this Annex is to help identify the specific context for England in which those decisions are made and the opportunities and barriers to that investment.

This Annex is for anyone who wants to understand the context and key policies and mechanisms for delivery of public realm and walking improvements in England. This includes people new to the sector and people from other sectors or other nations. There are also recommendations for policymakers in England.

This Annex is informed by the findings of a workshop held with stakeholders from the North East in April 2023, hosted by Transport North East and organised by Living Streets. to inform the research for this edition of The Pedestrian Pound. Delegates discussed the impact of walking and active travel measures (e.g., pedestrianisation) introduced since COVID-19 and how to better measure the value of walking. Their roles covered a wide range of expertise: public health, transport (including active travel and transport planning), climate change, economic growth, town centre management, planning, marketing, regeneration and retail consultancy.

## Geography and social context

England is the largest nation in the UK, with a population of 57.1 million in 2022 (Office for National Statistics, 2024). The majority (83%) of residents lived in urban areas (17% in rural areas) in 2020 (Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2024) which means there is plenty of opportunity to improve walking to local, town and city centres.

The UK has larger geographical differences than many other developed countries, with inequalities in productivity, pay, educational attainment and health, both within and between the four nations (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). Although average income in England is generally higher than in the other three nations, there are considerable regional differences within England. For example, the North East and Yorkshire and Humber regions have the lowest earnings in the UK, while London and the South East have the highest (Francis-Devine, 2023).

Residents of England generally have poor health and low levels of activity, which, as outlined in the main report, could be helped by investment in public realm schemes that encourage more walking.

<sup>1</sup> Note the topics discussed in workshops in Scotland and Wales were different, and therefore the outputs from the workshops are not directly comparable.

<sup>2</sup> Where rural is defined as settlements of less than 10,000 people.

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For example:

- Over a quarter (26%) of adults in England were living with obesity in 2021-22 (Bone, 2024);
- Over a fifth (21%) of men and a quarter (25%) of women in England were classed as inactive in 2019 (British Medical Association, 2019).

This is accompanied by large health inequalities, with people living in the most deprived areas of England found to be diagnosed with serious illness earlier and dying sooner than people in more affluent areas (The Health Foundation, 2022).

These regional and health disparities mean that there is a particular need for investment in public realm and walking schemes in the most deprived areas to help residents benefit from the positive impacts on health and wellbeing, economics and community as part of levelling up.

## Policy context

### High streets and public realm

Policy on public realm improvements in England straddle a number of Government departments but, in the main, comprise the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHUC) and the Department for Transport (DfT).

The main policies, strategies and guidance relevant to public realm improvements include:

- **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, which includes a commitment to 'town centres first' for retail planning, (see Section 8, DLHUC, 2021). There have been calls to revise the NPPF for better placemaking (see section on delivery below.).
- **The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023**, which introduced changes to the planning system including a statutory requirement for local planning authorities to prepare design codes for new developments in their area (Rankl, 2024).
- **Build Back Better High Streets**, which sets out a strategy to regenerate high streets, including funding and tools to help high streets to adapt to the impacts of the pandemic (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021). Improvements to the public realm are one of five areas for government action. This strategy established a new Levelling Up Fund and UK Community Renewal Fund, to fund green infrastructure and improvements to public space.

<sup>3</sup> A partnership between the local authority and local businesses, funded by a levy on business ratepayers in the BID area. The revenue from this is used to develop projects which will improve the local area, such as public realm improvements.

- **Levelling Up White Paper**, whose key objectives include boosting productivity, spreading opportunity and improving public services and restoring a sense of community and local pride across the UK (DLUHC, 2022). Two of its twelve missions to support those objectives are ‘improving wellbeing’ and ‘pride in place’ (i.e., building social capital). Investment in active travel is seen as central to levelling up.
- **Manual for Streets** (DfT, 2007) and **Manual for Streets 2** (CIHT, 2010) provide design advice to help plan, construct and improve streets.
- **Revitalising Town Centres Toolkit** is an online checklist to provide practical guidance and resources to assist councils in taking a strategic and evidence-based approach to revitalising town and city centres (Local Government Association, undated a).
- **The Flood and Water Management Act 2010 (Schedule 3)** (which came into effect in England in 2023) requires all new developments to include Sustainable Drainage Systems that comply with national standards.
- Unlike the other nations, planning laws have been relaxed in England to allow shops and offices to be converted into housing through ‘**permitted development rights**’, without the need for planning permission (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). See Section 7 of the main report for further discussion.

Many local authorities have public realm improvements as a key part of their regeneration programmes. A wide range of quasi-governmental, private and third sector organisations help to champion placemaking and public realm improvements in England. Key organisations include the High Streets Task Force, an alliance of placemaking experts set up by the UK Government in 2019 to help transform high streets, with a wide range of expertise, training, and data (High Streets Task Force, undated). The Task Force is run by the Institute of Place Management, the professional body for place management (Institute for Place Management, undated). Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) also play an important role in supporting placemaking and public realm improvements throughout England (British BIDs, 2018).

## Walking

Many public realm improvements involve active travel schemes. The DfT is the main government department responsible for walking policies, strategies and funding, while Active Travel England (ATE) is the executive agency responsible for making walking (and cycling) a preferred choice for travel (Active Travel England, undated).

Unlike the devolved nations, England does not have a central integrated transport strategy, to which all other policies are referenced. Instead, policy is often developed for different modes, sometimes with competing policy goals and trade-offs. For example, the road investment strategy is a five-year multi-billion-pound investment programme in new roads which is expected to increase traffic.



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Conversely, a number of policies published in the last five years are focused on prioritising other modes, including walking, such as the Transport Decarbonisation Plan (DfT, 2021a), Gear Change (DfT, 2020), Bus Back Better (DfT, 2021b) and the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail (DfT, 2021c).

Due to court challenges against its Net Zero Strategy, the UK Government published a new Carbon Budget Delivery Plan (CBDP) in 2023 which included a revised carbon reduction pathway for transport (DfT, 2023a). This, in turn, was the subject of three further legal challenges by climate groups, with the government now legally required to produce a better CBDP by May 2025 (Friends of the Earth, 2024).

Unlike Scotland and Wales, there is no explicit, high-level policy commitment across all government departments to the health and wellbeing of citizens in the UK or England, though the Levelling Up White Paper does include missions on improving health and wellbeing (DLUHC, 2022). Analysis by the British Medical Association in 2019 suggested that 'physical activity was not being prioritised in the UK' (British Medical Association, 2019). A long-awaited health disparities White Paper was shelved in 2023 (Nightingale and Merrifield, 2023).

The main policies, strategies and targets relevant to walking include:

- Gear Change – an ambitious strategy for active travel that reflects the important role of walking and cycling during the COVID-19 pandemic (DfT, 2020). It established a new inspectorate, Active Travel England, with the same aims. This was followed by a one-year review, summarising what had been achieved (DfT, 2021d).
- Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) (DfT, 2017a) and CWIS2 (DfT, 2018a), which set out the main objectives for walking and cycling and the financial resources available over a five-year period. As part of this, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) are developed by local authorities to identify walking (and cycling) improvements at local level. Although not mandatory, DfT has advised that councils who have plans will be well placed to make the case for future investment (DfT, 2017b).
- The targets for walking were revised upwards in CWIS2 to:
  - Increase walking to 365 stages per person per year in 2025.
  - Increase the percentage of short journeys in towns and cities that are walked or cycled from 41% in 2018 to 2019 to 46% in 2025.

## Walking levels and mode share

Walking is already important as a mode of travel and currently the only mode of transport in England where average trips per person are above 2018 levels. In 2022, the average person in England (DfT, 2023b):

- Made 267 walking trips (31% of all trips) and 318 walking stages.
- Walked 221 miles (4% of their total distance travelled).
- Spent about 90 minutes a week travelling by walking.
- Had an average walking trip length of 0.7 miles.

Walking mode share in England has increased from just over a quarter (27%) in 2018 to nearly a third (31%) of all trips in 2022, though this is partly due to the reduction in total trips (DfT, 2023c).

Academic research has shown that this important and growing role for walking as a mode of travel has multiple benefits for the economy, health and wellbeing, community and the environment (see the main report). Delegates to the workshop argued that this needs to be recognised and well provided for. This is especially the case for shorter trips in the vicinity of residential areas which link people to amenities, education, services and social activities.

## Funding context

The governance and funding context in England is very heterogeneous. For example, places such as Greater London with a unique governance structure and powers and Greater Manchester with devolved multi-year funding agreements (similar to the devolved nations), are in a very different situation to councils in smaller (e.g., two-tier) authorities required to competitively bid on a year-by-year basis for smaller pots of funding for public realm and walking improvements.

There are a number of UK Government funds that have recently been or can be used for high streets, public realm and walking improvements in England. These are shown in Table E1.

Through CWIS2, the UK Government has projected spending £3.56 billion on active travel between April 2021 and March 2025 (DfT, 2023d). However, only £1.1 billion of that is dedicated for active travel with the remainder made up of estimates spent on active travel as part of wider government programmes (e.g., Levelling Up) and highways maintenance. It is therefore very difficult to unpick exactly how much has been spent through the various funding programmes, some of which are not exclusively for active travel. Estimates suggest that, over the period 2021-25, the government has cut this dedicated funding by around £430 million (Transport Action Network, 2023).



**TABLE E1**

Recent and current funding streams for high streets, public realm and walking improvements in England

Name Of Fund	Funding (£)	Description	Nation	Reference
UK Levelling Up Fund (round 3 closed)	£4.8 billion	Fund for infrastructure including regenerating town centres and high streets, upgrading local transport, and investing in cultural and heritage assets	UK	DLUHC and Ministry of HCLG, 2021a
Shared Prosperity Fund (final allocation 2023/24)	£2.6 billion	Funding for improvements to town centres and high streets, including better accessibility for disabled people, including capital spend and running costs. All areas of the UK receive an allocation via a funding formula.	UK	As above
UK Community Ownership Fund (round 4 final round)	£150 million	Fund to support local facilities, community assets and amenities	UK	As above
Towns Fund (closed)	£3.6 billion	Fund to foster regeneration of towns as part of the Levelling Up plan	England	DLUHC and Ministry of HCLG, 2021b
Future High Streets Fund (closed)	1 billion	Fund to renew and reshape town centres and help them reopen and recover from the effects of the pandemic	England	DLUHC and Ministry of HCLG, 2021c
Brownfield Land Release Fund (closed)	£1.5 billion	Fund to transform derelict sites in towns and city centres	England	Local Government Association, undated b
Active Travel Fund	£634 million	Funding allocations in four tranches (2020-2024) for active travel schemes for local authorities in England	England	DfT, 2024a
Active Travel Capability Fund	£51.5 million	Revenue funding for local authorities outside London to develop active travel infrastructure plans and community engagement and training initiatives for the period 2023/24 and 2024/25	England	DfT, 2024b
Transforming Cities Fund (closed)	£2.45 billion	Capital fund to improve productivity by investing in public and sustainable transport infrastructure in English cities (2018-2024)	England	DfT, 2018b

## Delivery and evaluation

The funds listed above have enabled investment in a range of active travel schemes and ATE's Active Travel Capability Fund is designed to help local authorities outside London to build their capacity to deliver active travel schemes. As well as approving and inspecting schemes to enable active travel, ATE is set up to support local authorities, train staff and spread good practice in design, implementation and public engagement.

However, a report by the National Audit Office (NAO) found that the UK Government is not on track to meet its objectives to increase rates of active travel in England, despite increased ambition in recent years (NAO, 2023). More than half (56%) of local authorities in England were found to have low capability and ambition to deliver active travel projects, which has affected the quality of active travel interventions delivered with government funding to date (ibid.). The establishment of ATE is seen as helpful in tackling some long-standing issues, but the NAO identified a need for longer-term stable funding for active travel, and capacity building to help local authorities deliver schemes (ibid.).

The DfT has also been criticised by another cross-party group of MPs for not doing enough to understand the impact and benefits of active travel funding (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2023). While DfT spent £2.3 billion on active travel schemes between 2016 and 2021, the vast majority of those schemes came under the threshold (of £2 million) where they are required to monitor or evaluate them. The Government agreed with many of the Committee's recommendations and is now developing a revised approach to evaluation of active travel schemes that have received grant funding, due to be completed in 2026/27 (DfT, 2024c). In the latest round of Active Travel Fund funding, DfT are encouraging schemes above £750,000 to submit a full economic appraisal (ibid.).

At the same time, some analysis has shown that an approach focused predominantly on transport assessments and traffic modelling can get in the way of good placemaking (Create Streets, 2022). There are calls for more vision-led planning and a move away from the 'predict and provide' techniques that favour maintenance of the status quo, often road-based solutions, towards an approach based on 'decide and provide' (Create Streets and Sustrans, 2024). Among other things, this will require updates to the NPPF to require a 'vision-led' approach (ibid.). An independent body advising DfT has also called for a more vision-led approach to planning and recommends reviewing the NPPF to ensure it delivers healthy, low-carbon development with "access to residents' needs within a short walk or cycle ride" (DfT Science Advisory Council, 2024).

The Government's levelling up programme has also suffered from delays, with only around a tenth of the funding to tackle regional inequalities spent as of September 2023. It also lacks a mechanism to measure the impacts of the programme (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2024). Further research shows that local councils in England are struggling to invest in levelling up measures due to a lack of ongoing funding, staff and capacity (Taylor et al., 2024).

UK-wide guidance on evaluation for public realm schemes includes:

- UKSPF Evaluation strategy, published in March 2024 (around the same time as the Public Accounts Committee report) which sets out the methods and data sources that will be used to enable evaluation of the Shared Prosperity Fund at a programme, place and intervention

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level (DLUHC, 2024). Evaluation is not compulsory for local authorities but those that opt in can access additional funding. Interventions are expected to be evaluated using randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental approaches with treatment and control groups.

The most significant England-specific appraisal (and evaluation) tool used for public realm and active travel schemes is Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG).

- Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG) is the DfT's modelling and appraisal system for transport policy interventions or infrastructure decisions. It provides guidance to support the development of a business case for an intervention, in line with the Treasury's 'five case model' for decision making (DfT, 2024d).

More information on evaluation can be found in the Evaluation Briefing which accompanies this edition of The Pedestrian Pound.

## Workshop findings

Delivery of high street and active travel improvements since COVID-19 were discussed at a workshop in the North East in 2023. While the points raised in that discussion were specific to the North East, they can also be applied to England more generally. For example:

- Some of the COVID-19 social distancing schemes (wider pavements etc) were retained and some of the experimental schemes were effective, but the ones that were retained depended on political will and leadership rather than decisions being based on the effectiveness of each scheme.
- There is a polarisation in how local businesses understand parking and active travel in terms of their importance for trade.
- There is a difference in perceptions versus reality, with some traders not happy with some of the emergency active travel schemes despite the fact that their takings were higher than in usual trading conditions.
- The public response to new active travel schemes varied. This may have been a generational issue, but the emergence of conspiracy theories (as part of the backlash against Low Traffic Neighbourhoods) was also seen as playing a large part in the public response.

The workshop also discussed how to better measure (and evaluate) the value of walking (e.g., to public health and air quality). Points made by delegates included:

**Better data and information:** a need for more data about how people use public spaces; details on the origins and destinations of their journeys; how people would like to travel and what the barriers are. It was suggested that public health data and intelligence could be better used, as well as linking the value of walking to public health.

**Better evaluation:** the value of health indicators and statistics, as well as information about the impact on the NHS, to contribute to the economic case for walking. Delegates also highlighted the importance of quantifying carbon dioxide emissions and looking at the different costs and time of travelling by different modes. It was suggested that Living Streets community street audits of walking routes to check the quality/connectivity of routes should be fed into wayfinding schemes. There was also recognition of the importance of evaluation and a need to ensure there was sufficient funding for it. See the separate Evaluation Briefing for details of how to monitor public realm schemes.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from both the Newcastle workshop and the reports discussed above:

### Policy

- Produce a single integrated transport strategy based on a transport hierarchy, with overarching objectives of health and wellbeing, carbon reduction, fairness and sustainable economic development.

### Funding

- Provide longer-term stable funding for active travel.

### Delivery

- Build capacity in local authorities to help them deliver schemes.
- Develop a clear and consistent approach for ensuring greater integration of active travel infrastructure with the public transport network.
- Revise the NPPF and planning policy to ensure there is a vision-led approach to planning for better placemaking.

### Evaluation

- Comprehensively identify and measure the benefits of active travel across all government policy areas, i.e., the wider benefits to health, climate targets etc.
- Better integrate the health costs and benefits of schemes into the economic case.
- Consider the costs and need for evaluation.

Some of the recommendations above, which are common to all three nations, have been included in the main report.

## Case studies

See the case studies which accompany this edition of The Pedestrian Pound for examples of public realm improvements in England – and across the UK – which have benefitted pedestrians.

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