Walking Network Pilot

A new approach to planning and prioritising walking and wheeling infrastructure









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Commissioned by Active Travel England
Report and methodology by Footways CIC
Engagement and expert input from Living Streets

1. Executive summary

Walking is the most universal form of transport. It underpins almost all local journeys, connects people to public transport, and is fundamental to health, access, inclusion and the quality of places. Despite this, walking has often been under-prioritised in transport planning and investment. Within many Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs), walking network planning is typically less developed, less detailed and less clearly prioritised than cycling, making it harder for local authorities to identify schemes, secure funding and deliver change.

The Walking Network Pilot was commissioned by Active Travel England to address this gap. Working with local authorities in five locations – Bristol, Liverpool, Maidstone, Sheffield and Sunderland – the pilot developed and tested a practical methodology for identifying what an attractive, functional and accessible walking network might look like, and for translating this into clear, prioritised proposals that can inform future investment.

Two main conclusions emerge from the pilot. First, walking needs its own network, with its own hierarchy of routes, so that councils can see where investment will make the greatest difference. Second, that network cannot be identified from data or desktop research alone. Rapid fieldwork and early engagement reveal the routes people already use and those they would use if conditions were better. These include quieter, more enjoyable routes, and streets with potential for pedestrian priority (see Section 9).

The pilot also recommends shared digital maps as a practical way to record and share walking networks and proposals. With light-touch support, local groups could manage the maps themselves, giving councils a clear view of local ideas and priorities, linked to the routes where change would have the most impact.

The findings are timely. CWIS3, the government's third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, commits to new LCWIP guidance by 2027, and to every mayoral strategic authority and large local authority having a funded, phased active travel network plan by 2030. A walking route hierarchy shows councils where to start, and what comes next.

1.1 Establishing a hierarchy of walking routes

In many LCWIPs, walking routes follow the same corridors as cycling routes, often along main roads. A few identify separate primary walking routes, usually where walking is already busiest. The pilot instead ranked walking routes across whole urban areas – centres and the neighbourhoods around them – according to the trips they serve now and could serve in the future.

Hierarchy of walking routes

- **Primary network:** the most direct and attractive routes between major destinations, where investment would have the greatest impact
- **Focus routes:** top-priority routes to start on first, selected from the primary network
- **Secondary network:** a wider set of routes for everyday access between neighbourhoods and local destinations
- **Full network:** all streets and paths[1]

[1] The pilot maps and slide decks used the names Priority and Main network, since changed to primary and secondary following feedback from councils (see Section 9).

Hierarchies help councils focus limited resources on the routes that matter most. Barriers to walking can be small and scattered, so easily lost in long lists of minor works. Linking them to key routes shows where to act first, and allows them to be packaged into coherent schemes ready for future funding. Hierarchies also strengthen existing LCWIPs, adding clarity within Core Walking Zones and identifying connections to surrounding neighbourhoods and key destinations that have often been overlooked.

1.2 Fieldwork, engagement and data to identify routes and barriers

The pilot used an approach designed specifically for walking. People on foot experience streets more directly than anyone else. They feel the noise and speed of traffic, the width of a footway, a missing dropped kerb or an unlit path in a way that is hard to capture in data or from behind a screen. The best way to judge a walking route is therefore to walk it, and to ask the people who use it.

Data was used to identify trip generators, potential demand and areas of social exclusion, but real-world experience was the starting point for choosing routes and finding barriers.

Key features of the approach included:

- **Data as a guide.** Desktop analysis drew on council and public data and GIS tools to reveal key destinations, draft an initial network, identify areas of transport-related social exclusion and places where new development may change demand.
- **Early engagement.** Engagement was built in from the start, not added later to comment on draft networks or proposals. Councillors, officers, local campaigners and community groups shared their knowledge through guided walks, workshops and commentable online maps, and this shaped which routes were chosen and prioritised.
- **Rapid fieldwork.** Walking the streets in person proved an effective way to identify both routes and the main barriers along them across a wide area. It revealed routes and barriers that data analysis can miss: perceived safety risks, informal desire lines, accessibility barriers, and the impact of traffic and severance. Rather than auditing every street in detail, the fieldwork focused on clear barriers on key routes.
- **A snapshot for later stages.** The result is a snapshot of what needs to change, to be followed by detailed audits, design and formal consultation at scheme stage. People are likely to be engaged more than once, but early involvement should make later consultation easier, because residents have already helped shape the routes.
- **A responsive, iterative process.** Insights from engagement and fieldwork prompted further data analysis, new questions and refinements. This back-and-forth strengthened the evidence base while remaining proportionate.

In many LCWIPs, walking networks rely heavily on GIS mapping and available data, with limited guidance on how to prioritise routes, and community input is often limited to commenting on draft networks. Local authorities reported that the pilot methodology would help them plan and improve walking networks more efficiently and effectively.

1.3 Outputs

The pilot produced a set of outputs for immediate use by councils and communities:

- **Walking routes as GIS files**, so that councils can add the networks to their own mapping systems.

- **Lists of infrastructure proposals** – specific and route-wide geolocated improvements, grouped by type of intervention, in csv formats that can be integrated into council systems.
- **Digital maps** – bringing together walking routes, barriers, proposals and contextual data, such as collisions and deprivation, so that priorities can be explored at both street and area scale. The maps include comments added by local people.
- **Slide decks** – turning complex material into clear narratives for decision-makers, using maps, photographs linked to local policies and strategies.

Councils valued seeing proposals backed by both community input and professional analysis. Community groups found the maps a practical way to record ideas and barriers, and to share them easily with councils.

1.4 Barriers to walking identified by the pilot

Across the five pilot locations, common challenges affecting walking and wheeling were identified:

- Women and girls' safety, which depended on the presence of people as much as lighting and sightlines – making it a planning and regeneration issue, not only a transport one
- Poor walking access to healthcare, despite hospitals and GP surgeries being major trip generators
- Severance caused by major roads, hostile junctions and impermeable layouts
- Accessibility barriers, including missing dropped kerbs, uneven surfaces and wide side-road crossings
- Road danger, from traffic volume and speed, poor visibility and wide junctions
- Long-term under-investment in deprived areas, where low walking levels often mask suppressed demand
- Barriers to walking around schools, particularly high traffic volumes and missing crossings, which limit safe and independent journeys for children and families
- Few reasons or opportunities for people to spend time on streets

The pilot showed that improving walking conditions needs both quick wins and more ambitious, cross-departmental action. Leaving long-standing barriers in place risks entrenching inequality, avoidance of walking and poor health outcomes.

1.5 Implications for LCWIPs and investment in walking

Councils in the pilot said the methodology addressed gaps in their current LCWIP practice. The pilot's key recommendations include:

- embedding route-based walking hierarchies in future LCWIP guidance and in local network planning, including LCWIP refreshes
- making rapid fieldwork and early engagement core parts of walking and wheeling network planning
- using walking networks to support funding bids, development negotiations, maintenance programmes and regeneration
- enabling local groups to manage shared walking network maps, giving councils a clear view of local ideas and priorities
- exploring pedestrian-priority spine routes as a long-term ambition for the primary network

The pilot also supports wider government priorities, including:

- CWIS3's targets for walking and school journeys, and its commitment to phased active travel network plans
- the government's 10-year health plan, through better walking access to hospitals, GP practices and other health services
- the Pride in Place strategy, which emphasises community insight in creating safer and more welcoming places
- Active Travel England's Women and Girls' Safety Programme and the cross-government strategy on freedom from violence and abuse

The barriers that stop people walking are rarely large: a missing dropped kerb, a side-road too wide to cross safely, a path that feels dangerous after dark. These can usually be fixed for a fraction of the cost of a major road scheme. But when they are spread across whole towns and cities, fixing them all at once is overwhelming, and fixing them at random achieves little – a route is only as good as its weakest link. Councils need a clear order of priority: which routes first, which barriers next. The pilot shows how to build that pipeline, one route at a time.