

# North Somerset Council

## Report to the Executive

**Date of Meeting: 21 October 2020**

**Subject of Report: Pre-consultation sign-off of the Draft North Somerset Active Travel Strategy, in preparation for public consultation (November-December 2020)**

**Town or Parish: All**

**Officer/Member Presenting: Cllr James Tonkin – Executive Member for Planning and Transport (excluding Public Transport)**

**Key Decision: Yes**

**Reason: The Draft Active Travel Strategy proposes new walking and cycling improvements in two or more wards.**

### Recommendations

To approve the Draft Active Travel Strategy document for public consultation.

#### 1. Summary of Report

- 1.1 North Somerset Council has been developing its draft Active Travel Strategy (ATS). The aim of the ATS is to create a 10-year plan to enable, promote and increase walking, cycling and other active travel modes such as running, wheeling and scooting.
- 1.2. It sets out an aspiration for active travel in North Somerset which is encapsulated by the vision statement for this Active Travel Strategy:  
  
‘Making walking and cycling the natural choice for a cleaner, healthier and more active North Somerset’.
- 1.3. The ATS sets out how we will reshape places to become healthy, vibrant and clean. Using new and improved walking and cycling infrastructure, we strive for residents and businesses to choose walking and cycling as the natural choice for short and medium length journeys and for the first and last mile of longer journeys. We aim for them to take these journeys via a safe, connected network, making active travel the most attractive option wherever possible. This will be important in working towards making our transport network carbon neutral by 2030.
- 1.4. The provision of a high-quality, segregated cycle network will also attract visitors to North Somerset to cycle, walk and spend more within the District. This will be to the benefit of the local economy, as we work towards a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 1.5. We have four key objectives, showing what we aim to achieve for North Somerset:
  - Deliver safe and frequent active travel
  - Tackle the Climate Emergency
  - Drive local economic development
  - Shape active travel neighbourhoods through an enabling planning system
  
- 1.6. Achieving these four objectives will result in the following successful outcomes:
  - High-quality walking and cycling networks are delivered, enabling residents and visitors to make active journeys more frequently, with improved public realm and access to local shops, facilities and green spaces.
  - Safety and perceptions of safety are addressed through improved infrastructure and suppressed demand for active travel is released through reallocated road space to improved walking and cycling facilities.
  - Awareness is increased, supported by a strong, consistent media campaign showing the active travel options available. Residents are supported to make changes using education, training and publicity.
  - Improved health and wellbeing of residents through increased regular walking and cycling, making a healthier, happier and more resilient North Somerset.
  - A lower carbon transport network with lower fossil fuel and car dependency, reduced carbon emissions and improved air quality across North Somerset, especially around schools and shopping areas. Transport is playing a central role in contributing towards carbon neutrality by 2030 to help tackle the climate emergency.
  - A stronger local economy, supported by improved access to work, services and businesses, as part of our green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Income from tourism is higher, supported by attractive active travel facilities and the reduced dominance of cars in central spaces.
  - Council spending priorities will be more focussed towards delivering identified active travel improvements and funding opportunities are maximised.
  - An enabling planning system that ensures development is active travel focused.
  - Other local policies ensure that new developments are active travel neighbourhoods from the outset and support the rapid growth in retrofitting our transport network to prioritise active travel.
  
- 1.7. The strategy is wide ranging in scope, covering new infrastructure, promotion, cycle training, and opportunities which may be gained by the Council changing how it carries out existing duties. The final ATS will form a local supporting strategy to the emerging Local Plan, Joint Local Transport Plan 4, and the emerging draft Joint Local Transport Plan 5 (JLTP5).
  
- 1.8. A decision is sought to approve the draft ATS document and delegate final detail decisions regarding this and its consultation to officers.
  
- 1.9. Following the consultation, the final ATS document will be brought back to the Executive Member for approval.
  
- 1.10. The recently approved Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plan has helped to identify key routes for delivery / improvement and these are incorporated into the ATS, the national methodology means these are mainly focussed around urban

areas with significant opportunity for active mode increase, but the ATS takes a wider view of the issues and locations for improvements.

## **2. Policy**

2.1. The ATS is a key strategic document that interacts with a wide range of policies in North Somerset and across the West of England. It sets out how we will act to deliver key aims and objectives:

- Deliver safe and frequent active travel
- Tackle the Climate Emergency
- Drive local economic development
- Shape active travel neighbourhoods through an enabling planning system

2.2. Climate Emergency Declaration

North Somerset have been making good progress increasing levels of walking and cycling, principally increasing numbers of trips through the provision of off-road networks. However, there is plenty more work to do and this strategy reframes the progress that is now required in order to deliver on our target of Net Carbon Neutrality by 2030.

In order to achieve carbon neutrality for North Somerset by 2030, we set out in this Active Travel Strategy to increase walking and cycling trips by at least 300% by 2030.

The transport sector at 42%, is the largest single source of carbon emissions in North Somerset. This is considerably higher than the regional (South West) average of 32% and the national average of 33% from transport (2018 figures, Gov.uk). For the West of England region, transport CO2 emissions will rise by a further 22% by 2036 if we don't act - increasing the risk of droughts, floods and extreme heat globally and extreme weather events in the South West region.

Consequently, North Somerset Council (NSC) and the other four authorities in the West of England have declared climate emergencies and are urgently working on action plans to mitigate this. The Active Travel Strategy will be an important part of North Somerset's carbon reduction action planning.

2.3 Corporate Plan

The Corporate Plan was approved by Full Council in February 2020.

The draft priorities are grouped under three broad aims, and the key areas related to the ATS are described below:

1. A healthy, sustainable and thriving place
  - A great place for people to live, work and visit
  - Safe, welcoming, clean and vibrant communities
  - A reduction in our carbon footprint to net zero by 2030
  - A transport network which promotes active and low carbon travel
2. A council which empowers and cares for people
  - A commitment to protect the most vulnerable people in our communities
  - A focus on tackling inequalities, improving outcomes and encouraging healthier lifestyles
  - An approach which enables children, young people and adults to lead independent and fulfilling lives
3. As an open and smart organisation, we will
  - Engage with and empower our communities

- Collaborate with partners to deliver the best outcomes

## 2.4. Public Health Strategy (including COVID19)

The ATS supports the local and national public health agendas by making physical activity easier to incorporate into everyday life. The lack of adequate physical exercise by a large proportion of the population threatens to become a national emergency with huge implications for the wellbeing of individuals and NHS resources. The COVID19 pandemic has had a range of impacts on people travel habits and resilience to public health threats is an important theme of the ATS.

Despite being a significant and ongoing resource and public health challenge, North Somerset Council is determined to maximise the benefits of our changed world for decarbonising the transport network and delivering public health resilience and improvement through significant active travel growth.

During peak lockdown, we saw a staggering 364% increase in cycling on some routes and even as we continue to 'reopen' as a district and as a nation, walking and cycling levels overall remain higher than pre-COVID-19 levels. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us the importance of underlying good health both physically and mentally and active travel is a very easy way for people to achieve this. It also showed the strong suppressed demand for active travel; only when motor traffic levels were down to approximately 25% of pre-COVID-19 levels did many people feel it safe enough to cycle on our transport network. Such opportunities and lessons must be harnessed.

Nationally, we are actively inputting to and responding to the changing national policy and guidance on COVID19.

The update of local design guidance for cycling infrastructure, in the form of LTN 1/20, was very welcomed by NSC, as it sets out for the first time that cycling should take priority over other highway users wherever possible in order to gain Governmental funding. Accompanying updates to the Highway Code with improved priority for cycling offer vital support and make clear the national government's recent shift towards cycling as a crucial 'form of mass transit' that is key to aid social distancing and improve public health in the short term, and reduce motor vehicle dependency and carbon emissions in the medium to long term.

The recent Department for Transport's Emergency Active Travel Fund (Tranche 2) welcomes only ambitious walking and cycling scheme bids that 'must meaningfully alter the status quo on the road' and 'include segregation or point closures to through traffic'. This sets a strong agenda for mass increases in active travel via significantly improved active travel infrastructure and awareness.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have a significant impact on our local and national economy. As we continue into the 'reopening' phase of the recovery, we have the opportunity to reshape and strengthen the North Somerset economy. The evidence on the increased footfall, income, vitality and general attractiveness of local shopping streets and areas that have strong pedestrian, cycle and public realm is staggering. We should not make the false assumption that prioritising access by cars will deliver economic success, where more often than not, this is just not the case.

## 2.5. Joint Local Transport Plan (JLTP4)

This is our 15-year vision for transport investment in the West of England. The focus for investment is on increasing the attractiveness of more active and sustainable modes, both by improving these networks and opportunities and implementing measures that can manage private car use.

JLTP4 seeks to deliver a well-connected sustainable transport network that offers greater, realistic travel choice and makes walking, cycling and public transport the preferred way to travel. The focus for investment is on increasing the attractiveness of more active and sustainable modes, both by improving these networks and opportunities and implementing measures that can manage private car use. Individuals will be empowered to change their travel habits, with sustainable modes becoming the preferred choice for journeys, if journeys need to be made at all.

## 2.6. Green Infrastructure Strategy

Also at the West of England 'sub-regional' level, links with the emerging West of England Green Infrastructure Strategy will be key in supporting the growth in safe and frequent active travel by maximising active travel connections with improved and greener public spaces. This will enable people to feel comfortable to dwell and spend time and money in our popular places and spaces both within towns and in our beautiful rural areas.

A successful Active Travel Strategy will rely heavily on and be interdependent on Green Infrastructure. The inclusion on elements such as permeable pavement, bioswales, planter boxes and trees will create environments that will encourage the uptake of active travel modes, and the enjoyment of the experience of both travel corridors and destination places. Meanwhile Green Infrastructure can also deliver solutions on wider issues created by the transport network (such as highway runoff) or experienced by it (e.g. stormwater runoff).

## 2.7. North Somerset Local Plan 2038 (Emerging)

Locally, through our emerging NSC Local Plan up to 2038, we will ensure that new developments (both residential and employment) will be active travel neighbourhoods from the outset and connect into our growing strategic cycle network.

Significant 'decarbonisation reviews' of our Parking Standards Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), Travel Plans SPD, Highways & Transport Capital Works Programme and our ongoing active-travel focussed COVID-19 response (including the ambitious EATF scheme work) will continue to ensure that the Active Travel Strategy is a strong fit with existing and emerging local policy; to reduce carbon and get North Somerset moving.

## 2.8. North Somerset Economic Plan (2020 Emerging document)

Transport, retail, the visitor economy and creative industries have been hit particularly hard by the COVID19 pandemic. Unemployment has risen and our young people are especially at risk with fewer job opportunities and apprenticeships. The lockdown has also highlighted digital poverty; those without access to broadband or the right equipment and skills are at a big disadvantage. And these unprecedented times have put huge pressure on mental and physical health – highlighting the importance of well-being.

The changes to lifestyle and work as a result of the pandemic means we need a new approach to our existing economic plan, which was due to run until 2036.

Our new plan will have two core drivers: Helping those suffering economic hardships and building on the opportunities the crisis has revealed.

The priority is to first identify projects which can help residents experiencing exacerbated deprivation due to the impact of the pandemic. Job losses, business closures, reduced access to digital learning or reskilling courses must be addressed to lessen the impact felt by our vulnerable communities.

Our second driver is rooted in the changes we've all had to make to the way we live and work and the opportunities that has revealed. Economic and financial values will remain a core priority in our recovery, but the lockdown has also highlighted a different set of values. Community, connectivity and well-being, as well as a healthy and sustainable environment, are now much more prominent drivers for decision-makers.

In response, the Council is prioritising economic renewal activity around three key pillars:

- Providing inclusive growth and well-being for North Somerset people.
- Delivering digital access for all.
- Supporting green business and low carbon activities.

2.9. Other relevant policies include:

- Weston-super-Mare Town Centre Regeneration SPD
- Weston Villages SPD
- Travel Plans SPD (revised 2020 and currently being consulted)
- NSC 20mph Policy
- North Somerset Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007-2017 (Revised 2010).
- North Somerset Road Safety Strategy (which will be brought to Executive in due course).

### **3. Details**

- 3.1. The draft ATS sets out our approach to supporting active travel over the next ten years. It explains how active travel delivers Council priorities. It is intended to guide the Council's decisions which impact upon active travel and sets out how the Council plans to increase active travel.
- 3.2. This Active Travel Strategy differs from any active travel plans and policies produced by NSC in the past. This time, we are placing active travel as the number one priority within transport planning and considerations.
- 3.3. We are serious about decarbonising our transport network, achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 and ensuring a green and fair recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, active travel will be the first priority. After all, the first and last stages of all trips should be walking whenever possible.
- 3.4. It is our responsibility to help create and reshape environments that provide equal access for all people regardless of their physical and socio-economic mobility; not just for those who have access to a car. Reshaping can take the form of reallocation of road space, priority or through improvement in the experience. Green

Infrastructure is also vital to the experience of places and streets, and the aim in the ATS is to ensure that we deliver appropriate green infrastructure improvements through all our schemes.

- 3.5. We will create active travel neighbourhoods from new and transform existing neighbourhoods dominated by the motor car to create green, safe and active environments for North Somerset residents, businesses and visitors. Accompanied by an enhanced, safer strategic cycle network (within and between our towns and villages), we will achieve our ultimate vision of making walking and cycling the natural choice for a cleaner, healthier and more active North Somerset. Green Infrastructure will play a key role in our active and green neighbourhoods, creating information play areas, visually breaking up space to reduce the dominance of motor vehicles, providing places to stop and spend time or rest, and redefining the street as a civil and community space, not only for the passage of motor vehicles.
- 3.6. It is well documented that the key factors which facilitate mode shift from car to foot/bike include the following, and it is these this strategy intends to address:
- Comprehensiveness of the network (i.e. can a complete journey be made by foot/bike). The Strategy includes a detailed schedule of all the main walking and cycling routes and improvements across the District that we should be striving to deliver up to 2030. It does not mean these will all happen but helps ensure opportunities will not be missed. Specific projects will also be subject to more detailed environmental assessment and consideration as necessary as a part of their detailed project-specific management arrangements. The progress of this and implementation will be subject to council resources and success in obtaining external funding.
  - Safety of the network both actual and perceived safety (i.e. greater segregation from motorised traffic is perceived as safer and will therefore attract more users). The Strategy seeks to provide safer routes and road conditions, with complementary Education, Training and Publicity (ETP) programmes aimed at all road users. This has a crucial role in supporting physical improvements.
  - Attractiveness and ease of use. The Strategy includes plans to improve the maintenance of routes, provide public realm improvements, greater legibility of routes and more widespread and improved cycle parking. The safer, the more attractive, and more comprehensive the cycling and walking network is, the greater the mode shift that will be seen.
- 3.7. Routes included are mainly derived from existing policy, engagement and prioritisation work (including the LCWIP), based on their strategic value and their potential to generate the greatest uplift in active travel. Also included are routes that promote leisure and tourism, which are essential for the economic benefits this brings across North Somerset, and to ensure that opportunities for healthy exercise are available to all residents. Proposals contained within the ATS were circulated amongst all relevant council officers. North Somerset Cycle Forum have also inputted and various elected Members.
- 3.8. Further local schemes will also be required, especially for new development.

#### **4. Consultation**

- 4.1. It is proposed that the consultation runs for six weeks during November and December 2020. Consultation details for the draft ATS are still to be detailed but due

to COVID-19 restrictions on social distancing and gatherings of people, we will primarily utilise digital means.

- 4.2. We will use NSC's online portal as the host website for information and submission of responses, but we will also seek views through the use of Teams, Zoom and Facebook Live or YouTube interactive sessions, including Question & Answer opportunities for engagement.
- 4.3. We are looking to attract a wide range of stakeholders including town and parish councils, those representing pedestrians, disabled people and cyclists, Local Members, businesses and as many residents as possible. It is intended that we use workshops with smaller 'breakout' groups of stakeholders to gain more detailed feedback on the four objectives of the strategy, as well as the types of infrastructure and improvement schemes we are looking to implement.
- 4.4. We will publicise this consultation through the Council's website, social media, and the Travelwest and Better by Bike websites and try to harness as much involvement from residents, businesses and stakeholders as possible.
- 4.5. Internally, we will set up workshops with the Strategic planning, economic development and regeneration policy and scrutiny panel (SPEDR) to ensure that Local Member involvement and scrutiny is central in the ATS consultation, to further represent the residents, businesses and other stakeholders in North Somerset.
- 4.6. We will engage closely with other teams within North Somerset Council to ensure that we manage the information and messaging around our Active Travel Strategy public consultation in a consistent and clear manner that does not confuse or result in consultation overload for residents at the same time as other NSC consultations. For example, the NSC Local Plan Choices consultation is set to go public for engagement in November/December 2020 around the same time as this ATS.

## **5. Financial Implications**

### **Costs**

- 5.1. The ATS has no immediate direct financial impact. However, the document will inform and shape our financial allocations from within existing resources and our bidding and project development priorities. This will require, for example, a reprioritisation of the Transport & Infrastructure Capital Works Programme.
- 5.2. The ATS outlines potential funding sources for proposals where this is known. The delivery of the ATS schemes will require further funding for proposals to be developed and delivered and this will be sought as appropriate opportunities become available e.g. through external grants. North Somerset have a good track record in securing external and Government funding through bids.
- 5.3. As schemes reach deliverability, approvals will be sought through standard processes to add them to the Capital Programme.

### **Funding**

- 5.4. Many schemes will require external funding and these usually require some element of match funding (for example, through the JLTP or developer contributions).



- 5.5. The ATS also outlines a range of existing and proposed ETP (Education, Training and Promotion) activities, some of which is already funded and some by short term funding streams. Other proposals may require additional funding to be sought.
- 5.6. Where resources (including additional staff) are required this will be dealt with via the processes of the MTFP and restructuring.
- 5.7. There are also implications for our contracts. For example, when we receive grant allocations for scheme delivery, due to our alignment with the national policy requirements. This will mean additional sums that could be spent through the Highways term contract (currently with Skanska).
- 5.8. As with any new or changed infrastructure schemes, there may be indirect costs or savings associated (e.g. maintenance).

## **6. Legal Powers and Implications**

- 6.1. None. The ATS is a guidance document and would not itself create commitments or statutory requirements on the Council, legal, financial or otherwise. There are no land or property implications as any schemes proposed would remain subject to the usual consultation, planning and land acquisition requirements.

## **7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications**

- 7.1. The more we increase active travel the greater the reduction in transport-based emissions. The delivery of the ATS will have direct positive effects on climate change and directly eliminate polluting journeys.
- 7.2. The Council has included active travel within the North Somerset Council Climate Change Motion 2019 – the main aim of which is to be carbon neutral by 2030. The ATS is intended to maximise active travel within the North Somerset as rapidly as possible.
- 7.3. The shift away from the private motor vehicle to cycling and walking will also have direct significant positive impacts on air quality as cycling and walking do not emit particulate matter or NOx.

## **8. Risk Management**

- 8.1. If the draft ATS draft document is not approved this will jeopardise progress of a whole range of schemes and aims of the Council as set out in the Policy section above. The key aims of this strategy are to:
  - Deliver safe and frequent active travel
  - Tackle the Climate Emergency
  - Drive local economic development
  - Shape active travel neighbourhoods through an enabling planning system
- 8.2. If implemented, it would provide a very wide range of positive outcomes including (but not limited to) delivery on the Council's efforts to address the climate emergency, air quality, health benefits, access to work, equality and tourism. All of these are corporate aims and objectives for North Somerset Council.
- 8.3. Public Health is a key risk to the Authority, as shown by the COVID-19 pandemic. Delivering public health resilience is reliant on underlying good health both physically and mentally and active travel is a very easy way for people to achieve this.

- 8.4. The change in cycling and walking levels during the COVID-19 lockdown period evidenced the strong suppressed demand for active travel; only when motor traffic levels were down to approximately 25% of pre-COVID-19 levels did many people feel it safe enough to cycle on our transport network. Motor traffic presents risks of road dangers, air quality and noise, which can all be addressed through altering the priority and allocation of space on our streets.
- 8.5. As individual schemes are developed these will be subject to their own risk management procedures.

## **9. Equality Implications**

Have you undertaken an Equalities Impact Assessment? No.

- 9.1. The ATS directly addresses current transport inequalities as it focusses on improvements for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists, including those with disabilities.
- 9.2. As schemes are developed NSC officers will engage closely with user/interest groups to ensure that proposed interventions reflect the needs of vulnerable users. The objectives within the ATS align with both the cycling and walking approach within the JLTP4, and with current DfT guidance.
- 9.3. Active travel is an activity which is open to all. In accordance with Policy DM 33 of the Sites and Policies Plan (Part 1), new infrastructure would be planned with the path surface, gradients, and all access points designed to facilitate access by disabled people. This will be of the same standard as that provided for able-bodied people; this includes those who use wheelchairs and mobility aids.
- 9.4. The latest guidance and design standards will be followed during the design of and construction of this scheme and it is not foreseen that any deviations from standard will be required.

## **10. Corporate Implications**

- 10.1 The ATS document supports the NSC policies outlined in Section 2 above.

## **11. Options Considered**

- 11.1 Not developing the ATS would put the District at a disadvantage when applying for DfT and other external funding for cycling and walking schemes. We have therefore considered that not producing this document is not an option. Presentation of a less ambitious strategic approach will fail to deliver on our corporate aims and ambitions.

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### **Appendices:**

Appendix 1 – Draft NSC Active Travel Strategy (attached separately due to size constraints).

### **Background Papers:**

None.