

Wheelrights Public Meeting

Notes of meeting on 23 March 2026

In the Volcano Theatre, High Street, Swansea SA1 1LG (and on Zoom).

Theme: The Future of Active Travel in Wales followed by Q & A.

The meeting was attended by about 20 members.

The meeting was chaired by John Sayce, who welcomed everyone and introduced two speakers, Kirsty James (who contributed via Zoom) and Mike Hedges MS for Swansea East.

The speakers had been invited in their capacities as, respectively, Chair of the Wales Active Travel Board and Member of the Public Accounts Committee. These two bodies have recently published reports on the progress of Active Travel in Wales. These reports can be found at:

- Active Travel Board report -- <https://tinyurl.com/y7d46d7v>.
- Public Accounts Committee report -- <https://tinyurl.com/2jfwhh7y>.

Kirsty James

Kirsty's presentation essentially outlined the findings of the report, as expected for her role as Chair of the Active Travel Board. The headline had a positive spin – that Active Travel is heading in the right direction, with the caveat that progress is not quick enough and not everyone is benefitting. Too many barriers remain for the disabled, the young and the old (with no distinction between walking and cycling here). She emphasised the problem of assessing progress when no data on AT is being collected.

She summarised the six recommendations made in the report:

1. The new AT funding model must re-introduce ring-fenced AT funding of at least £50m annually.
2. The new AT to School Hub must effectively co-ordinate publicly funded infrastructure and behaviour change programmes.
3. Highways authorities should modify or remove all discriminatory access barriers from AT routes by 2027.
4. All future AT investment must incorporate reviews from groups representing protected characteristics.
5. Welsh Government should promote legal e-cycling while taking action against illegal e-bikes/motorbikes.
6. Welsh Government must publish, by end of November 2025, guidance for AT promotion; required by the Environment Air Quality and Soundscapes (Wales) Act 2004). [*This was published early in March 2026; it concerns 'promotion' in the marketing sense*]

Kirsty concluded with "Where are we at?"

- A member of the board has written an advice note on e-bikes.
- The guidance on promotion has been published.
- People's worry about the roads being too dangerous for AT should be allayed by the reduction in casualties since the introduction of the 20mph speed limit.

Questions to Kirsty James

(Note: the note-taker does not do shorthand; the following is an attempt to capture the essence of what was asked and answered.)

1. Q: The previous year's report included nine recommendations of which none was met in full. This year the report has six recommendations including the very specific one of re-introducing ring-fenced AT funding of at least £50m annually. What can campaigners do to get decision makers to pay attention?

KJ: Contact government, emphasising the benefits of AT.

2. Q: Is irresponsible use of illegal e-bikes and e-motorbikes a big issue?

KJ: A board member has published an advice note on this. The police are trying. The next AT board report will focus on e-bikes. It's important to get the message out that illegally modified e-bikes and e-motor bikes are very different from legal e-bikes.

3. Q: (A comment.) Due to the lack of data and the absence of a national travel survey since 2011 there is no way of monitoring or evaluating local authorities' actions; this contrasts this with the approach taken to improving recycling rates.
KJ agreed with the frustration, particularly with respect to AT schemes put in without regard for disabled people.
4. Q: The biggest barrier to AT is overuse of the motor car. Is "calming the car" any part of the board's thinking?
KJ cited the Road Safety Strategy.
5. Q: Observed that the imminent (Iran war related) big increase in fuel prices should be an opportunity to promote AT.
6. Q: If Reform do well in the forthcoming election can we expect to see backtracking on AT commitments?
KJ/JS: These are political matters, better addressed to Mike Hedges.

Mike Hedges

Mike's presentation (based on his article, appended) essentially summarised the content of the report on Active Travel by the Public Accounts Committee. The headline was that while AT is a cornerstone of Welsh government policy, the pace of change has not matched the government's ambition. Progress towards becoming an Active Travel nation is painfully slow. Mike described what had been learned from the committee's visit to Slovenia, chosen because it is a small, not hugely affluent country with many of the same AT challenges as Wales. One lesson was the benefit of a regional approach, now being implemented in Wales, to address the capacity issues faced by smaller local authorities.

Mike emphasised the importance of

- AT to schools
- The need for data
- The need for inclusiveness – for provision for those with disabilities to be designed-in from the start, and for this to be required by the design guidance.

He listed some of what Swansea has got wrong:

- Don't discount the importance of hills
- Routes that just end, often at a main road or crossing
- Shared cycling / walking routes don't always work well.

Describing successes, he said that AT is seen as a priority in Wales and that the new electoral system will make it difficult for any single party to form a government.

He closed with "What's needed next?"

- Maintenance of AT routes
- Fill the gaps in existing routes
- Don't end routes at major roads – invest in making junctions and crossings safe for AT rather than in more miles of route
- Aim for what's **realistically** achievable

Questions to Mike Hedges

1. Q: Referring to the recent use of AT funding to widen the existing route in Clyne valley rather than fill the gap in the North Gower Access Path, the question was whether there is any road map for prioritising upcoming work, rather than the current apparently ad hoc approach.
MH: Local authorities feel pressured to spend money "in the pot" for the current year because if they don't they will receive reduced funding in the following year. They may not always spend it very well,
2. Q: Why did the Walter Road scheme not go ahead?
MH: That was a decision by Swansea council about which I have no information. [*The Swansea Active Travel Officer had been invited to this meeting but did not attend.*]

3. Q: Press reports are that with proportional representation Reform might get into government in Wales in the forthcoming election. They have talked about undoing the blanket 20mph speed limit. What is MH's opinion?

MH: The new system makes it almost impossible for any single party to get a majority of seats. We need to be campaigning to people who are not in favour of AT as well as those who are.

4. Q: In spite of the Highway Code hierarchy of road users I'm seeing little change in driver behaviour towards people walking or cycling.

MH: It should be better. It's also my experience that drivers are ignoring pedestrian priority at side streets.

5. Q: The AT movement seems very marginal. Changes could be made by the government which would have more impact. The (Welsh) government could influence police priorities for example over pavement parking. Existing infrastructure is often littered with parked cars, there needs to be more enforcement.

MH: The police fall under the Home Office, the Welsh government can only request their co-operation. Parking is a problem in older areas especially of terraced housing where there are too many cars and parking is frequently the subject of neighbour disputes. The police have powers over "obstruction" but can only act if (e.g.) they see someone with a pushchair forced into the roadway – it's not enough that someone with a pushchair *would* be forced into the roadway.

6. Q: With reduced government funding for AT are there other possible sources of funding, as in for example, the Mumbles flood prevention work, Sandfields drainage work, Pembrokeshire trunk road improvements, the Towy river path?

MH: Levelling up funding, but there will be a lot of competition.

7. Q: Why is it so expensive to close the small gaps in routes that you've mentioned?

MH: Because they involve main road crossings, which need a bridge or tunnel.

John Sayce closed with a reminder that a transport strategy, which Swansea lacks, would provide a rational framework for addressing many of the issues raised. He thanked both speakers for taking the time to talk to Wheelrights.

Notes compiled by Brenda Lillicrap

APPENDIX

Full text of Mike Hedges presentation.

Active Travel

We are now talking about active travel. The best way to get someone to fully consider an issue is to get them to talk about it.

I am pleased that the public accounts committee decided to investigate active travel. It was an issue I was very keen to get the committee to address and produce recommendations for the Minister.

Active travel is a cornerstone of the Welsh Government's ambition to create a healthier, more sustainable Wales. Walking, wheeling and cycling are not only environmentally responsible modes of transport; they are integral to improving public health, reducing congestion, and supporting vibrant local communities.

More than a decade has passed since the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 was enacted, and while progress has been made, the pace of change has not matched the scale of the Welsh Government's aspirations.

The public accounts committee enquiry drew upon the findings of the Auditor General for Wales, the work of the Active Travel Board, and the evidence presented to the public accounts Committee by a range of stakeholders.

While we considered the successes that have been achieved, such as increased investment and improved infrastructure, we also noted the significant challenges that remain, including capacity constraints, the need for robust data to support effective decision making and accountability, and the importance of cultural and behavioural change.

It is clear that the pace of change to date has been insufficient to meet the Welsh Government's goals. The committee's visit to Slovenia provided valuable lessons on how integrated planning, strong leadership, and community engagement can accelerate progress.

These insights informed the recommendations, which call for clearer national direction, multi-year funding settlements, and a renewed focus on inclusivity and behaviour change.

The committee also emphasised the need for collaboration across all levels of government and with delivery partners, particularly communities, to ensure that active travel becomes a practical and attractive choice for all. By transitioning to a regional approach to delivering active travel, we believe that local voices and decision-making, supported by national expertise where necessary, can be more effective in delivering change.

Although this will help to mitigate some of the capacity issues faced by smaller local authorities, it is crucial these regional bodies are supported through multi-year funding settlements, with a balance between revenue and capital funding that will allow for projects large and small to be delivered as effectively as possible and for behaviour change projects to be delivered locally, as well as nationally.

The role of Transport for Wales is crucial in ensuring this is a success. Crucially, the public accounts committee heard compelling evidence about the barriers faced by vulnerable travellers, including disabled people and older citizens, who often encounter inaccessible routes and inadequate consultation during scheme design.

If active travel is to be truly inclusive, these voices must be embedded at the heart of planning and delivery.

The public accounts committee recommendations called for stronger design guidance, more meaningful engagement, and a commitment to retrofitting existing routes where necessary.

The task ahead is considerable, but with sustained commitment by the Welsh Government and partnership working, Wales can achieve its vision of becoming an active travel nation that works for everyone.

On 19 September 2024, the Auditor General for Wales published a report on Active Travel in Wales alongside a data tool providing further information about active travel routes, national

active travel rates from the National Survey for Wales, and local authority expenditure from the Active Travel Fund.

The Auditor General's report focussed on national level arrangements led and/or managed by the Welsh Government and Transport for Wales. He did not examine interventions by individual local authorities, although he recognised their important front-line role and reflect certain evidence about issues at a local level.

Nor did he consider the part that wider public, private and third sector organisations can play to promote active travel as employers or otherwise in, for example, the case of the NHS and schools.

The Welsh Government's Active Travel Board published its first annual report, for 2023-24, at the end of August 2024. The Active Travel Board is independent of the Welsh Government and, in its own words, provides:

"An independent voice that scrutinises the effectiveness of active travel related measures delivered by the Welsh Government, including their funded delivery partners and agencies. Their work involves identifying key themes in active travel policy and making recommendations to ministers and delivery partners as to how active travel can be improved in Wales."

The Active Travel Board's report presents a similar picture to the Auditor General's report, with the foreword to the report stating: "Our report presents a mixed picture. We report on significant progress in terms of investment in active travel infrastructure and support for those wishing to travel actively – most clearly in terms of active travel to school.

But the behaviour change we seek – and is outlined as an ambition in the Welsh Government's Llwybr Newydd – is for the most part absent in the available data.

As more desperately needed data becomes available, we should be able to identify at a more granular level those interventions that have the greatest success in delivering modal change.

We have set the ambition of becoming an active travel nation, but as yet progress on that journey has been painfully slow.

I very much hope we will be able to report on definitive progress in the years ahead, rooted in innovative and people-centred research that uses investment in such a way as to yield demonstrably higher levels of active travel."

The Board's report assesses that, at the current rate of progress, it would take almost 50 years to complete all of the routes currently mapped as potential future routes in their active travel network maps, concluding that the Welsh Government will need to demonstrate "the stamina and commitment to get the job done".

The Active Travel Board' report made nine recommendations to the Welsh Government, albeit to my knowledge no response has been published.

Essentially, Active Travel describes walking and cycling, possibly combined with public transport, for everyday journeys. This can include, to or from a workplace or education setting, or to access leisure, health or any other services or facilities.

The Committee heard that Active Travel had been promoted as a key goal for Slovenia, driven through by the aims and funding provided by the European Cohesion Programmes from 2014, with funding from European Structural and Investment Funds. This led to national legislation in 2022 that formally recognised the role of Active Travel, which mandated that all municipalities in Slovenia of all sizes must have strategies that include active travel including the City of Ljubljana.

Often, these projects can be supported by national funding. They explained that significant funding through European investment came in 2014-15, with approximately €160m being invested in national cycling infrastructure during this period.

As of 2025, much of their investment in cycling paths had come to an end, albeit they have now more than doubled their investment at a national and local level, thanks to the investment through EU funds.

Slovenia has established a new national cycling network and managing bodies to maintain them. They explained that the majority of the focus had been on putting in place infrastructure around schools, high-density areas, and public transport hubs, which served to link surrounding communities.

Most of their cycling paths are ones that link cities and suburbs, separated mainly from the main road. They went on to describe softer measures being adopted to increase participation, including national training programmes for transport professionals as well as national campaigns promoting things such as cycling to work or school.

A prominent recent campaign had been the so called "less than 2" campaign, which sought to encourage Slovenians to consider active travel instead of the car when completing journeys of less than 2km.

They described spatial planning as also being a cornerstone philosophy in their approach, with significant investment in urban infrastructure, particularly in Ljubljana. This included initiatives to add floor marking to improve safety and accessibility, as well as to boost the attractiveness of walking in the city.

They have also focussed on redirecting traffic away from pedestrian routes where possible. When describing their committee approach, they described their role as looking at policy approaches holistically, ensuring that Active Travel policy led to health, economic and environmental benefits.

The national direction is spearheaded by the Ministry for Environment, Spatial Planning and Energy, who they described as taking a holistic view on implementing active travel initiatives. There is a state public transport policy, national guidelines around walking and a forthcoming national cycling plan.

However, municipalities in Slovenia also have significant local autonomy to make decisions and develop policies too, with national oversight.

Where has active travel in Swansea gone wrong?

Firstly, I do not underestimate the problems caused by hills to those walking and cycling. My office is on Pleasant Street which is a very long hill.

Cycle paths come to an abrupt end.

Whilst the coastal cycle path from before County Hall to Mumbles works well. What happens at either end?

Sharing between cyclists and walkers does not always work well especially when the footpath part is busy during summer; the tour de France is on TV; or there are gaps in the cycle path, sometimes involving crossing a major road or roads.

There is a footpath/cycle path from Morryston to Clydach.

I use it but it involves crossing the A4067 and it crosses the Ynystawe to Heol Las road.

A longer route exists but it again involves crossing the A4067 but this time at its Clase Road junction. Would I take a child on that road? Definitely not.

It is expensive to fill the gaps but without doing so then cycling and walking enthusiasts will use the routes, but others will not.

The Committee heard evidence from Disability Wales, the Royal National Institute of Blind People Cymru and Guide Dogs Cymru, to better understand the present issues.

The stakeholders were consistent in their view that the additional investment into active travel in Wales in recent years has failed to create a more inclusive environment for vulnerable pedestrians, with the representative for Guide Dogs Cymru saying to the public accounts Committee:

Ideally, the money would have been spent more effectively to promote an inclusive environment for everyone, and I think there are examples of where we can see that has not happened.

Disability Wales told the public accounts Committee that the plan appeared to have been written without consideration for disabled people.

The public accounts committee examined how designs often did not meet the needs of vulnerable pedestrians, leading to expensive remediation works in the future to address problems that could have been addressed at the outset.

This, in particular, included the use of colour, which could be applied nationally to ensure consistency and to make it easier for pedestrians to use pavements and road crossings.

Issues with lighting and dropped kerbs were also noted as being particular impediments that could be addressed more effectively during the planning stages.

When areas in the city centre are designed being aesthetically pleasing appears to take priority over making it easier for people with sight problems to identify kerbs.

It is only recently that the steps on Woodfield Street leading to its junction with Slate Street have had white edging paint after a long campaign.

What is often forgotten on footpaths and cycle paths is that public seating is needed.

The Cross-Party Group on Active Travel reiterated a series of recommendations it had made as part of a previous review, including:

- Equality Impact Assessments need to be overhauled and properly applied.
- Early engagement with the community and particularly groups representing the disabled is vital.
- Barriers that impede access for people using mobility aids, adapted bikes or trikes should be removed from all active travel routes in Wales.
- Active travel data should capture information about people with protected characteristics.

I am going to end on successes and what is needed next.

Successes

The most important is that active travel is now seen as a priority.

Active travel is being discussed by Senedd committees and by politicians.

Cross authority active travel should stop the reaching the end of a route when you cross a county boundary.

Real time bus information at bus stops is being provided but it is only visual, it needs to be announced as well.

What is needed next:

Repair active travel routes. When I was in charge of highways in Swansea 1% of the road maintenance budget was spent on cycle way maintenance.

Fill the gaps, this can be expensive but without the gaps filled then many will not use active travel.

Consider where people want to travel between – not where it is easy to provide a route and not ending at a major road junction.

Every walking and cycling route needs to consider: Is it safe for children? Is it safe for people with disabilities?

On buses: announce visually and verbally the next stop.