

“ IT IS A DELIVERY PLAN WITHOUT ANY PLANS FOR ACTUAL DELIVERY... IT REQUIRES A DEDICATED BUDGET AND DELIVERY TEAM ”

It's important to explain here why the vast majority of our campaigning in Northern Ireland is focused on the Stormont Assembly rather than local councils. Unlike in Great Britain or Ireland, Northern Ireland's local councils hold no agency over streets and roads. It is completely centralised within the Stormont Assembly and the DfI.

This offers both challenges and opportunities when it comes to improving transport infrastructure. For example, if the Assembly and the DfI decided to make 20mph the default speed limit for residential streets, it would be rolled out country-wide. In Ireland and Great Britain, each local council would decide, so a roll-out would be slower. The flip side is that if the DfI drags its heels, things don't get done.

BRAKES ON BIKES

The DfI used to be called the Roads Department. It focused exclusively on developing roads and prioritising motor vehicles in Northern Ireland's transport policy. Many would argue that, in all but name, the department has remained the same.

Despite the statutory spending duty and the political will shown, there was a complete failure from the DfI to make any meaningful progress in 2022 on cycle infrastructure and safety. We saw a myriad of stalled projects, resistance towards making legislative changes, and essentially no new initiatives to encourage people to shift their journeys to cycling. Andrew Muir, who introduced the 10% active travel spend amendment, said: "Many months after the Climate Change Act was passed into law, it's really not acceptable we're still awaiting news on delivery of the commitment I proposed."

Any hopes that the interim minister John O'Dowd (in post for six months following the May 2022



Temporary cycle lanes did pop up during the pandemic

election) would make progress were quickly dashed. He acknowledged the need to shift car journeys to walking, wheeling and cycling, and he accepted the requirement to reach 10% spending on active travel. Yet we're still waiting.

Our first meeting with Minister O'Dowd during Bike to Work Week in May 2022 showed us what we, and the minister himself, were up against. It was clear that he wanted to push ahead with measures such as Highway Code changes, to progress work on Phase 1 of the Belfast Bicycle Network, and to get things moving with the Active Travel Act. The impression we got was that officials within the DfI were resisting these changes – and that they were asking the minister to wait.

GEARING UP

The Belfast Bicycle Network Delivery Plan should be of particular interest to the next DfI minister, indeed to any Belfast MLA. It is yet another in a long line of aspirational documents talking about improving active travel without actually committing to do so. It is a delivery plan without any plans for actual delivery.

A Belfast Bicycle Network should be the flagship active travel project in Northern Ireland. It requires a dedicated budget and delivery team to even get close to the timescale for implementation it sets out.

We cannot rely on the DfI to make this happen. We need bold political leadership from across the spectrum. We need the media, as well as organisations like Cycling UK and individuals in local communities, to hold the DfI to account. To paraphrase the Welsh Deputy Minister for Climate Change: if we are still talking about doing this in 10 years, we will be doing so underwater. ●

ASSEMBLY POINT

Elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in May 2022 but the Democratic Unionist Party has refused to agree to the election of a speaker, protesting against the Northern Ireland Protocol arrangements that were put in place after the UK left the European Union. This means that a new executive can't be formed. The existing speaker and ministers were able to continue in caretaker roles for six months. As of October 2022, there have been no ministers in place. While this has paralysed the Assembly in some respects, it doesn't prevent the Department for Infrastructure implementing spending commitments like the 10% agreed for active travel.



While the roads have little cycling provision, most parks (right) are OK

