



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Active Travel: Sustrans

12 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Mr Stephen Dunne  
Mr Mark Durkan  
Mr Andrew McMurray  
Mr Peter McReynolds

**Witnesses:**

Ms Beth Harding	Sustrans
Ms Perla Mansour	Sustrans
Ms Claire Pollock	Sustrans

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** I welcome Claire Pollock, head of Sustrans Northern Ireland, Beth Harding, Active School Travel manager, and Perla Mansour, routes and networks senior project manager. Thanks very much for taking the time to come and see us today. The Chairperson, Deborah Erskine, sends her apologies: she is unable to speak today, as members will know. She has been none too well for a number of weeks now. She has tuned in, and she wanted to record her apologies to you for not being able to be here.

I invite you to take five or 10 minutes to set out a few of your proposals and give us a presentation, after which we will ask questions. We have about 45 minutes or so.

**Ms Claire Pollock (Sustrans):** I believe that we sent through our presentation.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** It is in our members' packs. It has already been circulated, and we can see it. I am sure that members have been through it prior to the meeting.

**Ms Pollock:** OK, great, you can see it. Thank you.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Were you planning to talk through the presentation?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes, I was.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** We can see it here on the laptop.

**Ms Pollock:** That is great. Thank you very much for inviting us along today. I am the head of Sustrans Northern Ireland, and I am joined by Perla Mansour, our routes and networks senior project manager, and Beth Harding, our Active School Travel manager. We are here today to talk about Sustrans: what it is that we do; what our aims and objectives are; how we are delivering some of the work that we do in Northern Ireland to achieve our mission and objectives; and the opportunities and challenges that we see in enabling active travel.

Sustrans is a UK-wide organisation, which has been in existence for almost 50 years. Our vision is a society where the way that we travel creates healthier places and happier lives for everyone. Quite simply, we do that by focusing on making it easier for people to walk and cycle. We want people and communities to enjoy the benefits that being active brings.

We have two strategic priorities. "Paths for everyone" focuses on traffic-free routes, such as greenways — routes that an unaccompanied 12-year-old can navigate themselves. "Liveable cities and towns" is about supporting people to travel for everyday journeys by walking and cycling. Essentially, we want to see a shift in focus from moving cars to moving people.

The work that we do supports a range of government agendas. We work in partnership with a wide range of organisations and statutory bodies to tackle the challenges of air pollution, health inequalities and physical and mental well-being issues. Simply by achieving our mission of making it easier for people to walk and cycle, we can make a really big impact on those agendas, which are cross-cutting in government.

One of the slides in the presentation shows the wide range of crises facing society at the moment. Another benefit that is not explicitly stated on the slide is reducing congestion. We know that congestion costs our society millions economically. We know that over 9,000 return cycling trips are made daily in Belfast by people who could have travelled by car. If all those journeys were lined up, they would form a 27-mile traffic jam, which is basically the distance from Belfast to Ballymena. We would save tons of carbon if we were to switch from car journeys to active ones.

In Northern Ireland, we have a portfolio of work that covers behaviour change and infrastructure. We have a number of projects through which we support and enable people to travel actively. We do that through a number of settings: our schools programme; our workplaces programme; and, in communities, through active travel hubs. We have an infrastructure team who push for safe and sustainable active travel infrastructure. We know that infrastructure is really important in enabling people to travel independently.

The Active School Travel programme, which I will come on to in a little bit more detail later in the presentation, is our largest behaviour change programme. It works with 500 schools across Northern Ireland. It is funded by the Department for Infrastructure and the Public Health Agency (PHA). We have had 10 years of successfully delivering that programme. The core aim is to increase the number of children walking, cycling or scooting for the journey to school.

Our workplaces programme, which is funded by the Public Health Agency, is called "Leading the Way". The programme's focus is to increase levels of physical activity by getting folk who travel to work to do it actively. We work with a number of public-sector organisations in Belfast and the north-west, and we see the impact. We capture the stories of people who have changed how they travel for their journey to work. In the presentation, we have included a case study on Shea Stinson. As part of the package of measures to try to encourage people to embrace a shift in how they travel, we talk about public transport as well. We appreciate that people will not necessarily step out of the car one day and get on a bike the next day. It is a journey of change. Looking at public transport as well as walking and cycling and mixing modes — multimodal travel — are really important as part of that. Shea is a really good case study for showing the personal benefits that he saw when he switched from driving to taking the bus. He saved money on car parking and fuel costs, and we all get the benefits of reduced congestion and improved air quality from Shea making that change.

How do you get people to swap travelling by car for an active journey? The best way to do that is through a combination of measures. The Department for Transport commissioned a report that sets out that the best way to increase walking and cycling levels is by rolling out a programme of combined measures. That means combining behaviour change — supporting people through information, knowledge and skills — with really good, safe active travel infrastructure. That combination and mixed package of measures has the most impact in achieving change.

The active travel hub at C S Lewis Square is a really good example of how we have done that. It is situated in a community, so people are there; it is part of their community; and they are happy to be part of what is going on. It is at the intersection of two greenways. It has really good public transport on the doorstep with it being on the Glider route, and it has access to the Belfast bike share scheme. Our team at the hub offers skills training, bike maintenance training and on-road cycling training to help people overcome the barriers. It is a really good model for engagement. We have an active travel hub at the train station in the north-west as well.

Until last autumn, we were running a community active travel programme, which was funded by the Public Health Agency, but, unfortunately, it closed due to funding cuts. That programme focused on working with 12 socially disadvantaged communities, supporting people there to be more physically active by walking and cycling. It is important to understand that those communities face real day-to-day challenges, and improving their health and well-being through being active by walking and cycling is really important. Furthermore, walking and cycling are affordable ways of getting about. By working with those communities, we opened up access to services, jobs and facilities in other parts of the city that those folk maybe had not the means to travel, or thought about travelling, to. Sadly, there is a real gap now that we are not offering that programme.

That is the behaviour change side of what we do. We have an infrastructure team, as I mentioned. Importantly, we know that good infrastructure is a real enabler for achieving active travel. We want to see a greenway network across Northern Ireland: a new national cycle network that is Northern Ireland-wide. It needs to be realistic, safe and inclusive, and we need to see it as a project for Northern Ireland as a whole. The benefits that greenways can bring are wide-ranging: economic benefits, regeneration, health and well-being and leisure opportunities, as well as safe and sustainable transport corridors. We need to note that, from a user's perspective, a greenway goes from A to B; it gets people to places, and there are experiences along the way. The Comber greenway, for example, travels through three council areas, but a user does not need to see that. We need to break down the barriers of council boundaries and look at it as a whole piece.

We also want to see urban cycling networks to enable everyday cycling. In urban areas, people need to be able to get to where they want to go actively and sustainably. We know that the eastern transport plan is looking at aligning modes of transport, and that is important in order to enable more sustainable means of getting about, but the Belfast bicycle network plan, for example, which has been developed for some time, needs to be implemented now.

That is what we are doing and covers some of our aims and objectives. We are working in a challenging context. Unfortunately, we live in a car-dominated society. Over the years, we have planned and built places for the car, not for people. There are a million cars and vans in Northern Ireland, according to the 2021 census. The recent travel survey reported that the number of people travelling sustainably was just 27%. We are on a downward trajectory in terms of how people travel, and that needs to be reversed.

We want to see greater investment, and we know that people want to see greater investment in active travel. The Department works with us to publish the 'Walking and Cycling Index', which is published every two years and sets out the state of walking, wheeling and cycling across 23 cities in the UK and Ireland. Belfast is one of those. In that report, published in March, 68% of people who responded to the survey said that they support building safe segregated on-road cycle tracks, even when that means removing road space. The graph in the presentation shows that driving was the least popular form of transport in which people wanted to see investment. We need to build the infrastructure to make it easy for people to leave the car at home.

Budgets are obviously another challenge. They are a challenge across the piece, but people need to recognise that active travel is a preventative measure. I have talked about the range of agendas that it can work towards supporting. We need to invest in active travel as a preventative measure to meet those agendas. There is a commitment in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 to spend 10% of the transport budget on active travel, and we really want to see that achieved. Until recently, Northern Ireland had the lowest investment in active travel per head across the UK and the Republic of Ireland, at only £7 per head compared with, for example, Scotland at £27 per head and the Republic of Ireland at £48 per head.

Despite all the challenges, some really good things are happening. I want to spotlight the Active School Travel programme as a good example of what is making a difference, achieving an impact and getting people to travel more actively. I mentioned it earlier: it is our biggest programme. I will come on to some of the detail, but why is it good? It is a regional programme — we are working right across

Northern Ireland; it is achieving year-on-year impact; it meets a number of government agendas; it is funded jointly by the Department for Infrastructure and the Public Health Agency, so we are working towards the transport agenda and the health agenda; and the cost-benefit analysis for the programme is really strong. Importantly, there is so much opportunity to deliver more.

Since the programme began in 2013, we have seen really positive results. The results for 2022-23, which are in your pack, show that, in participating schools, the number of children travelling actively to school increased from 30% to 42%, and, at the same time, the number of pupils being driven to school fell from 60% to 47%. Last year alone, we engaged with 60,000 pupils, parents and teachers at the schools that we are working with. On the health piece, we know that, in the schools that we are working with, the percentage of children achieving 60 minutes of physical activity each day increased from 29% to 46%. Half of primary-school pupils live within a mile of a school, yet half of those pupils are driven to school. There is, therefore, huge opportunity to increase how children travel actively. The map in the pack shows the programme's spread. It is regional; we are working across Northern Ireland with 500-plus schools, urban and rural, primary and post-primary. Applying is a competitive process, so schools buy into it by making an application, and we are oversubscribed every year. We can take on 60 schools each year. Schools receive three years of support and move to extended support thereafter.

This year, we carried out new research that identifies some of the impressive economic benefits of active travel through the programme. Over £500,000 was saved over the course of the year by families doing the school run actively instead of taking the car. A million car trips and 1.5 million miles of car journeys were saved, with the associated carbon savings. That is really impressive. Health benefits and road safety benefits were not included in that study, so the results are likely to be even stronger. The programme is affordable. We are delivering it for less than £400,000 of funding a year. It is very good value for money, and it achieves impact.

We have highlighted in the presentation the potential to expand the programme. I have talked about the need to mix behaviour change programmes with safe active travel infrastructure. We want to engage with our schools and layer on a safe routes to schools programme. The current programme is behaviour-change only. If we had a safe routes to schools programme providing crossings and footpaths, there would be much more opportunity in terms of our reach and who we can support to travel actively.

We would like to see a school streets programme whereby you restrict car traffic at the school gates at drop-off and pick-up times. There are such programmes across the UK and in the Republic, and we are the only part of that area not to have one. We have a wealth of experience in delivering them. We believe that every child in Northern Ireland who wants to should be able to travel safely and actively to school.

A team of eight people works on the programme. They are incredibly engaged and innovative, and they want to do more to support the audience that they work with, yet we are sitting with a contract that will end at the end of July. We do not want to lose momentum. We want secure funding for the programme in order to continue and grow our impact. Over the past four years, we have had piecemeal funding. Our programme is the only one that works across Northern Ireland to tackle the school run. We appreciate the pressures and complexities of government, but, with carbon reduction targets and health inequalities and challenges, we need to invest for the future in the health and well-being of our children.

How do we make the transition to active travel and public transport? Walking, cycling and public transport need to be desirable in order for people to make the shift. I have set out on the last presentation slide how we think that that can happen. We need investment in sustainable infrastructure — greenways and urban cycle routes — but we must not forget about the behaviour change piece; it is about combining the two. "Build it, and they will come" does not necessarily work. We want to see the implementation of the commitment to spend 10% of the transport budget on active travel. Increase spending on public transport, reallocate road space and plan for sustainable places. What future do we want? Do we want to see congested, gridlocked roads or more healthy and vibrant places where people move about and enjoy the space that they are in? The power of walking and cycling is incredible.

Thank you very much for your time. We are happy to take questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Thank you so much, Claire. I really appreciate it. All members got a lot out of that. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you and your organisation —

everyone at Sustrans — for all that you do to encourage more people to, effectively, get on their bike, particularly as this week is National Bike Week. It is topical that you are here today to talk to us about this important issue.

If you are able to take a couple of questions, I will start off, and then we will go around the room and see where we get to. On funding, you articulated very well the pressures that you are under and the disparity between here and the rest of the UK and Ireland in terms of funding per head for active travel in particular. How do you assess the impact of that? Where do we stand, comparatively, despite that disparity, on the number of people who are cycling and taking up other active travel? You talked about July as the cliff edge for funding. How important would it be for you, strategically, to have a multi-year budget to fund some of the strategic work that you do? We all know that it is virtually impossible to plan anything strategically and structurally with a limited one-year budget.

**Ms Pollock:** On the funding, we have historically had the lowest per head spend on active travel across the UK and Ireland. However, we know that, every day, walking and cycling takes 80,000 cars off the road in Belfast, which saves 13,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions and prevents nearly 1,000 serious long-term health conditions. We are doing well, relative to the funding, but the opportunity to do more exists, for example, through, as I highlighted, the schools programme. The cost-benefit piece that we have done with the schools programme really highlights how, with the little investment that we have in that programme, the output and the economic pay-off is very strong. There is plenty of opportunity to do more. Does anyone want to say anything more?

**Ms Beth Harding (Sustrans):** Longer-term funding is so important. It would benefit those engaged with the programme. In the past four years with the schools programme, we have been through four different contracts, and, in the approach to some of those contracts ending, it has been less than a month before we have known whether there is going to be an extension or a new contract. That has been very disruptive for the schools engaged in the programme because they are trying to set up their school development plans for the next year and do not know whether to factor in support from Sustrans and their involvement in the programme. It also means that we have lost people because they have felt unstable in their job and have gone elsewhere. We have lost really key, good people. That is disruptive. It would be really beneficial to the programme to have a contract that was longer than six or 12 months; it could do more meaningful work.

**Ms Pollock:** Behaviour change takes time as well. It is a journey — forgive the pun. It takes time for people to begin to think about travelling differently. There is a bit of a culture shift to be achieved here in Northern Ireland around how we move. As I highlighted, we live in a very car-dominated society.

It is about the infrastructure piece as well. Infrastructure takes time. Perla, do you want to say anything?

**Ms Perla Mansour (Sustrans):** That impacts on how we plan, deliver and roll out different infrastructure, whether it is a greenway or an urban cycle network. It is also about collaboration and coordination between councils, and understanding what is going to be delivered, and when. Having a bit of a longer investment helps to engage communities in the long term. Sometimes, when it is just short-term funding, you are planning to deliver infrastructure within three months. Communities are approached about the design, but they are not really engaged and do not really take that as their own; it is not designed with them. That takes time. We need to start thinking about the structure a little bit differently, how behaviour change and infrastructure go together, and how that looks as a longer-term delivery plan, and then set the investment based on that.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** I firmly agree. I believe that the Department is serious, but it needs to demonstrate through sustainable funding that it wants to see 10% of the budget being spent on active travel. If it wants to get more people cycling, walking and scooting to work, it needs to not just find the money but ensure that there is a rolling contract that you can see, rather than being faced with a cliff edge every time. I know from other organisations that we speak to that it is virtually impossible to forward plan and do any of that critical work that you want to do.

In terms of funding outside of the Public Health Agency and the Department, has there been any collaboration with councils or private-sector organisations to fund some of the schemes? Can that be developed?

**Ms Pollock:** We have worked with councils in the past, particularly in the area that Perla works in. We have supported councils to look at master planning around routes and networks development. We speak to councils constantly. Money is tight everywhere; that is what we are facing.

On the private-sector front, we look across Sustrans at working with corporates and how they might invest in programmes, particularly for their staff well-being and how they move about and what that brings to a city where they are based, and also to support some of the other work that we do.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Before I bring in other members, I just want to touch on the fantastic Active School Travel programme. I know that my kids and many schools in my constituency have availed themselves of it, and I am sure that that is the case in the constituencies of other members as well. It is fantastic to see young people walking, cycling and scooting to school. You talked about the fact that it is now oversubscribed, which is down to funding. Is it down to personnel as well, or is it a combination of both?

**Ms Harding:** It is the structure of the contract that has been set out by DFI and the PHA. It is probably related back to funding, how many staff we can resource and the set-up of the programme.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** How far do you think that it could get to if the funding model were changed to encourage more schools to take it up? Could it be unlimited?

**Ms Harding:** Yes, it could be. At the moment, the ratio of one of my staff people to the number of schools is really large. Each of my team members works directly with 30 schools each year. That means that their time with each school is very limited, whereas our colleagues across the water work with maybe 10 or 12 schools, so they are able to give more intensive support and engagement in the school. If we were able to build up our team, we could work with more schools but could also do more meaningful work with a smaller number of schools per officer.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** It is amazing how it has changed. I walked to school. I do not consider myself to be that old, but everyone seemed to walk to school back in the day. Now, when you drop the kids off at school, it is pandemonium. This solves two issues: it makes children active, and it takes away those massive pinch points at schools that were not designed for hundreds or thousands of cars every morning. The fact that you have identified that is so important.

The final point that I want to tease out is how we encourage that further into areas that are less receptive to it, whether that is rural areas or areas where parents might think that it is not the safest way to travel to school. Is that about changing what you referred to as the access to it and the networks for it?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes, it is the reach. We work in urban and rural areas. Beth can say more about that, but the reach in rural areas is particularly important in terms of the infrastructure and what is there for families and pupils to avail themselves of. Beth, do you want to say more about that?

**Ms Harding:** At the moment, our engaged schools are about 55% urban and 45% rural, so it is quite even. A lot of those rural schools are super keen: they really want to take part in the programme. For some schools that have no safe infrastructure, what they are taking part in is giving their kids life skills that they can then use at home, in their communities, in their neighbourhoods or when they become older.

For a number of rural schools — maybe more the village ones — the park-and-stride option is very much available and is an acceptable option for families. That is something that we really work to put in place at a school. We get some families to drive part of the way, have a safe location to park up, and then walk or cycle the rest of the way to school. That, again, relieves the congestion outside the schools and gives kids a bit of exercise in the morning too.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** That is all from me for now. I will probably come in again. We will move to Danny.

**Mr Baker:** Thank you for coming in. I suppose that this has been touched on. I am just thinking about my own area. Most of my journeys are within one mile or maybe one and a half miles. I am ashamed to admit that, since COVID, we have been a one-car family, but now we are probably going to have to move to being a two-car family. My longest journey is coming here. It is easy on the Glider, which is

brilliant. It can get you up here if you do not have the car. However, it is about the short journeys. It is taking the kids to their activities that is driving this. Their training is probably 0.8 of a mile from my house. I cannot cycle them down there. Yes, I can walk, sometimes, if time is on my side, but not always. However, it is about the cycling. It is about having small, safe routes within a community. I am from the Collin, which is a town. Some 30,000 people live in it, but all our journeys are less than a mile. If those small routes to the leisure centre or the school were there, car dependency in my community would drop significantly.

I suppose that it is a question for the guys at the back of the room. There are only so many behaviours that we can change. My question is this: how long can we sustain behavioural change without the infrastructure, because people will change their behaviours again, even after all the great work that you are doing?

**Ms Pollock:** On behaviour change, there are always people coming through who want to learn. That is an ongoing piece, and it is a journey of time, confidence and skills. However, you are right: without the infrastructure, there is maybe a limit as to who we will reach. We worked on a study, the 'Colin Active Travel Network Study', for the Department.

**Mr Baker:** I read it. It is sitting on a shelf somewhere. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Pollock:** That piece is there, and it identified all those linkages that you are talking about. Perla may want to say more. You are right: those are the pieces that now need to happen.

**Ms Mansour:** A lot of strategies and plans are under way to try to better connect the network, but, sometimes, when investments are to be put into modal shifts, there will be a focus on major connections. It is important, therefore, to start thinking about the parallel programme of nodal roads. If we deliver greenways that connect inter-council areas or connect with public transport or park-and-ride sites, so that you are mixing the modal shifts, it is important to then start looking in parallel at the neighbourhoods that lie off those main roads, which is where the key segregated cycle infrastructure will be. They will look at what is happening in the neighbourhoods that lie back there, which is where the linkages to services and schools are. That is where streets become safer because cars no longer dominate those streets; people do. It is a chain and a link. As we plan, that is where the likes of the school streets programme and the neighbourhood master plan become important in engaging with the community on that low level. Those become the little projects in which the neighbourhoods are engaged in designing their streets and actively seeing how their streets will transform. That is where you find out what they want from their streets. It then starts to connect to the key services in those areas.

Yes, investment will be poured into the main cycle routes, because they are the most costly, and we want to see a bigger impact. However, we should not leave behind that thinking process with the local communities.

**Mr Baker:** Absolutely. I would love to be able to cycle to a greenway and all that. That wee internal connection would be perfect. I promise that I have not done the two-car thing yet; I am still holding off.

**Ms Pollock:** Do not do it.

**Ms Harding:** Do not do it.

**Mr Baker:** I am trying my best to hold off.

I have one more question. I suppose that electric bikes could be a game changer, especially in hilly areas. Talking about my area again, there is a one-mile hill up to my house. What is your view on their affordability? They are very expensive.

**Ms Pollock:** They are expensive. Through our programmes, particularly the workplace programme, we offer a bike loan scheme. The idea is that someone can try out different types of bike in the first instance. To address your point about what is out there, there is a range of bikes for people with different needs. We offer a scheme whereby people can try out some of the different bikes that we have to see what fits best with the journeys that they make.



On the issue of affordability, we support the cycle-to-work scheme. We point people to that scheme and the fact that they can avail themselves of it. The threshold for the cycle-to-work scheme is quite high, and a lot of people do not meet the eligibility threshold. A new scheme is coming out to support those who are on lower wages to access that. I think that the Belfast Trust has just introduced that new scheme.

The Belfast bike scheme is in place to give people access to bikes in the city area. Through our programmes, we also encourage people to make use of those schemes. Equally, we try to facilitate access to different types of bike through some of our work.

Access is definitely a barrier. In expanding the schools programme, you would like to see there being access to bikes, Beth, would you not?

**Ms Harding:** Yes.

**Mr Baker:** Thank you.

**Mr McMurray:** Thank you very much for coming in. Happy National Bike Week. I have my bike shirt on. People always comment on our attire, but my shirt has bikes on it, so that is all good, and that is the reason why I am wearing it. I biked here today. I usually get the bus and then bike the rest of the way. You mentioned different modes of bike. Any cyclist knows that the number of different types of bike is n+1: gravel bikes, mountain bikes and all the rest.

There is loads to take out of your presentation. What you are doing is so good. This has been touched on. I represent South Down, which is not the Colin, by any stretch of the imagination: it is hilly, but it does not have that same sort of urban intensity. A lot the urban solutions are also the solutions for rural areas. How do you go about managing those things? Are there different strategies? This question may be more for the departmental officials who will present at our next evidence session, but I always hear about quiet roads and stuff like that. I never see infrastructure being put in to quieten the roads. I have more questions, Chair. I hope that you do not mind. That question should lead on to something else. What are the panel's views on that?

**Ms Mansour:** That is key in rural areas when we are looking at the interconnectivity that I touched on: what we call the nodal routes. Those are quiet lanes. That can vary between areas, depending on what is already there and what you are connecting, whether that is services or you want to focus on connecting schools or on connecting to the main public transport hub. That is where it becomes an in-situ difference in how you treat the quiet lanes. Those are places where it would be allowed. That is where you have your segregated active travel infrastructure or greenway, but that would then become shared.

Rural roads on which there were not many cars used to be part of our national cycle network, but they are now declassified because they are no longer safe. That is where safety measures could be introduced to reduce speed on those connectivity routes, maybe not on the entire route but on those sections that connect places. Measures would include speed limits and better signage highlighting the hierarchy of road users in the area. If there was not room to create a segregated cycle lane, such roads could be retransformed into the quiet lanes that they were before.

**Mr McMurray:** That is great to hear. I suppose that it is our job now to help you guys to push that and put it in place. Some back roads are quicker than some main roads, although they are narrow.

I do a bit of mountain biking, so my risk perceptions may be slightly different from those of other cyclists, and that is OK. One of the big barriers to cycling — you guys talked about it as well — is that people do not feel safe. That is just the bare bones of it. This is a twofold question. There is risk perception, and then there is actual risk. How do we reduce the actual risk but also put forward that it is a minimal risk? We talk about risk versus benefit an awful lot, but there are many more benefits than risks.

You quoted the figure of only 1% of sustainable travel journeys being by cycle. That is crazy. I cycled from what is essentially south Belfast to here today. You are cycling along and looking at the traffic, and dear love them. There are single people in many cars. The risk of that lifestyle is surely higher. Sorry, I am —

**Ms Pollock:** It is the combination of behaviour change and safe infrastructure. One of the pieces of research that we have done over the years was asking people what would motivate them to make a change to travelling actively, and it was all around the health focus. People are quite selfish. They will do something if they think that it benefits them, and then the wider benefits that we all get come from when they make that change.

People identified health as the main motivator. When they then start travelling actively, they start to realise the other benefits, such as the financial savings, reliable journey time and helping the environment. All of those pieces come. First and foremost, we found that the motivator that people identified was health, so we put out a lot of messaging around the health benefits. When we asked people what the barriers were, it was, as you said, safety and the lack of knowledge around safe, segregated active travel infrastructure.

There is definitely a piece of training around giving people the confidence to travel by bike to wherever they are going, whether that is via a mix of safe, segregated routes or on quiet roads. However, there is definitely the need to provide the safe physical infrastructure for people, and safety is always up there, as you say.

**Ms Mansour:** I guess that it is about demonstration. What would change people's mindsets and behaviour is demonstrating that it is safe, and you cannot do that without the infrastructure. Sometimes, when big schemes are delivered, you wonder how much impact you are making on an individual level. Then, when you have conversations with people, you are surprised how many do not know how to cycle or even have the confidence to get on a bike, even though they do not own a car.

Last year, when we were working with communities, I was surprised to see a segregated cycle lane along the Stranmillis Embankment. That is the only segregated cycle lane facing Botanic that we have, and I consider it to be one of the safest. There are communities in the Holylands where the ladies would not even cross the street on a bike to get to that cycle lane. We worked with them last year, and, as part of the training, they did their local shopping on bikes. That just shows that, sometimes, it can go back to a one-person story. Sharing those stories and people talking about their journeys is part of the behaviour change programme. However, that has to be accompanied by their experimenting with a safe route, because they cannot always be accompanied by an experienced cyclist.

**Mr McMurray:** I have a few more points, Chair, rather than questions. That sharing of the story, if that makes sense, is important. I said that I would not ask a question, but is there an empirical tipping point? I was cycling today, and I noticed that I have always this thing in my head that, when you are cycling, you always ask any fellow cyclist, "How are you getting on?". That should be a promoted scheme. Nobody said hello to me today, and I could not believe it. Maybe that is because I was in Belfast. I do not know. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Durkan:** They must know that you are an MLA. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McMurray:** That might engender a culture of our all being in this together. There is the principle that, if you see someone with a flat tyre, you help them. You help out your brothers or sisters.

**Ms Pollock:** It is about normalising it. Apologies for giving an example from Belfast, but, as I highlighted, the project at the east Belfast active travel hub was a really good project. It not only met so many agendas but combined the behaviour change and the infrastructure opportunity that was around it. I know that not everywhere is at that point, but it is a really good example of combining infrastructure and behaviour change and working to try to normalise cycling so that there is a culture in that neighbourhood of people travelling actively. As you say, it is a very social thing, and it is better on so many levels, as we know.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Before I bring in Keith, arising from that is a question that goes to the point that Danny made about his area and that Andrew made about his. What sort of input did you have into the road safety strategy? How important will that strategy be in not only protecting people using active travel but encouraging them to think that it is somewhere safe that they can use?

**Ms Pollock:** Unfortunately, Anne Madden is not here at the moment. I think that she responded to that. Fundamentally, from our perspective, it comes down to reducing the number of cars on the road.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Yes. It is about changing mentalities. We will never do that, but there is a mentality of us versus them. It is not that I am saying that, but there is the mentality of, "This is our space. Get out of the way". It is about changing that mentality.

**Ms Pollock:** It is about the reallocation of road space. Perla talked about user priority, and there is the issue of the provision of safe, segregated routes.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Absolutely.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thanks, ladies, for coming along. I appreciate the information. The Deputy Chair touched on funding. Can you give me an understanding of your core funding, what your total funding is and how far it has changed in the past five years?

**Ms Pollock:** We do not get any core funding in Northern Ireland for our work. It is all project-based funding. That differs from other parts of the UK. Sustrans has received government grants from Transport Scotland, Transport for Wales and Active Travel England around the work that we do. Everything in Northern Ireland is project-based funding. The schools programme is our biggest piece. We have our workplace programme, and, unfortunately, as I highlighted, we took a cut last year from the Public Health Agency around the communities programme. It is piece-by-piece project work.

**Mr K Buchanan:** There is no certainty at any time.

**Ms Harding:** No. Even with the schools programme, we are sitting seven weeks away from the end of our contract, and we do not know what to communicate to schools or to our staff.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is there a normal figure that you get from DFI? I know that it is not core funding, but is there a figure, broadly, that you apply for and get, or is it up and down and all over the place?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes. Budgets are an issue. As Beth said, on the schools piece, in the past four years, we have had piecemeal funding through tenders, applications and bids for funding. It is on a project-by-project basis.

**Mr K Buchanan:** You said that you have eight staff. What is the rough figure to run those eight staff, based on projects, year-on-year?

**Ms Harding:** For this current academic year, the budget has been £390,000.

**Ms Pollock:** That is for the Active School Travel programme alone.

**Ms Harding:** That was made up of £75,000 from DFI and £315,000 from the PHA. That was for the previous academic year.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thanks for that. I want to move on to a slide where you say:

*"sustainable travel makes up just 27% of all journeys (33% in 2020)".*

Has it come down?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes, it has come down. There is a downward trend.

**Mr K Buchanan:** What has caused that?

**Ms Pollock:** That is a good question.

**Ms Harding:** Was that figure from the walking and cycling index (WACI)?

**Ms Pollock:** It was from the travel survey.

**Mr Durkan:** It is sustainable travel, not active travel. Was it to do with COVID?

**Mr K Buchanan:** Do you think that COVID affected those figures? We hope that that was the reason. How relevant is funding? If you were to get more money and do more work in schools, what would happen to those percentages?

**Ms Harding:** If you look at the school travel stats that came out from DFI recently, you will see that, after a downward trend, there has been an increase in the number of children who walk to school. We work with only a small number of schools compared with the total number of schools in Northern Ireland, but the work that we have been doing in schools is starting to be reflected in the Northern Ireland-wide school travel results. We are seeing an increase in walking to school in those stats.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I have a final question. You talked earlier about the uptake from 500 schools, with 55% being urban schools and 45% being rural schools. You add another 60 each year. Is that correct?

**Ms Harding:** Yes. We add 60 schools every year.

**Mr K Buchanan:** On top of those 500 schools?

**Ms Harding:** This is how it works: a school gets three years of support from an officer, and then it moves into what we call extended support, which is more like light-touch support at a distance. The total number grows, but the number of schools that are getting direct support is about 150 to 200.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Within the 55% of engaged schools that are urban and 45% that are rural, what percentage of children walk to schools? I assume that the proportion is more in urban schools, but do we know, among that 55% of urban schools, what percentage of children walk to school compared with rural schools?

**Ms Harding:** I do not have those numbers to hand, but I can dig them out for you. Certainly, the increases in active travel at urban schools are larger than those that we see at rural schools.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Rural schools are at a disadvantage. In rural areas, we cannot drive on the roads at the minute. We cannot see the road owing to grass lying across it. You will not get anybody to ask their primary-school child to walk up the road, irrespective of the particular road. In a lot of places, there are no footpaths. I appreciate that it is not your issue, but we have difficulty driving up the roads at the minute, because we cannot see the actual road.

**Ms Pollock:** We ran a very successful rural safe routes to school programme about 10 or 15 years ago. It focused on infrastructure and behaviour change, and it saw good results. I appreciate that it is a challenge.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thank you.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Further to Keith's point about core funding, 10% of the entire travel budget is intended to be used for active travel. Do you believe that that should make up an element of core funding for you?

**Ms Pollock:** We have been asking for some kind of core funding to sustain the piece that we can bring to enable active travel. I highlighted how other parts of our organisation in the UK receive core funding to deliver on active travel.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Claire, are we the only part of the United Kingdom and these isles in which your organisation does not receive core funding to sustain active travel?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I have a quick point. What time do you spend trying to achieve funding?

**Ms Pollock:** Every day.

**Mr K Buchanan:** That answers the question.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Exactly.

**Mr McReynolds:** Thank you for coming in. It is good to see you all again. I enjoyed reading the presentation and seeing mention of east Belfast's C S Lewis Square and the greenways.

My point is similar to something that Danny and Andy touched upon in relation to the behavioural piece and the longer-term infrastructure and capital project piece. Have we learned any lessons from the Comber greenway and the Connswater greenway? Claire, you mentioned that the Comber greenway straddles three council areas. I have been banging on about the need to transfer it from DFI to the local councils since I was a councillor, because DFI cannot maintain it. I have always referred to the Comber greenway as the poor relation of the Connswater greenway. Have you guys learned any lessons from those two really successful projects that will help you to implement and deliver greenways at a faster pace?

**Ms Mansour:** We had direct impact on and input into the Comber greenway. The Connswater greenway was led by the community, and it is not part of the national cycle network. The Comber greenway, because it was delivered by engaging the community, it is a successful greenway that we use as an exemplar. It is the only greenway that has been delivered in a while, and we want to see it replicated.

There is a lot of good learning from the Comber greenway, but there is a lot that can be done to continue to enhance it. There are barriers, for example. We are running an audit programme on our existing greenways, and there are a couple of accessibility barriers that have been identified on the Comber greenway. We would love to see those early greenways being used as more of an example and pilot, so that they are looked at when other greenways are being delivered. We should always be looking at our existing greenways to see how to enhance them and how to get more people to use them. It is about trying to audit them to see who is not using them and why. We need to work on those barriers and try to learn how to implement greenways in the future. The implementation of the Comber greenway has been successful, and we would love to replicate that example.

**Mr McReynolds:** Absolutely, it is. I use it every day for running and cycling, and there are so many people on it. We need to get more of those delivered across Northern Ireland. I recently met people involved with the Strabane greenway to see what they are trying to do up there. If we get more greenways, more people will use them, and more people will cycle.

Every time I am down at the active travel hub at C S Lewis Square, it is rammed full of people making use of it. Can you tell us about the numbers of people who are using it? How much does it cost to facilitate that annually? Would you like to see more active travel hubs across Northern Ireland?

**Ms Pollock:** Yes, absolutely. That model of being embedded within a community has really worked for us. We did some evaluation of the project that originally established the hub at C S Lewis Square, and 60% of people identified the fact that they were now travelling actively down to the support that was provided through the measures delivered from the active travel hub. At that time, we saw a 7% increase in both leisure cycling and people commuting to work by bike in that area, and that was linked to that project. There is a huge opportunity to replicate that across other parts of Northern Ireland through strategically placed hubs. At the north-west multimodal transport hub, we have an active travel centre that links directly into the public transport network and the greenways, and we are doing our behaviour change engagement. Originally, when we set up the C S Lewis hub, we had some project funding for that. Time has passed, and other projects now sustain that. Investing properly in a resource to coordinate a really active programme in that neighbourhood is something that we are seeking to achieve.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Before I bring in Mark Durkan, the Chair, Deborah Erskine, is tuned in from rural Fermanagh, and she thanks you for the answers so far. She wants to tease out one question on the rural piece. You will be glad to know that she is very interested in this. The question is about rural access. She is curious to know whether any modelling has been done by schools and councils that you engage with on the additional infrastructure that DFI needs to install, whether that is additional cycle lanes or extending footpaths, to ensure regional balance when it comes to active travel. That is an important point.

**Ms Harding:** As part of the contract for the schools programme, we carry out a basic infrastructure audit with each school that joins the programme. In that audit, we identify need. We talk to the schools and find out what they feel they need in order to encourage more children to walk and cycle to school.

We go out and look at the area as well. It is basic, but it provides some really useful, hands-on information. We then pass that on to the Department for Infrastructure each year.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** That is useful. Does the Department compile an audit or provide a response to that?

**Ms Harding:** No.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** OK. I am interested to find out, when we go to the next series of questions, what data is being correlated to ensure regional balance. That is a key aspect of this.

**Ms Mansour:** We engaged with the Department for Infrastructure recently while it was developing the Northern Ireland active travel delivery plan. We engaged with our consultants and submitted the infrastructure audit part of that, because they were doing the cycle network audits of different areas. We have not yet seen the output from the school data, but we hope to see that soon. I believe that that data was then used when they were trying to map out key routes, and those connectivity routes to schools are key areas that the infrastructure audit took into consideration as data that it mapped out and used.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** That is useful to know. Over to the very patient Mark Durkan.

**Mr Durkan:** I would not go that far, Chair. *[Laughter.]* Thanks for the presentation, ladies. I found it extremely interesting, including your responses to the many questions that I was going to ask but that have been asked.

Getting 10% of the transport budget for active travel presents a tremendous opportunity. Obviously, you would love to be in a position where your organisation receives core funding and more funding. However, I am sure that, in general, you are delighted that there will be more investment in something that you are extremely passionate about. What kind of engagement have you had with the Department at this stage to identify how we collectively can get the biggest bang for that buck with regard to reducing emissions and increasing the use of sustainable transport? Could that money being confined to active travel rather than sustainable travel be problematic?

**Ms Pollock:** The fact that it is contained in active travel?

**Mr Durkan:** No, the fact that it is all for active travel.

**Ms Pollock:** It is good because we can continue to invest in public transport, and we would not want those two budgets to compete. The 10% is a statutory obligation to spend 10% of the transport budget on active travel. We are in regular contact with the Department's officials about opportunities in the programmes that we deliver on its behalf. We are aware that sectoral plans are being developed for how it will be taken forward. We will wait to see the details of that. I am conscious that time is passing and that the legislation passed some time ago. We would definitely like to hear more about the plan to achieve the 10% spend.

**Mr Durkan:** It is certainly not a problem that you will be used to, but the situation could arise where there is too much money to spend in any given year. You could enter a 'Brewster's Millions' scenario of money being thrown left, right and centre at things that are not necessarily as impactful as they should be.

**Ms Pollock:** It is important to plan, but it is important to deliver. We are a UK-wide organisation with resources and experience across the UK, and we can tap into that. We would be delighted to be in that position.

**Mr Durkan:** Thinking about the bang per buck and the sustainable piece, what relationship is there between active travel and public transport? What partnership work is there with Translink? I know that you are under one roof in Derry at the north-west transport hub. You called it a train station. I have got in trouble for calling it that before.

**Ms Pollock:** Apologies for that. Absolutely. We work very closely with Translink, and Perla might want to say more on that. Public transport, walking and cycling go hand in hand. It is about moving people

sustainably. We have spoken to Translink on a number of fronts, but there is an idea around enabling sustainable journeys. Perla will talk about enabling sustainable journeys in Mark's part of the world — the north-west and Derry/Londonderry — and how we might approach that in a hilly city.

**Ms Mansour:** Yes. I want to go back and touch on the Comber greenway as an example. In our first approach to Translink about enabling sustainable journeys, we looked at an existing greenway, the key bus routes and how to create more permeability to connect them. If you are using active travel on a greenway, there is a start point and an end point, and the communities between those points cannot access or leave the greenway to use the key transport: for example, bus stops and park-and-rides.

We are mapping the key transport to find the permeability and create access. Sustrans now sits on the public transport task force in Derry/Londonderry with the council, and we see that as a great opportunity for discussion. We had a recent meeting with Translink about the opportunities to improve the uptake of public transport in a hilly area, and it is focused on active travel as a key mode of transport to get people out of their cars. If, for example, public transport is on the main streets, people use their cars to get there, and they might feel that it is easier to continue by car. How do you remove that barrier? It is with planning, looking at a hilly city in tranches and working on the loops. Public transport will do the linkages, and active travel is at a neighbourhood level on a different level of the morphology. We hope to present an interesting approach soon to the task force and see how the planning goes from there. There are a lot of opportunities, and we are in constant collaboration.

**Mr Durkan:** I have first-hand experience of the transformational impact that infrastructural change can have. I live in Strathfoyle, literally 20 metres from a joining point to the greenway. I can cycle to my office on Strand Road in 20 minutes if I use the scenic route over the Peace Bridge. I can do it in a bit less time if I take the sweaty route over the Foyle Bridge. I stick to the flatter route. There are a lot of hills in the city. I can get to the office and be told that I have a meeting in Creggan at 10.30 am, and I have to get a taxi. That work on interconnectedness is extremely important.

This ties in with the Active School Travel programme, but when Danny was speaking about short journeys, I was thinking about your role in helping to identify those safe routes. Do you have a way to feed into DFI — I will speak to the guys about this later — about what small infrastructure improvements could be made, be it signage or traffic calming, in order to increase the uptake of cycling in those areas where children in particular make short local journeys? Very few traffic calming schemes have been done lately due to budgetary constraints, and I wonder whether the Department views the 10% as an opportunity to roll out some of those schemes in a way that will facilitate an increase in active travel.

**Ms Pollock:** We hope so. We have a captive audience in schools. One of the biggest challenges in delivering infrastructure is the cultural issues that we talked about in that we have a car-dominated society. People need to think differently about how they move, and that will be hard for some people. One of the points to make about layering on the infrastructure to the Active School Travel programme is that we have a really engaged audience there. Not only do we need the infrastructure to then have a greater impact but we have that audience buy-in already. That is a willing community that we can work with in order to start making a change towards shifting the culture about how we travel and what the travel norm is. We talked about the safe routes to schools work, which is about wanting to expand the Active School Travel programme and School Streets. Those are so important.

An improvement can be something very simple. The infrastructure audit that Beth's team carries out is interesting. The improvement can sometimes be something as simple as a crossing. Last year, for example, Stephen was trying to bring a school down to the greenway at the active travel centre, but the teacher was not for that because she did not want to walk her whole class across a road that did not have a crossing. That is a barrier for that whole cohort of people and their family to experiencing what is on offer at the active travel centre and then onwards to the greenway.

**Mr Durkan:** Yes, OK. I had one more question, but it has left me.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** We can come back to you, Mark, if needs be.

**Mr Dunne:** Thank you for your presentation. It is good to hear about progress, particularly with the schools programme, which is very valuable indeed. It is positive to see that such a spread of 500 schools right across the Province are involved. Do you find that schools are very receptive to working with you? Is it fair to say that you could do a lot more with more?

**Ms Harding:** Yes, absolutely. The programme ticks a lot of boxes for schools, because it addresses the congestion problem, which so many of us see outside schools all the time. That is a real problem for schools. The scheme also tackles the health issues that schools are seeing with children, such as low levels of physical activity. Building physical activity into their daily journeys to and from school is an easy way to increase children's activity levels. It is a win-win for schools, and they are very keen to take part because they do not feel confident about doing it themselves. A lot of schools say, "Yes, we would like to see more kids walking and cycling to school, but we are scared to go there because we do not know what language to use or how to pass on the right kinds of skills". We are able to step in and do that for them.

**Mr Dunne:** We have touched on the fact that there are real road safety risks and issues for so many of our schools. Locally, we have had a number of near misses in North Down in recent weeks. There was an incident where a young kid was out on a scooter and a car did not stop at the red light. Thankfully, he just avoided being hit. There are real issues, and we are always pushing for the 20 mph zones and measures like that.

There is an issue with the Bangor to Newtownards greenway. I am keen to hear about your level of involvement with that particular greenway route, which, I understand, is at the planning stage. Is there any update on that?

**Ms Mansour:** We are not directly involved in the delivery of —.

**Mr Dunne:** Have you been involved with the Bangor to Newtownards scheme up to this point?

**Ms Pollock:** No.

**Mr Dunne:** No? That is OK.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Andrew wants to come back in very quickly.

**Mr McMurray:** I just wanted to touch on the schools programme. You mentioned emissions and journeys that are saved. Is there an educational benefit for the children? Is that something that you have tapped into? The idea of there being no cars is a great sell, but is there another tangent there?

**Ms Harding:** Absolutely. Studies show that kids who have an active journey to school are more alert, awake and ready to go, which means that they perform better in the classroom. There are studies out there that show that. Even the programme itself is educational. My team delivers a lot of programmes that link active travel with the curriculum. Whether it is in history, geography or health, we can make those nice ties and connections so that kids learn about active travel in whatever curriculum topics they have. In fact, one of our calls, which you saw in the slide, is that we would really like to see active travel included in the curriculum so that it is a core part of school life and schools build it into their planning and priorities. That is really important.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Pardon my absolute naivete. It is a few years since I passed my cycling proficiency test. Is that still a thing in schools?

**Ms Harding:** It is, yes.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Completely? I ask because I have not seen it being rolled out as much.

**Ms Harding:** The Department runs it. It would be able to tell you more about it, but yes —

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** I look forward to hearing about that.

**Ms Harding:** — it is still happening.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** Excellent. Claire, Perla and Beth, you have been very patient with us. Thank you so much for your answers and for listening to all the members' cycling anecdotes, which, I am sure, you enjoyed as much as the questions. We thank you for your time today. We have run slightly over time, but it is a really important topic, and members are keen to get answers on it. We



will continue to engage, and we look forward to hearing from you again. Thank you very much for coming along today.

**Ms Pollock:** Thank you. If, in due course, members would like to come out to visit one of the schools that are part of the programme and if it is still running after July, we would be delighted to facilitate them.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stewart):** That would be very good. Thank you for that.