

**Sustainable,
healthy and fair:
how the
principles of
'active travel' can
shape northern
Devon.**



**Internal Memo for
One Northern Devon Local Care Partners**

The publication of the Devon Carbon Plan in October 2022 set a benchmark for how we plan the future of our County.¹ It poses particular challenges for spatial planning. This memo explores how active travel and health equity principles can support a more sustainable, fair and healthier society in northern Devon. It poses some radical challenges about how and where we build high quality infrastructure and how we integrate active travel into the planning system, with particular focus on 'The Joint Local Plan' review for Torridge and Northern Devon councils. Active travel has clear physical and mental health benefits gained from giving more people, from all walks of life, the ability to be more physically active in their day to day lives, whilst supporting social connections and increasing time spent outdoors in nature. Shifting some journeys to active travel also has additional 'co-benefits', including reducing climate altering pollutants, that are in themselves harmful to human health.

INTRODUCTION

The North Devon and Torridge Local Plan 2011-2031 sets out the vision, strategies and policies to guide how northern Devon should develop over the coming years.² It was last formally adopted by both councils in October 2018 with consultation for its review starting in 2022. OND's Active Travel (AT) forum encouraged attendees to engage with the review to ensure the plan developed with the opinions of as many local stakeholders as possible. The AT forum, as a collective, decided that a discussion document/internal partner memo would help this engagement, and support local partners debate at an organisational level, their roles and priorities in supporting a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable locality.

Several recent plans, policies and events locally and nationally have prompted increased discussions on the wider issue of planning in Northern Devon. The Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for Barnstaple with Bideford and Northam, a 2022 Health Inequalities Conference held in Northern Devon, The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, and Active Travel England's Corporate Plan. We must also not forget the lasting impact of austerity, Brexit and Covid on society and the economy, and the increasing impact of climate change on how we live and how we plan for the future.^{3,4,5,6}

Other contributions to the debate include the publication in 2022 of 'Building Car Dependency', which looks at how much residential development over the last ten to twenty years has increased our dependency on the car.⁷

THE CONTEXT FOR THE DISCUSSION

One Northern Devon is a partnership of organisations, working together to improve wellbeing and reduce health inequalities for the people and communities of northern Devon. It has convened an 'Active Travel' forum since 2020.⁸ Included in the Terms of Reference (TOR) as it's second objective:

"Engage with local planners and policymakers to promote changes that encourage healthier and more active communities as well as support the climate change agenda and actively help tackle health inequalities."

Connectivity

Active travel includes discussion on our public transport network. There must be transport access for all, regardless of characteristics such as age, location or income that is affordable, comfortable, simple to use and fit for purpose.

Pollution

Air quality has improved in England over recent decades. However, it continues to be the biggest environmental risk to public health; with children, the elderly and the already vulnerable, most affected. Poor air quality also has consequences for crop yields, and particularly in the case of ammonia and oxides of nitrogen, significant impact for the natural environment and biodiversity. Pollutants also contribute to climate change, the biggest threat to human health.⁹

KEY PARTNERSHIPS AND POLICIES

The National Planning Policy Framework

The national context is provided by the National Planning Policy Framework, which sets a context for plan-making and development decision-making. Its emphasis is on providing housing in sufficient numbers to meet market demand, requiring local planning authorities to demonstrate that they have a five-year supply of housing development land. However, it also includes other measures, including promoting sustainable transport by identifying opportunities to promote walking, cycling, and public transport.¹⁰

Priorities for investment

The issue of how much infrastructure and service provision can be required of a development raises the issue of how the enhanced value of development land can accrue benefit to a local community. Within the current framework of community infrastructure levies, it is essential for local planning authorities to set out priorities for investment at each allocated site. Active travel provision must be established at this stage to ensure that it is on the forefront of the agenda at subsequent planning stages.

Active Travel England

The recently formed Active Travel England is the government's executive agency responsible for making walking, cycling, and wheeling the preferred choice to get around. Since 2022 Active Travel England has been a statutory consultee to the planning system, with all new development stakeholders (planners, developers and transport officers) over a certain size (>150 residential units as an example) being offered tools and guidance to assess their proposals against best practice and policy requirements. This will help planning authorities implement good walking, wheeling, and cycling infrastructure.

North Devon Biosphere Reserve

North Devon and Torridge is a Biosphere Reserve. This UNESCO designation has, since 2002, been increasingly influential as a context for planning new development.¹¹

"As part of the global UNESCO Man and Biosphere network, our biosphere provides an open forum for bringing people together with their natural surroundings - to empower them to unlock their potential, and use their local and scientific knowledge to model solutions for sustainable living" (ND Biosphere Reserve website)

The Values of the ND Biosphere Reserve are:



WE CHAMPION LIFE

– We create the conditions for people and nature to live together



WE EMPOWER PEOPLE

– We are a movement of people building a future we can trust



WE MODEL SOLUTIONS

– We explore new ways of living everyday that solve global challenges



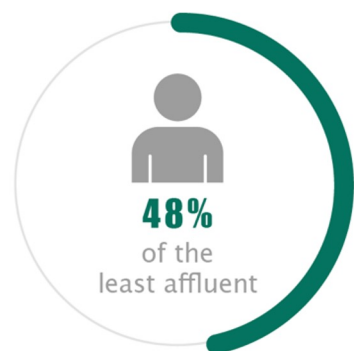
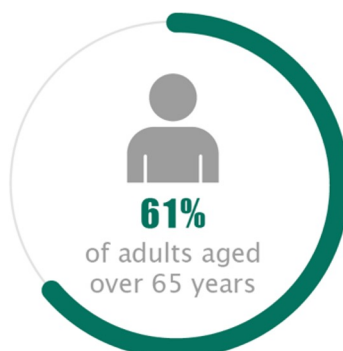
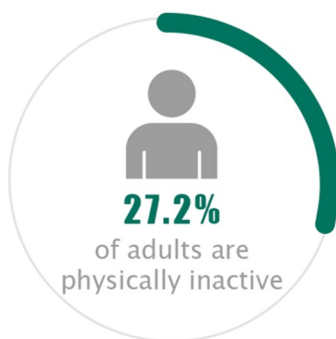
WE BELONG TOGETHER

– Our success depends on the strength of the relations we create

Design Codes became mandatory under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. A design code is a set of simple concise design requirements where local planning authorities and communities decide what good quality design looks like for their area. These may inform the local authority area, as well as specific defined areas, developments, and plots. A National Model Design Code sets out what should be considered when developing local codes. The design codes are important as they provide a clear framework under the Act to support healthy and sustainable living places.

Neighbourhood planning provides communities with a mechanism to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood, and shape developments within their local area. They can determine where they would like new homes, shops, and offices to be located, and what these will look like. Neighbourhood planning seeks to enable communities to meet their needs, where these align with the strategic needs and priorities of the local area. This is achieved through the local planning authority providing advice, assistance, and governance.

ADDRESSING HEALTH INEQUALITIES THROUGH ACTIVE TRAVEL PRINCIPLES



Everyday movement and physical activity

The social and environmental forces that keep communities in good health are complex, but we know there are clear physical and mental health benefits of being active. Physical inactivity is one of the leading risk factors driving the UK's high burden of preventable ill health and premature mortality, yet many people across our country and locality are not active enough to meet the CMO recommended guidelines.¹² In the 2021/22 Sport England Active Lives Survey 25.8% of adults in the UK are physically inactive (less than 30 mins a week of beneficial movement). As we get older sedentary behaviour increases with a sharp reduction seen in those over 75 years and those from lower socio-economic groups, people with long-term conditions and /or a disability also being associated with reduced activity, with complex interrelations.¹³ However, for many even a small increase in activity, if possible, can have many positive health outcomes (See Figure 2).

The Health Foundation in 2021 summarised the health benefits of active travel, with the key point that if walking and cycling rates in all regions in England increases to the same level as the regions with the highest average daily miles walked and cycled per person, around 1,190 early deaths could be prevented each year.¹⁴

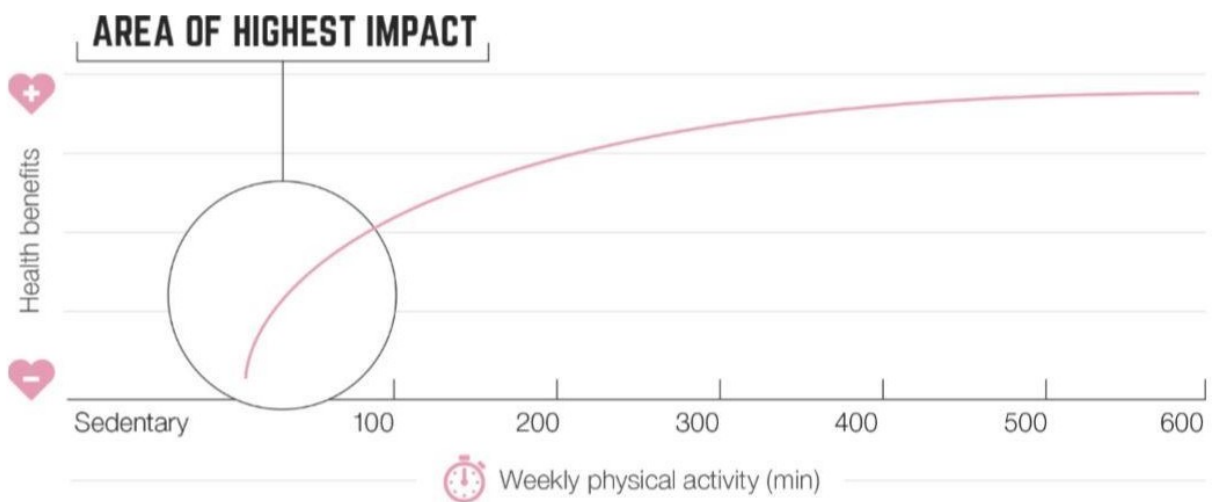


Figure 2. Dose-response curve of physical activity and health benefits

Everyday Routines

Active travel is an equitable form of physical activity that can be built into everyday routines. By supporting inactive people to engage in as little as 20 mins of active travel per day there is a significant health benefit, which for many is a realistic and achievable way of improving their health. National policy supports this priority, as is shown in the NHS Green Plan , with locality health and social care providers producing their own plans.¹⁵ Added to this, the most inactive in society have the most to gain in improving their health outcomes from moving more each day. It makes sense to increase access to safe cycling and walking routes across our region and increase/improve connections to low carbon public transport schemes.

Childhood Obesity

Active travel has direct links with childhood obesity and local system leaders in other areas of the country are recognising the need to take a whole system approach to this complex issue. For example in Hull, the City Council has directly prioritised active travel in promoting healthier weight in under 18s, with safe routes to school, security in storing cycles and scooters and supporting cycle confidence.¹⁶ We know from the National Childhood Measurement Programme (NCMP) that Torridge has the highest percentage of overweight 5-year-olds and very overweight 11-year-olds in the county and has the highest inactivity levels of school aged children in Devon.¹⁷ Local Government and the integrated care system (ICS) can directly address this through supporting active travel schemes in our locality, such as bike to school week, rolling out Bikeability, and other cycle confidence schemes, further and investing in family cycling and a bike provision/support scheme.

Health Equity

Health equity is achieved when everyone can attain their full potential for health and well-being. It aims to tackle stubborn inequalities in our systems and society that cause unfair differences in health outcomes between groups. There are many inter-relatable challenging factors that include high density or speed of traffic, poor access to green spaces, air pollution, and poor transport links. In April 2022 One Northern Devon’s Health Inequalities ‘Engaging Communities’ Project began exploring the challenges that people across Northern Devon face as we emerge from the Covid 19 pandemic and aims to achieve equity for all.¹⁸

Core20PLUS5 is a national NHS England and NHS Improvement approach to support the reduction of health inequalities at both national and system level. Launched in 2021, the approach defines a target population cohort – the ‘Core20PLUS’ – and identifies ‘5’ focus clinical areas requiring accelerated improvement that includes those experiencing severe mental illness, chronic respiratory disease, and supporting pregnant women and their families (See Figure 2).

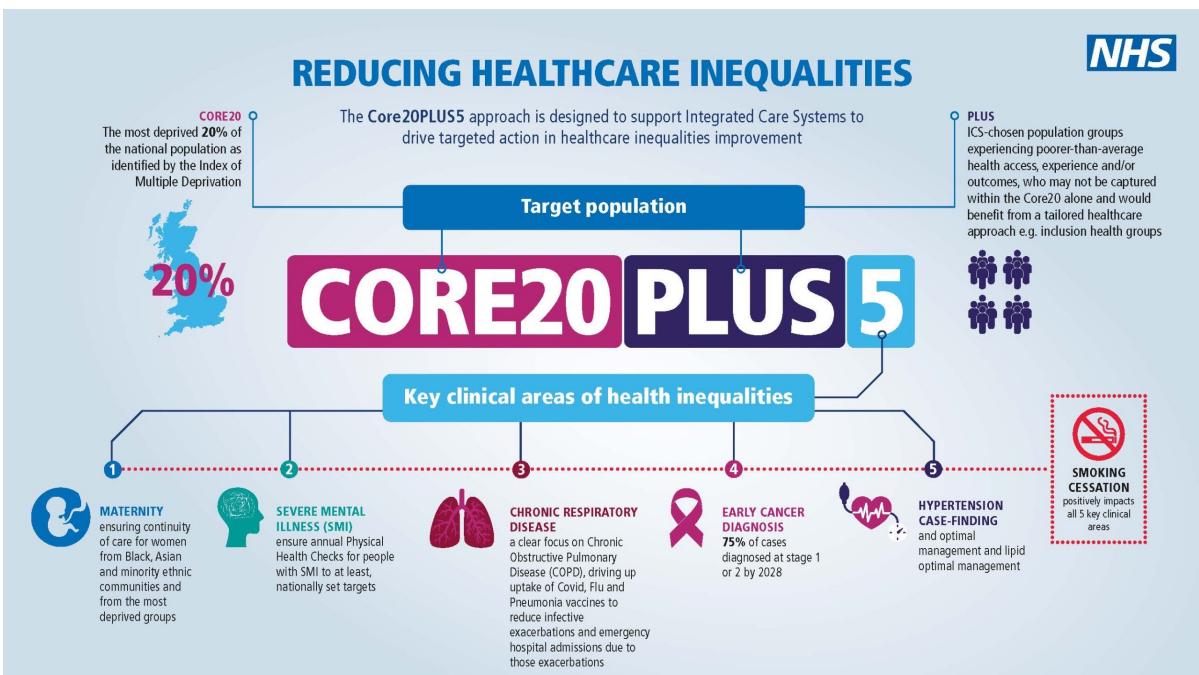


Figure 3 – CORE20 PLUS 5 NHSE (NHS England » Core20PLUS5 infographic – Adult)

It is known that disadvantaged groups have less access to safe, sustainable and affordable travel options, so active travel and planning that support this need to be prioritised. The active travel social prescribing scheme, which was launched in August 2022, is helping a selected cohort of local councils across England launch a range of projects and will evaluate the impact of active travel on an individual's physical and mental health. Evaluation will include whether there has been reduced demand for healthcare appointments and reliance on medication due to more physical activity. Plymouth is one of the areas chosen to pilot this, and Northern Devon hopes to learn from these findings.¹⁹

Healthcare sustainability

The challenges facing access to healthcare are felt throughout our communities. Increased demand for NHS services has started to outweigh capacity. By encouraging a more active lifestyle and promoting active travel we are not only helping individuals live a healthier life – but we are paving the way for healthier communities with less preventable health conditions and in turn, reducing the demand on NHS services which will improve access for our wider population.

NHS England (NHSE) within its Net Zero Travel and Transport Strategy calculated the direct cost savings to the NHS to be over £270 million a year.²⁰

The World Health Organisation's HEAT tool is designed so that anyone can conduct economic assessment of the health impacts of walking and cycling.²¹

Leading Challenges

OND's engagement with organisations and community members has so far shown the biggest challenges people are facing to be:



Poor transport infrastructure



Lack of affordable housing



Poverty



Geographical remoteness and rurality



Social isolation and loneliness



Low wage economy

BENEFITS OF ACTIVE TRAVEL



REDUCES
POLLUTION



REDUCES
CLIMATE CHANGE
EFFECTS



BURNS
CALORIES



INCREASES
PHYSICAL
FITNESS



SAVES
ENERGY



BOOSTS
MENTAL
HEALTH



CHEAPER



Mental Health in Children and Young People (MHCYP)

Young people have highlighted how poor transport choices in Northern Devon are reducing their chances of gaining employment, as well as accessing leisure and recreation facilities. The Kailo project, aimed at helping local communities, young people and public service partnerships better understand and address the root causes (and wider determinants) of young people’s mental health has evaluated it’s early findings (Figure 3). Transport infrastructure and access to opportunities is a key theme.²²

With young people’s mental health being of great concern post pandemic, targeted improvements in access to active travel routes may help young people find meaningful employment, meet peers, expand their networks and increase their connection with their surroundings. Rurality, social isolation, and loneliness are key factors that reduce health equity chances. A key area that ‘Local Living’ challenges is the provision of housing projects located away from major centres which reduces access to key amenities, including shops, public services, and employment opportunities. Appendix 1 give one example of ‘local living’ principles.

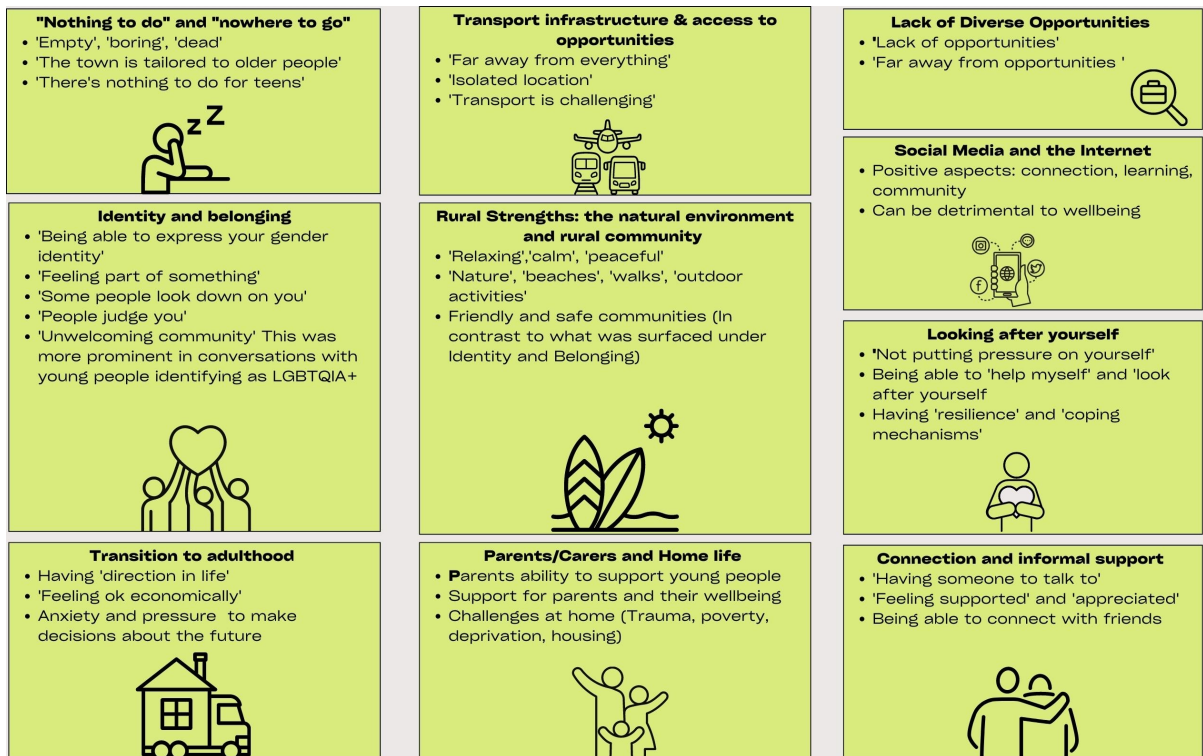


Figure 4 – Emerging opportunity areas for supporting improved MHCYP from Kailo study

Health and Economic Development

We know there are clear connections between health and economic development and our Active Travel group brings a local effort with specific goals to build partnerships with public services, community, VSCE and industry. We recognise the rural and coastal challenges to increasing active travel but feel that by increasing and improving connections through active travel we can impact employment opportunities for all, as well as increase physical and mental wellbeing through improving health behaviours and promoting health equity in our locality.

Academic findings

There are clear challenges to achieving the behavioural changes that will lead to more active lifestyles. These are clearly set out in a recent study carried out in Yorkshire by Sheffield Hallam University, in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA). This took a Capability/Opportunity/Motivation – Behaviour approach (COM-B) and, based on extensive survey work, reached the following conclusions about active travel:

- Relatively low cost, easy to implement, brief interventions informed by behavioural science, can have a positive impact on active travel.
- Motivation can be increased by getting people to reflect on their personal reasons for active travel and why it can be beneficial for them.
- It is important that we help support and enable people to commit to swapping one or more journeys each week and plan the overcoming of any barriers or obstacles that may get in the way of achieving that goal.²³

Poor air quality

Premature death, dementia, respiratory diseases, childhood respiratory infections and low birthweight Poor air quality is an alarming public health issue. Long term exposure (over several years) reduces life expectancy, mainly due to increased risk of mortality from cardiovascular and respiratory causes and lung cancer.²⁴ Research from Europe indicates a strong link between air pollution and millions of new cases of asthma, COPD, acute respiratory infections, lung cancer and other serious illnesses each year.²⁵ Researchers at Kings College London have shown that people with dementia living in areas with the highest exposure to nitrogen dioxide were 27% more likely to sue community mental health services.²⁶ Three related studies presented at the European Respiratory Society’s International Congress in 2023 have shed further light on the deleterious effect of air pollution. The studies reveal how pollution not only reduces the birthweight of newborns, but also increases the incidence of respiratory infections experienced by young children²⁷ Socially and Economically disadvantaged people may experience increased susceptibility to pollution due to living proximity to roads and poorer underlying health status.²⁸ Figure 5. Summarises the affects through the lifecycle.

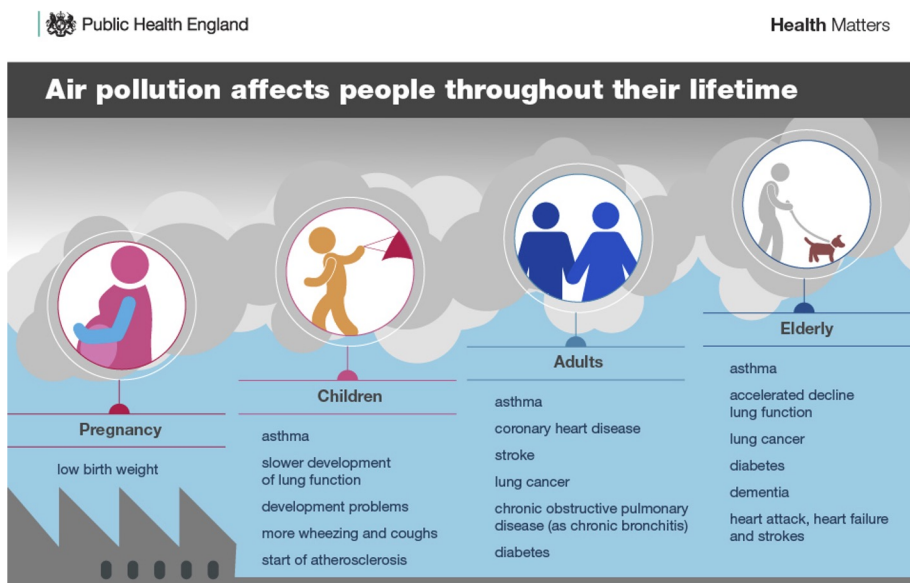


Figure 5 – Air pollution: applying All Our Health - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

DEVON CARBON PLAN

The Plan has a section on Spatial Planning. “A net-zero Devon will be different from how it is now. Where things are and how they connect affect GHG emissions. High car-based mobility in Devon has meant that many rural communities have lost local services. We need to consider how to organise housing and employment space so that we can get to shops, workplaces, and services by walking, cycling and on public transport more easily. We can proactively and sensitively plan for changes needed within our rural and urban areas to achieve net-zero, such as through the Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans we make together. Achieving net-zero can produce better places to live, work and relax, as well as cutting emissions.”

PRINCIPLES FOR PLANNING SUSTAINABLE, FAIR, HEALTHY, AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

In the spirit of modelling “solutions for sustainable living”, the following principles are offered for discussion:

NEW DEVELOPMENT



- That all new developments, including the provision of housing, employment, community facilities and infrastructure should have active travel principles embedded in them, in terms of location and design.
- That new housing development should put affordability and lifetime costs, (particularly for social housing provider consideration, at the forefront of provision.
- That new housing should be located and designed with ‘local living’ principles being taken into consideration (See Appendix 1).
- That economic resilience should be planned into the provision for work opportunities to include, for example, provision of retail, educational, healthcare and public transport connection facilities.

ACTIVE TRAVEL PROVISION



- That infrastructure for active travel should be integrated within all new development and designed to join with existing or planned active travel infrastructure.
- That public transport provision should have precedence over private vehicle travel in designing new development. One example may be to use a transport hierarchy based on access and mobility (i.e. streets with greater access such as cul-de-sac designed around pedestrian priority, through to motorways with high mobility, but limited to permitted vehicles).
- That active travel options be facilitated to neighbourhoods to allow for reliable and frequent access to schools, colleges, primary and secondary healthcare, larger retail facilities etc.
- That innovative approaches to goods deliveries and visitor parking should be provided for key urban and coastal communities.
- That the role of retailing within and outside town centres should be re-appraised, with a view to reducing travel-to-shop journeys, so to support local retailing. Out of town logistics/distribution hubs may reduce overall transport burden.

WELLBEING



- That we ensure all new development addresses and aims to reduce health inequalities and promote health within the communities. To include access to safe roads and pavements, considering speed limits and pollution levels and increasing and promoting access to green spaces.
- That opportunities to enjoy open space and open countryside nearby should be available to all communities.
- That opportunities to enjoy recreational and cultural activities should be available to all communities.
- That we should measure the health of our communities with strong reference to wellbeing indicators.
- Air pollution prevention, protection for those most vulnerable and public health promotion of the dangers to short- and long-term exposure should be considered a priority in local plans.

DISCUSSION

In commenting on these principles, the following views are offered on how future provision should differ from the past.

- Much new planned development, particularly housing, has been located at some distance from town centres and community facilities, necessitating travel by private vehicles. New housing allocations should focus on developing brownfield and town centre sites at higher densities. If insufficient housing opportunities can be identified on such sites, another option that might be explored is the location of a new settlement based on active travel and 'local living' principles, providing all the communities' needs.²⁹
- The growth of online retailing and the impact of Covid 19 have changed shopping habits. These have implications for the future of town centres. They also call into question the need for out-of-town retail parks. A review of the purpose of the main town centres in northern Devon is urgently needed to ensure they remain viable. Equally the need for "big shed" out of town retailing should be tested; since some selected sites could be repurposed (and are well-located) for housing development. Big sheds may be considered for distribution hubs or as places for more mixed development e.g. homes near places of employment. There is hope that design coding may look at this type of approach.³⁰
- Whilst it is accepted that rurality is an issue in people accessing services, the likelihood is that 90% of northern Devon's housing needs will be provided for in urban locations. For rural settlements the issue becomes one of improving the accessibility of services by providing adequate and affordable public or community transport. 'Levelling Up' is a current government commitment. Improving local transport links should be a priority in making sure none of North Devon's rural or urban communities are left behind and further isolated.

- Some recent developments have ignored the requirement for segregated walking and cycling provision and bus penetration in some new housing estates could be improved. Buses (ideally electric or hydrogen powered) should be given precedence over private cars, with one possibility via the use of bus gates. Other safety features, currently in use in Europe, include elevated cycle paths (The Netherlands and Germany) where bikes are given priority. Roads in these countries are generally wide (5-6m) and have cycle lanes each side leaving sufficient space between for just one car, promoting slower, more careful driving. Vision Zero South West, a road safety partnership working to reduce serious collisions in Devon and Cornwall, seeks a range of measures to improve safety – [Vision Zero - A collaborative road safety community project \(visionzerosouthwest.co.uk\)](https://www.visionzerosouthwest.co.uk)
- Last-mile delivery solutions are increasingly being used, based on edge of town commercial vehicle parking, where goods can be broken down into loads that can be delivered by electric vehicles of all types. This avoids the penetration of town centres and housing estates by larger delivery vehicles.
- The over-dependence of beach resorts on close and abundant visitor parking creates congestion and leads to very poor environmental and safe travel conditions in many of northern Devon's resorts, including Saunton, Croyde and Woolacombe. This leads to the added detriment of impaired access to outdoor areas such as beaches, for people living locally, due to congestion. Consideration of methods to reduce impact and focus on these honey pots should be an increased priority.
- The contribution that access to open space and nature makes to physical and mental wellbeing is well-documented. Whilst Northern Devon includes extensive areas of attractive countryside and coast, access is not always easy. Outside the core provision of the Tarka Trail alongside the estuaries of the Taw and Torridge and the Coast Path along the full length of the Northern Devon coast, there is little public access, whether by walking, cycling, horse riding or by canoeing etc to the countryside or the rivers that run through it. Improved patterns of access are called for and easy and equitable access for individuals and communities to green and blue spaces across the region also has the potential to promote pro-environmental behaviours.
- Wellbeing is also enhanced with good access to recreational and cultural activities. North Devon and Torridge Councils have recently produced a Culture Strategy for the area. The opportunity to network cultural and recreational activities across the area would maximise the social and community benefits of this investment.³¹

THE NEXT STEPS

There are many processes involved in planning for the future of our communities in northern Devon. The diagram at Appendix 2 sets out the relationship between them. This discussion document is intended to be a contribution to the process. In offering it we would like to refer to the concept of Vision Planning produced by Jon Parker for the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) in July 2022 and CIHT's 'Better Planning, Better transport, Better places' advice document.^{32, 33}

More specifically, this document is intended to be an input from One North Devon's Active Travel forum to the forthcoming 'Local Plan' review process. It is hoped that through partnership working and learning collaboratively that this memo can aid when talking to decision-makers and key service providers in health, education, recreation, and other sectors, at the local, regional, and national levels.

Steve Pitcher*/ Kay Brennan,
*Deceased 2023

This document is in memoriam of Steve Pitcher, an Active Travel group member, community champion and environmental activist.

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APPENDIX 1

An example of 'Local living'.



APPENDIX 2

Transport and Planning Diagram

