

Belfast should have a flagship cycling network. It doesn't



Feature

CYCLING IN LIMBO

Northern Ireland is committed to spending 10% of its transport budget on active travel. Progress so far? Nil. **Andrew McClean** examines why

Photos: Andrew McClean



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The Irish poet Seamus Heaney once said: “Anyone born and bred in Northern Ireland can’t be too optimistic.” While that doesn’t take account of the progress that’s been made in our little corner of north-west Europe over the last 30 years, it rings true for our current political and cost-of-living crises – and for the lack of support for cycling here.

It had looked like things were going to change. In January 2022 our MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly – the name for elected politicians in Stormont) were tabling amendments to the Climate Change Bill. Alliance MLA Andrew Muir introduced the Active Travel clause: “The Department for Infrastructure must develop sectoral plans for transport which sets a minimum spend on active travel from the overall transport budgets of 10%.”

Walking, wheeling and cycling were suddenly in line for a big slice of the transport budget. To put this shift into perspective: if the figure of 10% were achieved any time before 2025, Northern Ireland would go from a distant fifth place to Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales in terms of per-head spending up to second; only Ireland would be investing proportionately more in active travel.

And it wasn’t just pie in the sky. The Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill, along with Andrew Muir’s amendment, passed. It became an historic piece of cross-party legislation, receiving Queen’s Assent on 6 June 2022. Since then, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) has had a statutory obligation on its active travel spend.

DRIVING THE CHANGES

More reasons for hope came during the Assembly election campaign in May. Cycling UK and Sustrans held a hustings event with candidates from the six previous largest parties in Stormont.

We asked all the candidates to sign our pledge to invest, connect and make cycling safe across Northern Ireland. All parties agreed “that more needs to be done to ensure this happens, and that holding the next executive to account to prioritise both the investment and delivery of schemes is imperative”.

Over half of the subsequently elected MLAs signed up to our pledge, including the leaders of the three largest parties: Michelle O’Neill (Sinn Féin), Sir Jeffrey Donaldson (DUP), and Naomi Long (Alliance). With such cross-party consensus, it would be hard to imagine a better political mandate. ▶