Submission to

All Party Parliamentary Group for Cycling & Walking: Active Travel and Social Justice Inquiry

From **Transition Tavistock** (www.transitiontavistock.org.uk), December 2024

Introduction

Transition Tavistock is a volunteer-run community group, founded in 2008 and linked to the wider Transition Towns movement, bringing people together in local response to the climate and nature crises. We cover the market town of Tavistock, West Devon, and its sparsely populated rural hinterland including parts of Dartmoor and the Tamar Valley. Tavistock (population 12,000) is 15 miles north of Plymouth and close to the Cornwall border. Devon County Council (which recently formed a combined authority with Torbay) is responsible for highways. We have no party political affiliation.

One of our projects, the Travel Action Group, advocates for sustainable ways of getting to and around the local area. Our response to this consultation is based on this ongoing engagement with supporters, local stakeholders including councillors and organisations concerned with health and wellbeing, and the public.

Who is currently prevented from enjoying the full benefits of active travel and why?

Many residents of rural areas have less chance of enjoying the full benefits of active travel than urban residents of similar age, affluence and fitness making journeys of similar length between their homes and local facilities. Reasons include:

- Even within settlements it is common to have sections of road with no footway at all, or a single footway which swaps sides without a crossing point. Examples of these in Tavistock are Green Lane and Church Hill, which each link substantial housing areas to popular open space on Dartmoor. Many villages, for example Mary Tavy and Milton Abbot, lie across main roads now dominated by through traffic including lorries, with no controlled crossings.
- Roads between settlements, whether A-roads or single-track lanes, are often winding and rarely provide for walking or cycling other than on the highway. For example, Devon Oaks, a residential park home site on the busy A386 less than a mile north of Horrabridge, has no footway or footpath to connect it to the village. Bere Ferrers is only 2 miles from shops, primary school and health centre in the larger village of Bere Alston, but the linking lanes are narrow with blind corners, deterring walking and cycling.
- The network of public rights of way in the countryside is a valued asset for leisure walking, but routes across farmland or on wooded slopes are not suited to functional trips to workplaces or shops, or for use after dark.

This inequity is exacerbated by the greater distance between homes and destinations in rural areas. Tavistock has a large secondary school, community hospital with minor injuries unit, indoor swimming pool, supermarkets and an attractive high street with one remaining bank. The nearest similar facilities are 12-16 miles away in Plymouth, Launceston or Okehampton, and much further in other directions. Rural primary schools serve wide catchments, and the popularity of Devon as a place to retire, or own a second home in, means young families may be unable to afford to live close to them.

Forms of inequity also found in urban areas – for example difficulty storing cycles in terraced housing, vulnerable people wary of walking alone – are also present in rural areas, but may be less obvious. The very real rural poverty known to local services and charities is masked in deprivation statistics by significant disparities in wealth and income even at parish level.

In what ways are people travelling actively affected unevenly by poor provision and/or the negative consequences of motorised travel, and why?

The general disadvantage experienced by rural residents has more serious impact for those who do not have independent access to a car. These include young people, people with health conditions which prevent them driving, families only able to afford one car which is required for commuting, and some of the migrant workers employed in rural care homes and on farms. Public transport is often absent or infrequent.

As most rural households do have a car or van (88% in West Devon) both national and local policy seem to see active travel as healthy use of leisure time for locals, or an attraction for tourists, not a means of transport. This further disadvantages people without a car who cannot reach nearby places suited to leisure walking or cycling. For example, many Tavistock residents drive onto Dartmoor or into the Tamar Valley for weekend walks or even daily dog-walking. Parents drive children to a park or other safe space to learn to cycle, or to the start of a leisure trail for a family outing. There is a popular off-road cycling facility at Tamar Trails, 3 miles west of Tavistock, reached via the A390 which even confident adult cyclists avoid. Users need a vehicle to get their bikes there. The severe detriment of not having a driving license deters older drivers from admitting to failing eyesight or reaction time, making the roads more dangerous for others.

A key negative consequence of motorised travel for rural cyclists and pedestrians is the danger on rural roads, which account for two thirds of the traffic casualties in Devon. Across the Devon & Cornwall police area 15 people a week are killed or seriously injured. The default speed limit of 60mph applies on most rural roads, regardless of their width, twistiness or number of side turnings. For example, Gulworthy has scattered homes, but a school, parish hall and church close together. The roads, including the one with these important community places on, are de-restricted and have no pavements. A local resident commented that “Cars travel at considerable speed. Whilst I would have cycled to school many years ago as a matter of course, no-one in their right mind wants to let a child on a bike on these roads; and it's a real concern locally about how to even get children out of parked cars and across the road safely.”

Tourists from cities reach West Devon via motorways and a dual carriageway then face the hazards of narrow lanes, perhaps for the first time and with inadequate navigation aids. Local drivers can also be aggressive and irresponsible. It is no wonder that safety on the roads was identified as a key barrier in Cycling UK’s recently published Rural Mobility Reports, based on surveys in West Devon and South Hams https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/rural-mobility-reports. We recognise their findings as relevant to our part of the area.

A further impact of the focus on cars is patchy provision for cycle parking in rural areas, with secure facilities very rare. This is a particular concern for owners of e-bikes, due to their value.

Which initiatives (in the UK and abroad) aimed specifically at widening participation in active travel are having the greatest positive impacts? How are they achieving this?

Pedestrianisation of Tavistock’s Pannier Market area as part of a 21st century heritage project made the town centre more visually attractive, and has encouraged people to shop on foot, stopping to

chat without obstructing others, and to patronise cafes. The contrast with nearby streets where cars still dominate is marked. While we would like to see better cycle parking, the paved areas clearly encourage cyclists touring on NCN27 to stop off and picnic.

The construction of NCN27 (coast to coast route north from Plymouth) has not only attracted tourists but increased active travel by local residents. The provision of traffic-free bridges, both within Tavistock and the dramatic Gem Bridge near Horrabridge, is particularly helpful in a landscape shaped by rivers. Stretches of the route are well used for leisure walking and cycling, learning to ride, and short functional trips, particularly in Tavistock where it passes through the main park and links 2 schools, a clinic and supermarkets. This visibility, and the presence of cycle tourists, helps normalise active travel. The focus of the route design was, however, tourism and leisure, which limits its usefulness for functional journeys.

Voluntary organisations including the u3a and the Ramblers organise group walks for leisure, including car share to the start and graded difficulty, which encourages participation. Some parish councils publish walking guides. Transition Tavistock, with grant funding, produced the Walkable Tavistock Map which highlights pedestrian cut-throughs, indicating which have steps, and is the only printed street map of the whole town. This is recognised by the local Health and Wellbeing Alliance as a valuable free resource.

An active cycling club based in Tavistock arranges regular group rides, encouraging participation by women and less experienced riders. There is a related training group for young people. Cycle proficiency training from Plymotion has been offered to primary schools. Active Devon, a non-profit organisation funded by the County Council, offers free bookable 1-1 or small group adult training and confidence sessions, and is now seeking to expand these in more rural locations including Tavistock.

Which initiatives working to address transport exclusion (but not specifically active travel) have most to teach the active-travel community? How is their work effective?

Our engagement with bus users (and non-users) shows that clear, reliable information in a variety of forms is important. Not all mobile phone owners want to, or can, use them as the sole means of travel planning. Improvement of both printed and electronic displays at Tavistock Bus Station has been welcomed by passengers and encourages others to look at the options available to them.

Which more general transport policies/schemes most reduce exclusion from active travel? How does this come about?

Rural buses assist active travel, both by linking walkable routes, and by making it easier for people to stop driving when their ability to do so safely declines, thus reducing risk to other road users.

Quality of surface on roads, cycle paths and pavements matters, as does cutting back overhanging vegetation. This reduces the risk of falls which destroy confidence. Devon CC has a useful “report a problem” section on its website which enables reporting using a clickable map and photo upload. However, with overstretched budget and a vast road network, potholes and collapsed edges persist on minor rural roads, and pushchair height nettles remain a hazard on paths.

Regrettably, there is no equivalent means for people to suggest minor improvements – for example pointing out where widening the footway at a junction could make crossing safer.

What actions would be most effective in addressing social injustice in active travel? (financial incentives, regulation, infrastructure, institutional arrangements, funding for agencies, etc.)

Make it easier for communities to request and local authorities introduce lower speed limits. The national campaign group 20s Plenty evidences the benefits and barriers for 20mph, but many parishes in Devon are struggling to get even 30mph. There is no programme for challenging the default 60mph even for single track lanes with passing places.

Ensure transport funding allocation designates a minimum threshold for construction and maintenance of active travel infrastructure for all highways authorities, moving away from short notice competitive bids for government funds. This would enable planned development of traffic free paths in rural areas – for example a direct route from Yelverton to Roborough to serve the demand from cyclists working in north Plymouth.

Change planning rules so that cumulative rather than marginal increase in traffic levels is a valid challenge to piecemeal development on narrow roads on the outskirts of settlements. This arises, for example, along Brook Lane in Tavistock, a lane with no footway which is a popular walking and cycling link.

Ensure planning officers, councillors and police have up to date training on good practice in enabling active travel from and within new developments, relevant to rural settings. This is important as rural developments are often below the size threshold for Active Travel England scrutiny.

When government does give one-off funding for enabling active travel, set flexible criteria so that rural councils can fit projects to the local context. For example, there is currently no cycle hire outlet within 10 miles of Tavistock, so potential for targeted grants to enable suitable businesses to expand into this. Improved signage of walking and cycling links is needed, but has no budget.