



## **Growth and Regeneration Scrutiny Commission**

**Scrutiny Review of the Emergency Active Travel Fund; focussing on strategy and delivery and using the select committee model to gather views of members and external stakeholders.**

Scrutiny Commission Members: Cllr Paula O'Rourke (Chair), Cllr Fabian Breckels (Vice Chair), Cllr Tom Brook, Cllr Mark Bradshaw, Cllr Tim Rippington, Cllr Carole Johnson, Cllr Mark Weston, Cllr Kevin Quartley, Cllr Martin Fodor and Cllr Mark Wright.

Earlier this year Central Government released Emergency Active Travel Funding (EATF) to local authorities to help mitigate the loss of capacity on public transport due to social distancing. The aim was to provide safe walking and cycling routes in a short space of time to enable people to move around more easily.

The Scrutiny Review focused on the overarching strategy applied by Bristol City Council's Strategic Transport Team and the approach taken to deliver the individual projects. The Commission held 3 sessions as follows:

- Session 1. Transport officers briefed the Commission on the Emergency Active Travel Funding (EATF) and focussed mainly on how Tranche 1 of the Funding had been managed.
- Session 2. This was an information gathering session between Scrutiny Commission members, external stakeholders and transport officers.
- Session 3. Member only session to evaluate the information previously provided by officers and feedback from the session with external stakeholders.

### **What Scrutiny Learnt**

The Government funding is being released in two separate tranches.

**Limitations of the fund:** funds in Tranche 1 had to be spent within 4-6 weeks and mandated to be spent on 'pop-up' structures (no funding for planters, etc). Funds granted in Tranche 2 could be more permanent and had to be delivered before April 2021.

**Size of the fund:** Bristol City Council received just under £500,000 for Tranche 1. The figure for Tranche 2 has not yet been finalised but is expected by around three times as much as the first tranche of funding.

### **Strategy for the Fund**

Unlike some other Core Cities, Bristol did not see immediate pop-ups. The strategy was to accelerate some plans already in place under Temporary Traffic Regulation Orders (TTRO) such as the pedestrianisation of the Old City and the closure of Bristol Bridge to general through-traffic and to give priority to pedestrians, cycling and public transport. There were very few options for putting in more cycle lanes in arterial roads as they are not wide enough. While there was a will to make changes around schools, the decision was to focus on shopping areas as that was the immediate need for social distancing measures to be put in place.

**Pavement widening:** focussing on local centres where there were narrow pavements and shops with people queuing. It was accepted that these measures would mostly be temporary.

**Cycle lanes:** the decision was to concentrate on the City Centre as it was felt that there were good cycle paths into the City. It was hoped that these would be more permanent as they would change peoples' attitudes to travel. Also, putting in more cycle lanes in the Centre had the added advantage of improving air quality and might lessen the need for a Clean Air Zone.

**Buses:** bus lanes must be preserved and routes improved, so removing bus lanes not considered as a long-term option.

### **Delivery of Tranche 1 Funding**

**Tranche 1 funding had to be used for immediate 'pop up' measures and needed to be spent within 4-8 weeks.**

Key sites where changes have now been made:

- Closure of Bristol Bridge
- Pedestrianisation of the Old City.
- New cycle lanes at the following:
  - Lewins Mead/Haymarket, Upper Maudlin/Park Row, Counterslip and Victoria St, Mina Road/Concord Way.

Members noted that the above, list of schemes does not convey what is a huge achievement this was in such a short period of time. In highways terms, these changes would usually be measured in months and years rather than weeks!

Not all of the measures introduced were universally supported by Members. Some Members expressed concerns that some of the actions taken, in particular the closure of Baldwin Street, was in effect closing one of the primary connections between North and South Bristol for car users.

The strategy was to implement and then amend, in response to feedback from users. Officers said that some proposals, such as the point closure at Mina Road it was said were abandoned due to too much resistance from local residents and businesses.

Some Members also commented on the 'push back' against some of the emergency projects not yet delivered and cautioned that the active travel agenda was potentially at risk due to campaigning. It was suggested that the Council should improve the communication and information and perhaps have a high level champion who was willing to prioritise and promote the active travel agenda.

Officers acknowledged that due to the need for swift action, there was little time for consultation or community engagement. Although where possible, councillors, businesses and representatives from the universities and disability groups were consulted informally. However, some Members complained that they first heard of some changes by reading about it in the local press and expressed frustration that Ward Members hadn't been involved, weren't asked for input, and aren't being asked about priorities.

In response, officers said that for Tranche 2 of the funding there would be early engagement with community and business representatives and they will discuss and consult with Councillors about any potential plans.

Some Members said there still needed to be a more coherent network of continuous cycle and walking routes. Without continuous routes it was thought that many potential cycle users won't change due to safety worries on busy main roads.

Some Members also mentioned the backlog of local area (Community Infrastructure Levy) CIL funded schemes that already had funding allocated to them. The recruitment to the vacant posts was welcomed but the risk to existing road safety schemes and crossing, routes to school etc was already causing disquiet in their view. It was suggested that more could be done to keep people informed and if possible progress schemes that were already being waited for.

The demand for flexibility demonstrated a need for more agility in officers and Members were told that training to that end was being arranged. Officers said that this has been a learning experience and they agreed that there were areas for improvement.

Members said they sometimes found that there were several officers working on the same project and felt that there could be some stream-lining in this. They were told during the first session that the team structure was being reviewed as this point was already recognised and being addressed internally.

Members commented that they were reassured with the high level of reflection that the presenting officer showed and had confidence in his ability to identify and implement changes where they were needed.

### **Meeting with External Stakeholders**

#### **List of attendees:**

- West of England Centre for Independent Living (WECIL)
- Bristol Walking Alliance
- University of Bristol
- Written submissions were provided by Bristol City Centre Business Improvement District BID and Sustrans

### **External Stakeholders Response to the Strategy**

Generally, there was approval and gratitude for the work done.

Attendees were very complementary about the approach the officers took and the projects achieved. While there was an appetite for more projects to have been put in place, attendees understood the limitations of time and resources.

The strategy to focus on the Centre met with approval but some questioned why more work was not done on improving cycling corridors into the City and also, wanted more actions to limit cars

near schools. The strategy to use pedestrianisation and cycle lanes to limit emissions and, therefore, improve air quality was universally approved.

Attendees had concerns about the ugliness of the materials used but understood the need in the very short term. However, there was concern that the very ugliness would lead to more demand for removal of what was seen as only emergency measures. Indeed, some of the barriers in place for the 2 metre rule are already being removed.

It was thought that the link between air quality and the changes implemented is not understood well enough by citizens and that messaging on this needed to be improved. The changes were accepted due to the 'Covid imperative' but it was said that citizens need to be made aware that they are intended to stay as a means of improving air quality.

Attendees understand that the strategy for Tranche 2 funding will be to make more permanent changes which will be carried out under TROs with full consultation and those who attended welcome this.

Attendees also advised that policy priorities need to be reviewed and our influence on WECA acknowledged. Also, comments were made about the lessons learnt in other cities about the use of language and signage which could make changes to active travel more acceptable for example, green rather than red signs and 'no through traffic' signs replace 'road closed'.

Attendees generally felt that a unique opportunity had been well-exploited, but were concerned that momentum was a little lost due to the physical structures not appearing quickly enough.

Attendees worried about conflicts that arose from the necessity of the 'bid first, consult later' chronology insisted on by Central Government; however, it was acknowledged that lessons had been learnt on this. That these two points are oppositional and were not lost on attendees!

Representatives from the University of Bristol and disability groups felt that they had generally been communicated with well but there were some periods of hiatus when communication was difficult. This was, however, seen in context and the hard work of officers was emphasised.

Representatives from walking groups felt that they are still the 'Cinderella' group and that more focus needs to be put on making walking a pleasant experience in the City.

A representative of a local Business Improvement District (BID) commented on the frustration of the decision-making pathway and the confusion that ensued from different decisions of the Council making different decisions, specifically, that traders were encouraged to trade on the street and allowed to invest in planters to enhance the scheme, only to be later told that they would be charged for the right to trade on the street.

Members at the stakeholder meeting had questions for officers. The written answers that were received are at Appendix A.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- There could be improved information, communication and engagement between different parts of the Council; particularly between the Mayors' Office, councillors and communities when decisions are made about such things as changes to road layouts and parking restrictions.
- As 'community leaders' local Ward Members should be actively involved in future schemes. This could be undertaken via Area Committees or ward by ward.
- The Council could be more active and confident about the national, regional and local policy priorities for active travel being delivered and should consider having a high level champion willing to prioritise and promote active travel.
- Unless there is a more coherent network of continuous cycle and walking routes it will be difficult to encourage more people to engage in active travel.
- More Officer training is needed to ensure a more agile approach can be taken to delivering diverse projects in short-timescales.
- The Strategic Transport Team needs to be restructured and needs more resources to enable to operate effectively and efficiently. Members were in full support of the recruitment of 7 new officers over the winter months to ensure that there are the required resources to implement the next phase of the funding more speedily.

### **Appendices (below):**

- Appendix A - Additional questions from stakeholders and the answers provided by Transport Officers
- Appendix B - Sustrans Written Response

## Appendix A

### Additional questions from stakeholders and the answers provided by Transport Officers

1. Q: Was the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund issued to Councils by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government used?

A: Not as yet as it was a different fund with different rules, some may get used on the tranche 2 schemes

2. Q: Why did you not trail pop-up cycle lanes on corridors such as the A4018 and A37 in advance of major Bus Deal improvements, or even more ambitious plans such as bus gates on the A38 Gloucester Road and A420 Church Road and are these likely to happen in phase 2?

A: These sort of schemes were too difficult to fit on most corridors without removing bus priority measures which we decided would not be permitted. Bus gates on major corridors were not felt to be deliverable or acceptable on such key routes without a thorough engagement process

3. Q: Could we use local creative people to make 'parklets' and point closures more attractive?

A: Possibly although there will, as with any such project, be issues around liability and maintenance

4. Q: There was concern by members that there will be slippage in the already-funded pre-Covid projects as officer time is focussed on the EATF; is there a planned remedy for this? Will you inform people about slippage and new time frames for these other projects?

A: Information is being distributed on impacts on existing schemes and this will be an issue. We are recruiting to the team most affected so while there will be delays we are taking action to remedy this where possible

5. Q: If taxis will be able to use the old city centre and Bristol Bridge, will the bus gates be operating for taxis, Ubers (or equivalents) and delivery vehicles, and why have 'bus gates' been deemed appropriate if a wide range of other vehicles will also need to access areas where 'bus gates' have been proposed?

A: Only buses, taxis, motorcycles and cyclists will be able to go across Bristol Bridge, delivery vehicles will not be permitted. Bus gates are the technical term for these sorts of facilities

6. Q: Can you describe how the teams are preparing for the policy shift and the extra funding that is coming down the line – can we have assurances that 'oven ready' projects are in place to grab funding when it comes?

A: We are currently prioritising resource to deliver the proposed projects in tranche 1 and tranche 2 of the EATF. We also have plans in place for other routes through the LCWIP. Recruitment is ongoing to both the project management team and the local engineering team to increase resource available. Schemes will be worked up in advance where possible but funding is always required to work schemes up

7. Q: What are the timescales for the recruitment of the 7 new officers?

A: Recruitment is under way at present we expect people to be appointed in December/January depending on how quick the process is with COVID restrictions

8. Q: How and when will the restructuring of the teams take place and what are the anticipated benefits?

A: The restructure is ongoing and expected to be in place for the start of the next financial year. The aim is to bring the two existing teams together and improve the processes and increase the resources for delivering our capital programme, enabling greater oversight and management of the whole process. We also expect to be freeing up management time overall for to enable more resource for managing our whole programme of works.

## **Appendix B:**

### **SUSTRANS WRITTEN RESPONSE**

#### Emergency Active Travel Fund Implementation

Many thanks for the opportunity to provide a written contribution to the Scrutiny Commission's inquiry on the implementation of the Emergency Active Travel Fund schemes. I'm assuming that the Commission also reviewed the use and implantation of the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund issued to Councils by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government?

As a member of the Transport and Connectivity Board I fully support the measures implemented and am committed to working with the Mayor, Councillors and officers to further improve the physical environment to enable more people to walk and cycle for everyday journeys. We naturally celebrate the actions taken by the Council and officers so far under challenging circumstances, and applaud

#### Key principles

- The main purpose of the initial funding was to promote cycling as a replacement for journeys previously made by public transport
- The Government expected local authorities to make significant changes to their road layouts to give more space to cyclists and pedestrians
- Was intended to help local authorities address the short-term issue of re-opening their local economies by supporting temporary changes to the physical environment

#### General Comments

As a point of principle, Sustrans fully supports the measures implemented by the Council and we have publicly supported measures taken at Bristol Bridge and across the Old City to limit and remove through traffic from the city centre. This centrepiece project is a pivotal scheme that will assist the city in meeting its air quality and carbon reduction objectives. Removing through traffic

from the central area is a key demand management response – fully supported by the Department for Transport’s updated statutory guidance issued in May 2020.

We support the measures taken to widen footways in local centres across the City to enable social distancing and to give people the confidence to return to the high street on foot.

Measures focussed in the city centre are welcome and have and will continue to improve the environment for those on foot and bike. We would have liked to have seen further corridor schemes (as supported by the statutory guidance prioritising public transport and active travel modes) that provide a safer environment for people to reach the central area. This could have been an opportunity to trial pop-up cycle lanes on corridors such as the A4018 and A37 in advance of major Bus Deal improvements, or even more ambitious plans such as bus gates on the A38 Gloucester Road and A420 Church Road. However we recognise the significant time and resource constraints the Council faces in making these decisions.

#### Schools

Bristol has an established school streets programme, albeit modest in scope and scale in the early stages. We would have liked to have seen a more ambitious programme of school streets measures over the summer to enable pupils’ safe return to schools this week. Whilst the latest evidence suggests that children are not spreaders of Coronavirus, the Departments for Transport and Education have both issued guidance to Councils and schools, urging them to adopt measures to enable at least 50% of pupils to arrive at school gates by active means. Discouraging car use, and adopting the principles set out in the Travel Demand Management guidance issued should in our view been a higher priority.

#### Communication

There has been a missed opportunity to win hearts and minds with the temporary measures implemented. Measures have been implemented with little or no notice for communities and stakeholders impacted. Whilst we understand that these are emergency measures, befitting a rapid emergency response, there has been little visible communication to set out why the measures are being taken, and how they fit within a wider plan. We would have like to have seen a communications campaign setting out a clear narrative, with support from business, community and the voluntary sector to amplify the messaging. Instead of proactive communication, the Council has been forced to defend decisions and individual schemes from those impacted.

#### Next steps

We would like to see the Council begin community engagement on plans to make temporary schemes permanent with the use of experimental orders as appropriate. This should be backed up by a city- wide communications campaign supporting the adoption of active travel for every day journeys.

The temporary water-filled barriers in high streets in particular need to be replaced quickly with timber planters, seating and cycle parking to demonstrate how the space can be used. We note that some authorities have offered hospitality businesses the opportunity to rent or purchase outside seating designed to fit in a car parking bay. We would like to see Bristol’s creative industries engaged in designing these measures to entice people back to a safe and visually appealing high street.

I do hope these comments are useful, and I would of course be happy to provide further detail for further inquiry sessions in person.