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Title page

Manoeuvring rural mobility policy for active and sustainable travel

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Manoeuvring rural mobility policy for active and sustainable travel

Abstract

Promoting "slow mobilities" and low carbon transport alternatives, through supporting active and sustainable travel (AST, including walking, cycling, wheeling, and public transport), is a priority for both public health and net zero strategies. Using a situational analysis drawing on local and national documents and stakeholder interviews, we explore the policy ecology of local authority ambitions and practices for creating and implementing AST policy for rural communities. These are shaped by national agendas and messaging, as well as local concerns. Our analysis identified the ways in which stakeholders manoeuvre the friction points that inform, constrain, and shape the production and implementation of AST policy in the South West (SW) and North East (NE) of England. The marginality of rural concerns is reflected in a scarcity of funding, sitting alongside volatility in local and national decision making. Local contestation arises from these conditions, as turbulence in national government messaging shapes (and is shaped by) public and private responses to AST schemes. These friction points were found to operate on, and intersect at, different scales, requiring formal strategic and opportunistic tactical manoeuvres by those creating and implementing local policies, who are both bound by these forces, and work to challenge, resist and facilitate them whilst managing contestation from communities and stakeholders. This study on AST policymaking contributes to broader literature across various disciplines on "slow mobilities" by offering a policy-oriented perspective. Our findings highlight that creating and implementing policy for rural mobility is a dynamic and demanding process, relying on the commitment and agility of local stakeholders.

Keywords: Active and Sustainable Travel, Policy Analysis, Local Government, Friction Points, Tactics and Strategies, Situational Analysis, England

Introduction

In recent years, public health efforts have aimed to increase physical activity to prevent physical and cognitive decline, along with chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cancer (Public Health England, 2020). There is increasing interest in "upstream" population-based approaches to promote physical activity, such as modifying built environments to support walking and cycling (Smith et al., 2017). More recently, the climate emergency has been identified as an important public health challenge (Harmer et al., 2020), with clear nexuses identified between strategies for health and climate change mitigation. A key area of potential co-benefits is active travel, and in the United Kingdom (UK), there are national and local net zero policy ambitions for population modal shifts in mobility practices through transport planning (HM Government, 2021).

Promoting active and sustainable travel (AST) is acknowledged by both national and local government to be a major challenge, particularly for rural communities. Rural settings are less well researched (Bosworth et al., 2020), but policy actors face distinct challenges in promoting sustainable travel. In addition to nationwide barriers such as insufficient resourcing for active modes and poor integration with transport planning investments (Aldred et al., 2019), policy makers in rural areas across the UK are promoting sustainable travel in a context where dispersed settlements and topography combined with limited public transport may increase dependence on private motorised transport (Christie et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2006). We understand AST as an umbrella term for the everyday journeys that are partially or fully people-powered, such as walking, cycling, wheeling, and using public transport, and with a particular focus on the first two modes. Through a situational analysis, involving document analysis and stakeholder interviews, this paper explores how local authority ambitions and practices to create and implement AST policy in rural counties are shaped by national agendas and local concerns. The paper draws on findings from a study based in two rural and coastal counties in the South West (SW) and North East (NE). The study set out to ask: how have local government ambitions, opportunities, and challenges to create equitable, sustainable, and healthy transport systems in rural communities been shaped by national and local contexts? What opportunities or challenges are impacting on the realisation of these ambitions?

Policy ecologies

Active travel is, as we have seen, is not just a transport issue (Hobbs & Frost, 2024) and is shaped by policymaking at different levels, and by differing policy actors. Our focus is on how local policy actors might be influenced by both national and local contexts in their work: acting amid multiple priorities; creating, implementing, or remaking policies. We understand policy to be the plans, ambitions, and

rules, produced by organisations and individuals, that shape the actions of organisations and individuals. They are usually written into documents, created by national and local government, and other institutions. They might be regulatory or advisory. With resonance in the policy mobilities literature, we recognise how policies, their animating ideas, and instructions, may move, and/or be re/de/contextualised or re/dis/assembled:

> "Policy mobilities emphasises the dynamic movement (or flows) of policy and, at the same time, the contextual embeddedness of its uptake, contestation and enactment (frictions) by people and places" (Lewis, 2021, p. 329).

We set out to locate the "friction points" within the mobilities of AST policy. Here, we think with friction points as the "awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing, 2005, p. 4). They are required to keep (global) power in motion, whilst simultaneously limiting it – as a "sticky" force that inflects "historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing" (ibid, p.6). Here, we take this as an insight for being attentive to policy dynamism and motion, but also its inertia or non-use. While we have analysed policy documents, we have been careful not to "mistake policy artifacts for the fullness of policy at large" (Lea, 2024, p. 3). Lea uses the concept "policy ecology" to acknowledge how policies are immanent in institutions, infrastructure, and relations; dispersed, and combined with others, newer or older. Hence, our focus is on the multiple influences on policy action aiming to support rural active and sustainable travel, through the lens of those invested in local actions to promote AST, with roles in local government and community organisations.

The paper is interested in the ways in which local authority officers and community partners make policy on the ground: both the frictions they must navigate, but also the ways in which they negotiate those frictions. They might not be quite "street level bureaucrats" in Lipsky's (1980) sense of frontline workers such as bus drivers or police offers who *de facto* create policy through interpretation and application in their service delivery, but they have a similar role in "making" and implementing policy through their agency and discretion. These civil servants in local government and their community partners sit between levels and hierarchies of policymaking and they need to translate national policy into local plans, and then to implement these in consultation with and support from publics and elected councillors. They do this within organisational constraints, wherein officers promote central policies, apply for competitive funding, or advocate within their organisations to work on some issues not others.

Previous research has thus begun to critically probe the frictions within local and national policy processes relating to active travel. Thus, recent empirical research has sought to understand how local governments prioritise and negotiate different approaches to active travel polices. Yet, most of this work is concentrated on urban policy processes, with well documented gaps in research concerning rural policy implementation and creation (Meyer et al., 2016; White et al., 2020).

In the UK, work has focussed on urban policy and political processes, where local government civil servants work within a wider context of the neoliberal "hollow state" (Aldred, 2012). Through austerity measures and scarcity economics has shifted decision-making from central to local government (Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017). Responsibility for AT has been devolved to local authority transport departments, without recognition of AT as a core service (White et al., 2020), which means that the work of implementing AT policy relies on local authorities and businesses (Bloyce & White, 2018). Bloyce and White's (2018) analysis of official policy documents demonstrates that central government has relied on advising local government, requiring local authorities to enact rhetorical policies that enrol individuals into healthism and behaviour change with limited legislative or financial support for new infrastructure.

However, international perspectives have demonstrated the challenges in *rural* mobility policy creation and implementation. A policy document analysis from urban and rural areas in Victoria, Australia, explores the ways in which local governments balance 'hard' infrastructure developments versus 'softer' behaviour change measures (Hunter et al, 2025). Hunter et al.'s (2025) work acknowledges that both physical and social environments need to be created especially against the backdrop of low active travel use. Elsewhere, Flipo et al. (2023) consider the obstacles in the achievement of spatial justice goals for the mobility transition in rural France. Their work identifies challenges for the financial viability of schemes due to low population density in rural areas, causing a lack of infrastructure for public transit and AT in rural areas. Urban-focussed mobility policies were found to be replicated in their rural counterparts, without consideration of density and level of use, which compounds territorial inequality and lack of access. The reliance on individual change creates "the diffusion of responsibility, making it harder for citizens to participate in the decision-making process" (ibid, p.6).

The other dimension of the research was to understand policy labour of stakeholders: the ways in which they negotiate these challenges or frictions. Rubin (2021), writing on local government resistance in Johannesburg, describes the (ad hoc) "tactics" and (formal) "strategies" (from de Certeau, 1980) that street-level bureaucrats use to handle and resist top-down policy initiatives, alongside supporting or constraining community action. Strategies are measures planned and

implemented by organisational power structures, such as the state or local government, that reinforce existing control and power structures, whilst tactics are the "art of the weak", within "the space of the other", as "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (de Certeau, 1980, p. 37). Put another way, tactics are framed as opportunistic, not pre-planned, and are contingently enacted (Sara et al., 2021).

Sara et al.'s (2021) research on urban placemaking explores the dynamic interplay between tactics and strategies by people who can work fluidly between these two parties. The concept of "manoeuvres" reconciles this divide. Manoeuvres are the ways that tactics are undertaken strategically, and strategies are being employed tactically to exploit and negotiate formal processes to unlock those formal systems central to the realisation of the project (ibid, p.503). These manoeuvres contest a homogenous view of the state, given the enacted agency of local officials, which "may not and do not approve of or embed the status quo and actively find ways to protest and rebel", showcasing the "whims, quirks, prejudices and faults" within "the state" (Rubin, 2021, p. 77).

Active travel policy in the UK: national and rural policy contexts

England has almost ten million rural residents (DEFRA, 2024), and whilst "the rural" occupies a prominent place in English cultural imaginaries, many of the challenges faced by these residents are underrepresented and under-addressed in policy (Shortall & Alston, 2016). In coastal areas specifically, deprivation and ill health have been masked in data, diluted in the focus on outcomes for affluent in-land locales (Whitty, 2021). Transport ranks amongst the most prominent of the difficulties facing rural communities (ACRE, 2023), alongside (and both influencing and influenced by), ill health and social isolation (Shergold et al., 2012). Efforts to better employ and design policy for these communities and environments (e.g., in commitments to "rural proofing") have been frustrated by concurrent periods of austerity (Vera-Toscano et al., 2024).

The wide-ranging benefits of active travel are frequently espoused in policy and AST-promoting action, which often demonstrates strong returns on investment (Davis, 2014). There have previously been periods in which discourses of sustainable (and "integrated") travel has come into focus politically, although Richardson (2001) argues these have struggled to become embedded in practice. Indeed, many have noted apparent implementation gaps. The UK National Audit Office (2023) raised concerns around the implementation of AST policies, identifying 75% of objectives outlined in the government's *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy* (DfT, 2017) unlikely to be achieved. Changing ministerial priorities (Committee of Public Accounts, 2023) and funding for active travel (AT) have jeopardised progress on the full range of actions outlined in *Gear Change: a bold vision for walking*

and cycling (DfT, 2020a); a document released by the Johnson government in July 2020 that set out a top-down approach to cycling and walking strategy (Dudley et al., 2022). In March 2023, the UK's Department for Transport (DfT) announced a £233m reduction in AT funding until April 2025 (National Audit Office, 2023). Then, in October 2023, the UK Government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak released their *Plan for Drivers* policy document that aimed to protect drivers who "feel under attack" (DfT, 2023, p. 4).

July 2024 saw another set of changes in the national landscape, as the UK Government introduced a Labour administration. This change prompted promises of new and imminent policies: *"we talked about active travel in the manifesto, but it's going to be utterly essential to developing our national integrated transport strategy. And it's going to be the first time this country has ever had one. And active travel is going to be at the heart of that."* (Interview with Louise Haigh MP, then Secretary of State for Transport, Laker et al., 2024). Yet, this was disrupted by Haigh's sudden resignation in November due to a fraud conviction (Courea, 2024).

Such policy swings illustrate how, although never absent of friction, AST is a policy area increasingly animated *both* by controversy and enthusiasm. In the UK, in particular, COVID-19 era initiatives to rapidly implement Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (Dudley et al., 2022) prompted considerable political dissent, with current controversy representing an additional imperative to explore the rural active travel policy landscape. AST-promoting initiatives have been subject to accusations of hidden motives, coercive intent, and origins with international 'elites' (Glover, 2024). Walker (2024), reporting on Department for Transport documents, suggests that such thinking has not only been a reaction to policy and action, but has also influenced it.

This somewhat unruly national policy landscape has produced a volatile and unpredictable climate of competitive funding for LAs, limiting their "ability to create long-term visions for infrastructure programmes" (White et al., 2020, p. 174). Indeed, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2023) identified that uncertainties around funding available for AST schemes was holding LAs back from delivering successful AST interventions. Bloyce and White (2018) highlight the ways in which active travel policy makers create ambitious policy "take-offs" that fail to "land" or be fully realised. Given the widespread implementation gaps, this can be particularly acute in rural settings, with design guidance and UK Government associated funding, likely to privilege urban areas (Hancock & Parkin, 2023).

The case: rural authorities in SW and NE England

This study was undertaken in two counties in the South West and North East of England, both of which have large rural and coastal populations. They are within the lowest 15% for population density (ONS, 2021), and both have protected landscapes and coastlines. The SW context is classified by the UK Government as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), whilst in the NE, the coastline is protected as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) by the Joint Nature and Conservation Committee (JNCC). Historically, these counties have a strong industrial heritage of mining (coal in the NE and tin and copper in the SW), the legacies of which have shaped the economic, social, cultural, and geographic landscape of the area. In the SW, the area has a strong nationalistic heritage and a distinctive regional identity, along with a tourist industry that now accounts for around 20% of employment. Both areas have high levels of multiple deprivation, with the NE location ranked in the top 40% most deprived authorities across England (ONS, 2021).

The NE location is a unitary authority (that is, a single authority for the council combining what are in other counties lower and upper tiers of local government) and a member of the North East Combined Authority (NECA). NECA sets out the region's transport ambitions through to 2035 across 7 local council areas. Alongside this, the unitary authority has a local plan that integrates sustainable transport policy. In the SW, the local unitary authority is responsible for transport strategy and policies, with Peninsula Transport, a shadow sub-national body, bringing together the 5 lead transport authorities in the region.

Methods

The project was reviewed and approved by XX University and Department of XX Ethics Committees. Informed by situational analysis, the research explored how local government ambitions and opportunities for, and challenges in, creating equitable, sustainable, and healthy transport systems in rural communities have been shaped by national agendas and local concerns. Situational analysis is an extension of grounded theory, mapping 'the situation' as the key unit of analysis (Clarke & Charmaz, 2019). It is a relational and ecological approach to empirically understand social life that enrols discourses and materials found in the context under study as data (Clarke, 2021, p. 225), as well as primary qualitative research methods. The project used document analysis and interviews within this approach and combined the data from across both sites in the analysis. The project worked with practice and policy partners to develop the study and engaged with them during the analysis to sense check initial findings.

This study was small in scale, which has two main implications 1) that the findings cannot be generalisable to other settings; and 2) to preserve the anonymity of our participants, we have not

referred directly to schemes or places. We instead use SW and NE for the locations in the study and refer to participants through their identification code (see Appendix B).

Document analysis

The documentary data included policy documents such as active travel white papers, local travel plans, annual reports, and regional strategies (see Appendix A for details). These documents, published since 2008, relate to active and sustainable transport, rural travel, and net zero initiatives. National documents were searched for and retrieved from the UK Government websites using 'active travel', 'cycling', 'walking', 'rural' as key words, including the Department for Transport and the Department for Health and Social Care websites. Local documents were identified from local authority (LA) websites and email exchanges with transport officers in LAs. Meta-data from 113 retrieved documents was recorded in a database. From this, a purposive sample of 7 national and 17 local documents were selected for in-depth thematic analysis, based on those that were most relevant in topic and most recent in publication (this was also guided by our local government partners on the projects and interviewees). These documents were uploaded to NVivo Collaboration Cloud support management of the analysis (see appendix A).

Interviews

Eleven semi-structured interviews were undertaken during Spring 2024, with key stakeholders in transport delivery, planning and strategy. These included local authority officers, local councillors, transport portfolio holders, and community organisation employees (see appendix B). Ten participants were based in local government (parish, town, or county councils), and one in an 'Active Partnership' (these are England-based charities, focused on increasing levels of physical activity and affiliated with the public body Sport England). Two of these participants also held roles in local transport-related community groups. Interview participants were identified and selected purposively based on their job remit and participation in active and sustainable travel campaigns or interest groups.,

Interviews lasted around 90 minutes and were undertaken online (via MS Teams) or in person using a semi-structured format. A topic guide was used and covered the following areas: The participant's background and involvement in AST; their experiences of the influence of national policy on local decision making; their experiences of local community views and concerns, knowledge exchange and the evidence sources that had influenced the policy making process; who they identified as key stakeholders; and their experiences of changes in sustainable transport over time. Interviews were carried out by XX and XX, who probed specifically on rural AST policy creation and implementation

(see Supplementary Material). The schedule was informed by the initial descriptive analysis of the documentary data, which provided the researchers with a policy background to the topic and concrete prompts for exploring the topics. Before each interview, the schedule was refined to reflect the respondent's expertise and professional knowledge.

Data analysis

The team undertook deductive analysis of the policy documents, coding for influencing factors for AST identified (e.g. investment), specific policy instruments mentioned as relevant for AST promotion (e.g. social prescribing), stakeholders identified (e.g. Active Travel England), and connections between AST and other policies (e.g. Net Zero). From this, an initial list of descriptive codes was used to inform the content of the interviews.

Interview data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2023), using a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis. Stage one involved mapping high-level topics discussed by participants (such as infrastructure, behaviour change, decision-making). In a second stage, the team met to discuss how these broad topics were evident in two transcripts in the light of literature on policy ecologies. This drew out more detailed codes relating to tactics, strategies, and manoeuvres, such as how a reported 'lack of resources' was positioned as a constraint within rural authorities. A codebook was developed that was applied to the remaining interviews. The third stage of analysis integrated data from the actors identified in the documentary analysis with the themes from coded interview transcripts. This stage focused on identifying friction points and synergies but remained open to more inductive codes. NVivo 14 was used to manage the analysis for both sets of data.

The SW and NW data was initially analysed separately. However, consistent thematic findings across both sites prompted the team to combine the data into a larger set. Whilst we accounted for differences at both sites, the similarity in geographic, economic, and social context across these areas was suited to combining the data. Extracts from interviews and documents are quoted using the participant or document reference codes (see appendices A and B).

Findings

Manoeuvring friction points within the AST policy ecology

Three friction points shaping the production and implementation of active and sustainable travel policy in two rural and coastal areas were identified: scarcity and marginality, volatility, and contestation. In negotiating these friction points, the local policy actors in this study employed

various manoeuvres (Sara et al., 2021) to deliver schemes and interventions. This crucial work traverses the boundary between formal strategies and opportunistic tactics, resisting and facilitating changes from top-down policies and governance, as well as contestation from communities and stakeholders. However, importantly, these manoeuvres are themselves bounded and constrained by the very processes of volatility, scarcity, marginality, and contestation – insufficient power and resources impacting on the ability of officers to manoeuvre strategically and tactically.

Scarcity & marginality: lacking attention and resources for rural areas

The first theme conveys the experiences of making and implementing policy in rural settings. The research highlighted a lack of national priorities that acknowledge or address the unique challenges faced by rural areas, which produces the experience of marginality. Transport officers expressed frustration over national policies, expressing that the policies provided by national government are "*predominantly for urban areas" (SW2)*.

> *"I think that there needs to be a greater emphasis on understanding the specific challenges of rural areas, what we find is a lot of the documents […] are urban focused, we really struggle with that. […] It's the rural areas that are always going to be left behind, who are going to struggle to make business cases for some of these schemes […] because it's incredibly difficult to keep paying for sustaining transport in an area that is really rural, and that we know we want to improve on." (SW4)*

Participants directed us to *Gear Change*, a national policy document that states:

> *"We will require more from all local authorities, urban or rural. But our main focus will be on medium-sized towns, larger towns and cities." (Policy Document (PD)11, p.33)*

One SW regional document framed the devolution of powers to city regions as a factor in generating urban-centric policy:

> *"By focusing on city regions, this has, to some extent, drawn focus away from other locations, the majority of which are predominantly rural areas. Focusing on cities of the South West means that the majority of the population of the South West remain unaffected by the major economic policy. In addition, the Government's Devolution Deals have, to date, almost entirely focused on major city regions" (PD21, p.15)*

Moreover, our document analysis found that rural areas were positioned as marginal in national documents, largely discussed as providing sites for leisure rather than economic activity. This leisure

activity (a core contributor to physical activity) was, furthermore, located as somewhat peripheral at best, and a distraction at worst, to achieving AST goals. For instance, the national document *Gear Change* referred to the 'bias' of attention related to the National Cycle Network for leisure routes, *"and not enough routes for commuting or everyday journeys in and around the urban areas where most people live"* (PD11, p.20). This position does little to acknowledge the need for infrastructure in rural areas to enable economic activity and transit where people also live, a point articulated by the transport officers during the interviews and noted in regional documents:

> *"Around 17% of the English population live in rural areas and in the South West that figure is higher at 33%. However, despite housing sizable populations, our rural places have been under-prioritised in our policy-making, including the planning and delivery of mobility."* (PD21, p.15)

Rural-specific issues relating to existing infrastructure and limited road space were offered as key material constraints on the delivery of AST projects, with local authorities getting their "*fingers burned so many times on big trail schemes, trying to acquire land*" (SW2). Participants discussed the lack of consideration of rural areas in cycle infrastructure design guidance (e.g. LTN/120, DfT, 2020b) and in national White Papers (e.g. *Gear Change*). This was evident in the frequent positioning of rural areas in these documents as 'lagging' or left behind in comparison to their urban counterparts, with regional bodies recognising that: "*urban mobility is starting to rapidly respond to some of these [low-carbon and integrated transport] changes and rural mobility could be left further behind if it does not equally respond*" (PD21, p.15). An example of specific areas where the misalignment of generic guidance with the specific needs of rural areas, was around bidding for discretionary funding for schemes that often relied on resource allocation based on self-assessed metrics – yet, as this local document cautions:

> *"Making the case for investment in rural areas is difficult using traditional cost benefit analysis based primarily on the economic benefits of transport and infrastructure schemes."* (PD19, p.9)

Competitive funding from Active Travel England requires local authorities to regularly bid for pots of money to improve AT infrastructure, as this local plan further explains: "*The Government believes this competitive process will ensure that the greatest possible number of schemes, with the best value for money*" (PD24, p.129). Interviewees described being at the sharp end of funding changes, reflecting on the instability in funding available for capital (infrastructure) and revenue (behaviour change): "*it is a massive thing if the government takes away that commitment*" (NE2). The use of

competitive and precarious funding schemes means that AST policies are understood at best as 'nice to have', rather than a core concern that is integrated through central funding. AT schemes thus rely on the care, commitment, and resourcefulness of officers to push policies through and secure competitive funding to ensure delivery and implementation, despite scarce resources and support.

Financial scarcity, in turn, was described as having led to reductions in staff resources within transport departments in local authorities: *"over successive restructures, we have reduced in size considerably. So now our team consists of me and five other staff."* (SW2). As well as increased workloads due to the absorption of multiple roles, this had also resulted in dissipation of expertise across several transport fields: *"whereby many years ago there used to be a bus strategy officer, and then separate project delivery team within the operational transport team, mine sort of straddles both of those positions now."* (SW4). Smaller transport departments working with ever-tightening budgets were one factor that, some noted, had contributed to an over-reliance on engaged individuals, those willing to push through AST schemes despite shoe-string budgets and depleting resources: "*it's down to individuals, whether it's an individual who's striving, or an individual who sees other priorities and doesn't see the value maybe that other people do." (NE4).*

In this challenging climate, rural transport officers described having to 'do more with less', including finding ways to respond to the challenges within national guidance. Our analysis identified that they employed various manoeuvres to manage these challenges of scarcity and marginality. Documents from the NE and SW were a key resource for a strategy of framing the marginality of rural places; a strategy requiring a place-based approach to transport, and one that positioned such places as 'in need' relative to the urban-centric focus of national strategy. This 'need' was also one that was (perhaps unlike the implication for urban areas) specific to each area:

> *"For rural mobility, this means there is no 'one size fits all' solution, and instead our thinking in this space must adopt a place-based and targeted approach for individual rural communities." (PD19, p.5)*

One manoeuvre, bridging the formal strategic and ad-hoc tactical, employed by officers was to argue for ringfenced resources. For example, to offset financial constraints and achieve the delivery of schemes and interventions, officers in the SW successfully secured a proportion of the transport budget specifically for rural areas:

> *"So, as part of the Local Transport Plan we do have a rural element to it, where we try to do some things in rural schemes, so I did that just through top slicing the funding. Typically I get*

just over £4 million a year for the Local Transport Plan funding, £300k of that I top slice for

rural pot" (SW4)

This manoeuvre bridges the everyday tactical work of officers diverting funding to rural schemes and the strategic grounding of the policy in the county's transport plan. Manoeuvres are thus a strategic use of tactical work employed by the street-level bureaucrats in this study.

Volatility: policy making at local and national scales

Scarcity, driven by competitive funding regimes and intersecting financial crises, combined with shifts in national decision-making and local political control, exacerbates the volatility of AST policy production and implementation within local authorities. In general, national decision-making and rhetoric regarding AST has been described as "frenetic", producing a situation where local authorities must deal with challenges in political leadership, and a greater reliance in their own resources. In our case study, rapid changes in national decision-making after UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's resignation in July 2022 were cited as shaping political appetite for AST policies and schemes:

> *"Under Boris's reign, that's where Gear Change came from. I'm not saying it was entirely*
> *down to him, but there was an appetite and there was a commitment. And that has totally*
> *wavered. Whilst those things still exist, there's nothing behind it. So, I'd like to see a*
> *strengthening of that, but it needs to apply to rural areas." (SW2)*

Transport teams described attempting to implement long-term plans set out in policy that could be derailed by the short-term turbulence of AST policy ecology. It required, said one, a *"long-term"* approach, which is like *"trying to steer a ship, which is slow and steady"* (SW2), unlike politics which "*is very short-term […], it's like one of those frantic charts […]. And it's so hard to navigate through that."* (SW2). An officer in the NE spoke about the lack of long-term engagement with AT schemes:

> *"I do not think it has been sustained in any meaningful way.... But then the government put*
> *lots of interventions in during COVID, didn't they? They gave money out very quickly and they*
> *created additional cycle lanes. So they took areas of roads and had them marked out for*
> *cycle lanes, but things like that were not sustained after COVID in many places. They were*
> *just taken out." (NE2)*

Turbulent funding alongside U-turns in national messaging and decision-making greatly impact the work of officers. With both a lack of robust policy production to drive forward AST scheme delivery in rural LAs:

"There's a distinct lack of national policy documents, recent ones that we can refer to. As I said, the local transport plan guidance, for example, hasn't come. Equally, they were going to release a tool for quantifiable carbon reduction, a tool and guidance around that. That hasn't come." (SW2)

Transport officers told us that they were awaiting the release of rural-focused policies from Active Travel England to supplement national standards guidance. Yet, a sudden proliferation in conspicuous policies redirected policy and political attention elsewhere. The 2023 UK government policy paper *Plan for Drivers* came "out of the blue" for transport officers. It diverted attention from the challenges of rural sustainable transport infrastructure suggesting, for example, that:

"The long journey times, challenging connectivity and high costs of delivery mean the bus has not compared favourably as a viable alternative to private car use." (PD2, p.22)

The plan was perceived at local level as a "backwards step": *"it sort of goes against what we're trying to achieve from walking, cycling and public transport and all that side of it, to then have that focus on drivers isn't necessarily the way that we would like to go."* (SW5). It had *"a negative impact on what we're trying to do"* (SW5), and left officers delivering potentially controversial AST schemes in a sticky situation:

"You know, and we get kickback from the community. If we've got a strong and clear position from government, that's helpful, isn't it? Because we can also say, "This isn't just us saying this. This is government saying this, and these are the standards, and this is why they are the standards." Obviously, when they start backtracking, that leaves us really exposed. They issued… I don't know when it was, in the last couple of years, some updated traffic management guidance around road space reallocation. And then on the day for Plan for Drivers, it was withdrawn from the website" (SW2)

This national turbulence shapes political will at the local level. In the SW, rapid changes in the transport portfolio holder over 18 months (*"I'm probably not going to be here next year, so we'd better get some stuff done now." SW6)* had caused instability in the consistency of political will and support for AST measures:

"I just mean generally, with our politicians […], it's all about votes, at the end of the day. And transport is very divisive and very contentious. And so, there aren't many vote winners in transport planning. (Laughter) Especially with the direction we're trying to go in." (SW2)

Contestation: local resistance to AST schemes

Friction points were found to operate on, and intersect at, different scales, with contestation emerging within a volatile national and local political, social, and economic climate. Turbulence in national government messaging relating to AST funding and schemes, along with the national and local media exploiting and inflaming the "war on motorists" narrative, shaped public and private responses to AST schemes. Cars were understood as socially and psychologically embedded in many parts of the UK, particularly rural areas: *"I think a big trouble in rural areas is car dependency and getting over that culture of private car use"* (SW1). This meant that local residents were often seen as resistant to AST policies. As one interviewee put it: *"people do not like seeing road space reallocated to cycling. It's hugely contentious" (SW2)*. AST in rural areas is thus perceived, within local policy ecologies, as a potentially illegitimate transport goal, and one likely to generate political opposition, with a notion that "*no one's going to use it. You're going to spend all that money putting it in, you're going to reduce road space for parking or traffic, and no one will use it*" (SW2).

AST schemes that endanger resident parking spaces go *"down like a massive lead balloon"* (SW2) with interventions being *"thrown out by residents"* despite initial support. This contestation required ongoing management work related to conflicts within communities and between publics. Real or perceived loss of resident parking spaces was a contested issue, with initial local support of road changes to accommodate a crossing or footway waning when local councils had to "*lose a lot of parking to accommodate*" these changes. One example in the SW, was eventually *"thrown out by the residents" (SW5),* who had been campaigning for a footway for a number of years.

Vocal responses from engaged publics can distract and block the strategy and delivery work by LA transport teams:

> *"There's all those things that come from left-field and can also take a huge amount of time, like a complaint somewhere that gets the ear of a local politician or an MP, and then we're having to write responses or do FOIs (Freedom of Information) or… all sorts of work around that which can distract us. Often, some of those things obviously are legitimate queries, or it gets very parochial. And as a strategy team, (Laughter) it's not really what we should be focusing on. But again, it often lands with us." (SW2)*

Alongside this, transport officers pointed to the ways that external contestations over planning and development, and internal contestations in local authorities could delay or prevent policy adoption. Officers in the NE told us that *"developers quite often do not want to create the conditions for active travel. They want to maximise their profits",* with developers expressing concern *"about some of the*

content of it a local cycling and walking plan], so they decided to delay the adoption, so it could be something like political or it could be internal" (NE2).

Our participants told us about the ways they mitigated the risks of potential future conflict through several manoeuvres. Officers spoke at length about the "balancing act" of scheme implementation to manage contestation across stakeholders and within local communities:

> *"There's a compromise between trying to deliver what we're trying to do, but actually people have got to live with it as well. Most people would like to park outside their house, and that can be a bit of an issue for us, where we try and get that balance right of saying 'no actually it's the right thing to do', and in some cases we then deliver it […]. It's those sort of decision makings where we obviously need to be quite bold. But, at the same time, we would obviously get a backlash [from residents], and ultimately, we're accountable to our locals' etcetera at the same time, so it's quite a difficult balancing act." (SW5)*

The need for a 'balancing-act' is motivated by an understanding that resistance from vocal minorities overshadows the quieter voices in favour of schemes, meaning that reactionary decision-making due to backlash, such as the scrapping of cycle lanes, does not represent most supportive citizens:

> *"People will come out of the woodwork, and you often find that it's mainly people that object to something that will be making their voice heard more. But that petition did show the latent demand for cycling. So, we get people coming up to us and saying, "Yeah, this would be great." And we ask people where they cycle and what they would like to see improved. So, we get a lot of positive support there. (SW1)*

Officers and councillors sometimes treated these opposing voices sceptically, understanding them as a vocal minority: *"I don't think there's any need to treat them too seriously, I think they show up the weakness of their arguments" (SW3).*

Furthermore, officers employed careful planning and targeted communications leading up to a public consultation or the construction of a scheme. This manoeuvre was seen to ensure consistency of messaging and the delivery of schemes. For example, the roll out of the 20mph speed limit scheme in the SW was undertaken in a phased approach, backed by monitoring data to ensure that delivery was appropriate to the targeted local area. An Officer (SW5) described how consistency of "*assessment criteria*" and having "*the same delivery client team*", alongside the regularity of "*site visits*", supported a public perception that "*we know what we're doing; this is our policy*". During the roll-out, Officers regularly collected data (such as vehicle speed and air quality) to assess the

implementation of the scheme across the county to understand "*where we're not quite getting it right*" (SW5).

Officers also worked to adapt, or shift plans to "softer" and less controversial actions, that either do not require consultation or "fly under the radar". SW2 spoke about the small infrastructure changes that her team implement to improve walkability in local areas, such as alterations to light phasing at crossings, which require little-to-no local engagement with local communities– something that is advantageous to its rapid and successful delivery:

> *"That piece hasn't really got wider engagement at the moment. I think it's one of those gifts of things. It's quite straightforward and low-cost to do, and it's a bit of a no-brainer because so many things are not like that in transport. [...] So yeah, it's not an example of a project where we are doing lots of engagement because I don't think we necessarily need to."* (SW2)

Despite careful planning and the labour of negotiating contestation, successful implementation was dependent on persistence and hope. Officers expressed frustration about their efforts to improve AT infrastructure and behaviours going unrecognised, relying on emotional resilience and labour to continue the "battle" of AST intervention. In the SW, Officers were motivated to stand *"their ground"* (SW1) to implement controversial schemes and *"stick to their guns"* (SW1). Our interviewees in the SW were cautious and less-than-optimistic about the role of national government in recognising rural concerns. They described having their "fingers burnt" when trying to deliver large infrastructure schemes. Their manoeuvring of the 20mph scheme on village roads was particularly cautious in in the face of turbulent national messaging regarding speed limits. Officers in the NE, however, were compelled towards more optimistic emotions. Their team was relatively new, due to a recent influx of ATE funding meaning that there was more hope for new schemes and the role of Active Travel England in making a "*huge commitment*". They were hopeful that the "*Government will continue to invest*" as there's "*a lot of people in jobs in that, so let's hope, let's hope*" (NE4).

Overall, these manoeuvres are partly strategic: based on the influence of top-down advice to go ahead despite the contestation that schemes generate but also based on emotional tactics: hope for change and persistence, that led officers to try and do what they perceived as the "right thing".

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the well documented gaps in research on policy processes around transport infrastructure (White et al., 2020), and policy implementation and creation in rural communities (Meyer et al., 2016). Our situational analysis set out to identify friction points in the

production and implementation of sustainable and active travel policies in two case study settings in the NE and SW of England. We found that rural concerns and challenges were at the margins of national policy solutions and widely positioned by local actors as thus neglected in national policy. The scarcity of ideas and resources for rural communities, volatility of policy attention, and local contestations in the production and implementation of policy, have been shaping the ability of local governments to plan and deliver schemes that support walking, cycling, wheeling and public transport. Here, marginality is found to be a *particular* challenge of rural counties and their communities. Our findings demonstrate the complex and multi-scalar nature of policy processes, which require and employ a range of approaches to policy creation and implementation.

In our analysis of friction points, we found that local policy actors tasked with creating and implementing local AST policies and their "manoeuvres" in resolving these issues – to get strategies written, funding granted, and schemes in place. We built on Sara et al.'s (2021) proposition of "manoeuvres", in which they reconcile the divide between de Certeau's "bottom up" community tactics and "top down" government strategies through considering the ways that actors perform both roles – something that our study also speaks to (i.e. local technical officers, who need to negotiate schemes that are embedded in national governance and policy structures not fit for purpose for local (rural) realities). The decisions of local policy actors have been conceived largely as operating within various kinds of bounded rationalities, shaped by pragmatism, path-dependence, incrementalism, and trial-and-error (Lindblom, 1959). Through a focus on the "doing of policy analysis", our research adds to understandings of these complex and messy policy processes, as embedded practices carried out by actors, working with specific geographies, relations, discourses, materials, resources, and demands. This includes how much such manoeuvring relied on their labour, creativity and commitment.

This study on AST policymaking contributes to broader literature across various disciplines on "slow mobilities" by offering a policy-oriented perspective. Our findings highlight that creating and implementing local policy for rural mobility is a dynamic process and requires agile manoeuvring in response to policy scarcity and volatility, and to contestation at different scales. Thus, policy mobility matters in two ways: through the movement of policies from the national scale to local (rural) contexts; and through the ways in which policies and politics are in flux and requiring agility at the local level to anchor them in place. In our case, policymaking to support walking, cycling, wheeling and public transport is indeed slow in pace and national ambition – at least from a local perspective looking at national guidance. Rurality and its geographic, economic, and social complexities remain largely unacknowledged and underfunded. As new governments regularly take the reins, they do

well to recognise the friction points identified and the resources required by local governments, including the personal commitment of their technical staff to facilitate the effective creation and implementation of AST policy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Document analysis

Ref	Title	Date published	Scope
PD1	Bus Back Better: National Bus Strategy for England	2021	National
PD2	Bus Service Improvement Plan for County in South West	2021	Local
PD3	Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report 2021 Health in Coastal Communities	2021	National
PD4	Climate Change Plan: creating the conditions for change through direct action and a new form of place-based leadership for SW to become net carbon neutral	2019	Local
PD5	Climate Change Strategy and Emergency Response Plan	2022	Local
PD6	Climate emergency: SW County's call to action	Not dated	Local
PD7	South West County Health and Wellbeing Strategy	2021	Local
PD8	SW County Local Plan Strategic Policies 2010 - 2030	2016	Local
PD9	Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain	2021	National
PD10	Future of Transport: Helping local authorities to unlock the benefits of technology & innovation in rural transport	2023	National
PD11	Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking	2020	National
PD12	Great British Railways: The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail	2021	National
PD13	Housing Strategy	2019	Local
PD14	Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023-28	2023	Local
PD15	Moving Together Strategy: Our Action Plan 2023-28	2024	Local
PD16	North East Active Travel Strategy	2023	Local
PD17	North East Town 1 Local Cycling and Infrastructure Plan	2022	Local
PD18	Plan for Drivers	2023	National
PD19	Policy Position Statement: Rural Mobility	2022	Local
PD20	North East Town 2 Local Cycling and Infrastructure Plan	2022	Local

PD21	South West Rural Mobility Strategy	2022	Local
PD22	Strategic Cycling and Walking Delivery Plan	2019	Local
PD23	Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy	Not dated	Local
PD24	The SW County Transport Plan: Local Transport Plan to 2030	2022	Local

Appendix B: Participant information

Ref	Job title	Organisation/department	Location
SW1	Local councillor (Green Party) and campaigner	Local government and cycling campaign group	SW
SW2	Transport Strategy and Road Safety Lead	Local authority	SW
SW3	Local councillor (Green Party) and campaigner	Local government and cycling campaign group	SW
SW4	Strategic Service Specialist (Transport Officer)	Local authority	SW
SW5	Programme Development and Delivery Lead (Transport Officer)	Local authority	SW
SW6	Portfolio Holder for Transport	Local authority	SW
NE1	Community Development Project Officer	Area Action Partnership in local authority	NE
NE2	Infrastructure and Environment Strategic Lead	Area Action Partnership in local authority	NE
NE3	Delivery Manager	Partnership organisation (local authority-led, with universities, charities, and public bodies)	NE
NE4	Senior Active Travel Officer	Local authority	NE
NE5	Policy Officer	Local authority Strategy and Delivery team	NE

Highlights

- Active and sustainable travel (AST) includes walking, wheeling, cycling, and public transport
- Promoting AST is a challenge for policy makers in rural communities
- A policy situation analysis included document analysis and interviews with policy makers
- Scarcity of ideas, political volatility and public contestation were three friction points
- Tactical and strategic manoeuvres were required locally to negotiate these frictions