



Understanding and improving journeys for walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders

Findings from seven years of research

August 2026

→ Executive summary

Walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders regularly make journeys that involve crossing, using or travelling alongside England's major roads — whether that is someone walking to local services, a wheelchair user navigating a crossing, a cyclist commuting, or a horse rider using a bridleway. These journeys take place on a network primarily designed for fast-moving traffic, where their needs can be less visible and their experiences less well understood. Bringing together evidence from their experiences helps ensure their voices are reflected in decisions about the Strategic Road Network and in the improvements that shape it.

This report brings together seven years of Transport Focus insight into the experiences of walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders whose journeys interact with the motorways and major 'A' roads in England managed by National Highways. Two major themes emerge: first, users' desire for their journeys to feel safer and, second, the importance of maintaining the active travel infrastructure in good condition.

Across 46 case study locations, the findings are consistent and clear.

- **Safety is the overriding concern.** Users want to feel protected from fast-moving traffic. The absence of safe crossings and dedicated space is the single biggest barrier to walking, wheeling, cycling and horse riding when it comes to National Highways' network.
- **Maintenance makes a real difference.** Getting the basics right, such as cutting back vegetation, removing litter, resurfacing paths and making sure lighting is working improves user experience at relatively low cost.
- **Dedicated infrastructure matters.** Segregated routes, safe and well-designed crossings, bridleways and clear signage are repeatedly requested by users. Without them, they feel unsafe and overlooked.
- **Local context is critical.** Things can go wrong where National Highways' network intersects with local authority roads and paths. Collaboration between National Highways, local councils and communities is essential to creating continuous, safe and connected routes.

These themes show that while large-scale infrastructure changes are important, National Highways can also deliver meaningful improvements by maintaining existing provision effectively and working closely with local partners.





Our programme in 2026/27

Focusing on the basics: using evidence to drive improvement

Using insight built up over seven years of research, Transport Focus is working with National Highways to focus on the basics, particularly maintenance. Our findings show that maintaining existing assets — cutting back vegetation, resurfacing paths, and keeping signage clear — can make a big difference to walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders.

A pilot with National Highways' Yorkshire and North East region will explore how things are currently done and what could be improved. We intend to jointly explore how cyclical maintenance is specified relating to assets used by walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders, including the level of detail given to contractors about what is required; how highway inspectors identify faults and prioritise actions; how infrastructure renewal needs are identified and actioned; and how long it takes for action to be taken when faults are reported by members of the public.

The aim is to identify practical changes that can improve journeys for walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders within the resources available.

Deepening our insight into active travel user experience

Building on our previous active travel research, we will use a similar primary research approach in 2026/27 to develop a deeper understanding of the active travel user experience. This year, we will also work with National Highways to analyse active travel and journey data to identify locations with high volumes of short car trips that could potentially be made by walking, wheeling or cycling if conditions were improved.

We will then engage with both current and potential active travellers, including people who currently choose to drive, to better understand the barriers they face. By combining these insights with journey data, we will identify practical, evidence-based improvements that could encourage more people to choose active travel for short journeys.

What are the most common issues mentioned by walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders?

In undertaking the analysis to develop this report, Transport Focus has reviewed the detailed findings across the 46 locations in previous research. A 'meta-analysis' was undertaken where we coded into categories, and counted, the issues identified by walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders at each location. This analysis identified that issues related to the proximity of routes to fast moving traffic and to crossing points were mentioned most often. After this, issues relating to the quality and maintenance of the road or path surface, to lighting and personal safety, and to the lack of dedicated provision or poor signage were mentioned.

Category of Issue	Highlighted in how many case-studies?	Specific issue	
Proximity to traffic / lack of segregation from traffic	34	Fast traffic	24
		No dedicated/segregated cycle/safe routes/lanes	16
		Paths close to fast-moving traffic/lack of suitable segregation	15
		High congestion/level of traffic	8
Crossing issue	33	Lack of safe/suitable crossing points	31
		Lack of/poor refuges at crossings/paths	7
		Poorly positioned crossings	4
		No traffic lights at crossing points	4
		Long wait times at crossings with traffic lights	3
		No suitable crossing for pedestrians to access public transport	1
Poor road / path surface quality / maintenance	29	Poor maintenance of routes	16
		Poor surface quality	9
		Uneven road/path surfaces	9
		Potholes/rubbish on road	8
		Litter on paths	8
		Muddy paths	7
		Hazardous debris on paths	4

Poor lighting / personal safety	23	Limited/poor lighting	21
		Dark underpasses/poor sense of personal safety	4
		Poor personal safety generally	3
		Poor lighting on alternative routes	1
Lack of dedicated provision	21	No/lack of dedicated horse-riding paths	9
		Lack of dedicated infrastructure generally	7
		Lack of/inconsistent walkways/paths	7
		Limited alternative routes	4
		Not enough overbridges	3
		Lack of active travel routes at junctions/cyclists deprioritised	2
		Inconsistent paths	1
Poor signage	21	Poor signage to/of alternative routes	9
		Signage for drivers alerting them to pedestrians/equestrians is poor	8
		Confusing/poor signage	7
		Signage unclear at night (lacks reflection)	1
		Unclear on whether horses can use bridleways due to signage.	1
Narrow pathways	20	Narrow lanes/foot paths/inconsistent widths	19
		Narrow pavements/paths	9
Poor visibility	17	Poor visibility at crossing points/junctions	15
		Poor visibility due to overgrown foliage	5
		Poor visibility due to road configuration (e.g. sharp bend)	4
Unsuitable overbridges	14	Low parapets on bridges	14
		Bridge is 'exposed'	2
Overgrown vegetation	13	Overgrown greenery/vegetation	12
		Safety hazard due to (overhanging) foliage on paths	4
Severance of routes	13	Bridleways not well connected	7
		Active travel routes not well connected in area	4
		Severance of bridleways/paths	3
		Lack of connected cycleways	3
Noise / Air pollution	12	Noise pollution	12
		Air pollution	3

Steep gradients	9	Steep alternative routes	4
		Steep gradients	3
		Steep incline on bridges	3
Anti-social behaviour	8	Unpredictable/poor driver behaviour (including parking)	4
		Bikes using paths illegally/antisocial behaviour	3
		Litter in woodland	1
Poorly maintained provision	7	Poorly maintained public infrastructure e.g. bus shelter	3
		Bridge in bad condition/poorly maintained	2
		Underpass in bad condition/poorly maintained	2
Accessibility / inclusivity	5	Lack of ramp/dropped curbed	2
		Inconsistent curb heights	1
		Scarcity of benches	1
		Lack of dropped kerb	1
Unsuitable underpasses	1	Low underpass	1
Others	11	Abrupt traffic speed changes	5
		Unclear/inconsistent road markings	3
		Ineffective cycle gate	3
		Accident blackspot	2
		Poorly promoted route/lack of awareness	1



How can the evidence improve journeys?

Transport Focus has presented the results of its research among walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders to both National Highways' central teams and those working in its regions planning and maintaining the network. These discussions have highlighted both the relevance of the findings and the challenges in making changes which impact positively on these road users.

The researches often highlights the desire for better dedicated provision to make these road users feel safer when making journeys. For National Highways, providing such infrastructure can be expensive and difficult to justify in business case terms when, despite the significant impact of the lack of provision on some road users, the number of them – notwithstanding any 'suppressed demand' – is relatively small.

The research has most often led to improvement in the maintenance of existing provision by local area teams. Things like removing litter and debris from paths; focusing on surface quality of routes used by walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders; and cutting back overgrown vegetation which narrows paths and contributes to poor visibility. These can have a significant positive impact on the journey experience and, in relative terms, are not expensive to get right.

Finally, the generally local nature of the journeys made by walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders should be considered, as should the fact that the issues identified often involve locations where roads and paths maintained by local authorities meet those maintained by National Highways. Supporting people in local communities to make active journeys in places where National Highway's roads create a barrier to them happening requires collaboration between local groups, local authorities and National Highways.

Case study: National Highways Yorkshire and the North East region (2021)

Transport Focus' research in 2021 shone a spotlight on the challenges faced by walkers, cyclists, horse riders and others at a series of sites in Yorkshire and the North East. The themes that came out are consistent: people wanted safer ways to cross busy roads, better connections between local paths, and more consistent upkeep of facilities. National Highways has since set out what has been done in response, and where work is still needed.

What has been delivered so far

At **Langsett on the A616**, a package of improvements was developed to provide a shared-use path, safer crossings and clearer signs. The scheme ran into technical difficulties, but parts of it are still moving ahead. In the meantime, a new footway was completed near Underbank Reservoir in March 2024. This was backed up by new signs and an extended speed restriction to make the crossing point safer. The project also benefitted from input by the British Horse Society, alongside support from Barnsley Council and Yorkshire Water.

On the **A64 between Leeds and York**, participants in the research noted the lack of suitable crossing points. Because this is a fast dual carriageway, at-grade crossings were ruled out on safety grounds. Bridges are the only realistic solution, but the costs are very high – one example on the A63 was costed at more than £3.5 million. A smaller study is now underway at Headley Bar, where the existing cycleway is in poor condition. Options for upgrading this are being explored, alongside the possibility of alternative routes using quieter local roads.

For the **A66 west of Scotch Corner**, the planned Northern Trans-Pennine project has the potential to include new underpasses and bridges, directly addressing the safety concerns raised in our research. Footpaths are maintained annually and inspected more regularly, but some of the equestrian mounting points are now coming to the end of their life. The regional team is looking at options for replacement.

At **Cold Heseldon on the A19**, a new footbridge is being developed with Durham County Council. This will give pedestrians and cyclists a safe crossing of the A19 at the A182 junction. The council also plans to resurface local footpaths and review signage as part of a wider package.

Finally, the **A19/A1058 Silverlink junction** benefitted from major investment during the Coast Road upgrade. Two new footbridges, wider bridleway provision and better pedestrian access were all delivered. Given the scale of work completed here, the site is not currently a priority for further investment, though feedback on equestrian facilities will be kept in mind for future schemes.



What has been learned

Several lessons stand out from this case study. First, safe infrastructure matters most, but it is also the hardest to deliver: bridges and underpasses are costly, yet they are the only options for genuinely safe crossings on fast dual carriageways. Second, smaller measures – such as speed limit changes, vegetation clearance and surface repairs – can still make a noticeable difference to how safe people feel. Third, collaboration with councils, landowners and user groups is essential, as shown by the Langsett and Cold Heseldon schemes.

Wider impact

The research has also encouraged National Highways to embed these insights more systematically. Inspectors now walk all walking, wheeling, cycling and horse riding routes twice a year in the region, covering over 13km of cycle routes, 124km of footpaths and 272 crossing points. Engagement with the British Horse Society, Ramblers and Sustrans is becoming more frequent, with quarterly meetings planned. And renewal projects are being scoped earlier to allow small active travel improvements to be built in from the start, rather than bolted on later.

Appendix A: Photos of completed scheme on the A616 Underbank



New crossing point on the A616 Underbank



New pedestrian footway that is adjacent to the A616



New footway through woodland linking Local Authority routes



Background to research

In April 2014 the then government announced that the then Highways Agency would be transformed into a government-run company (now National Highways) tasked with managing England's motorways and major A-road network (known as the Strategic Road Network or 'SRN'). As part of this change, which took place in April 2015, Transport Focus' remit was extended to include representing the interests of users of the SRN. This included motorists, freight and business owners, as well those as walk, wheel, cycle or ride a horse on, alongside, or across the network.

In 2017 Transport Focus began the process of designing research that would collect evidence from walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders concerning their experience of making journeys which interact with the SRN. Transport Focus conducted a scoping exercise that year which investigated the feasibility of undertaking research among these road users, and explored how best to do this. This [research](#) was published in January 2018 and concluded that walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders were happy to engage in research, particularly when it focussed on the local context. This began a programme of research in which walkers, wheelers, cyclists and horse riders making journeys in specific case-study locations were identified and interviewed about their experience.

Between 2018 and 2025 Transport Focus undertook seven waves of this research, focussing on 46 separate case-study locations across nine different National Highways areas or regions. A full list of these sites is included as an appendix to this document. While only some of the early waves of this research included a quantitative element to measure journey satisfaction among walkers, wheeler, cyclists and horse riders, all waves have included qualitative in-depth interviews and/or accompanied journeys to generate findings.



Appendix

List of case-study locations across all waves of research

Wave	Date of publication	NH area / region	Case-study location
0	Jan 2018	N/A	Dover (A20, A2 and the Whitfield Roundabout)
			Manchester (M60, A5103/M56 junction)
			Worthing/Shoreham (A27)
			York (A64)
			Newcastle (A1, A69, A19)
			Hastings, Didcot and Lowestoft
1	Oct 2018	East Midlands	A52 Brian Clough Way Retail Park
			A52 Derby Golf Centre to University of Nottingham Hospital
			A6 Bridal Gate Lane to Thulston
			A50 Cavendish bridge to Toyota Island roundabout
			A38 Burton Albion Football Club to Rawson Green
		North West	M60 J17 to J18
			M60 J6 to M56 Benchill
			M56 J3 to A55
			M6 J17 to M6 Bechton Road Bridge
			M61 Rivington Services to M61 J6 roundabout
2	Sep 2019	West Midlands	M54 J1 and J2
			M54 Lawn Lane
			A5/M6 Toll Churchbridge
			A5/M6 Toll Norton Canes
			A5/B54154/M6 Toll Lime Lane

2		Berkshire and Hampshire	A3 J4
			A3 Scratchface Lane (bridge)
			A3 J5 Bedhampton Roundabout
			A27 Havant Bypass
			A27/A2030 Eastern Road Roundabout
			M27 London Road, Portsbridge Roundabout
			M4 J15 Medbourne Lane bridge
			M4 J14 Shefford Woodlands
			M4 J13 Snelsmore
3	Nov 2021	Yorkshire and the North East	A616 Langsett
			A64 Leeds-York
			A66 Scotch Corner towards Brough
			A19 Durham
			A19/A1058 Newcastle to North Shields
4	Sept 2022	Kent and Sussex	A26 Beddingham 'Egret's Way'
			A27 Arundel Bypass
			A24 Tonbridge-Pembury Cycle Link
			A27 Falmer-Lewis
			M2 Junction 5
5	Mar 2023	East	A11 Thetford to Norwich
			A47 River Yare Viaduct
			A120 Braintree to Marks Tey
6	Jul 2024	South West	A38 Liskeard: Old Road Junction - Lantroom Quarry
			A38 Devon Expressway: Lee Mill Industrial Estate - Ivy Bridge
			A30 Penzance
			A30 Bodmin - Trewint
7	May 2025	North West	Ulverston to Greenodd
			Greenodd Crossing
			Haverthwaite Crossing
			Newby Bridge Roundabout to Shell garage
			Gilpin Bridge and Leven

Contact Transport Focus

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*Transport Focus is the operating name of the
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