



THE PLAN FOR DRIVERS: POLICIES OR POPULISM?

By Steve Dawe

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The UK Government issued 'The Plan for Drivers' in October 2023.¹ Since this document lacks timescales for all proposals, clarity about costings and, from time to time, accuracy, then it's a plan not unlike my shopping list – lacking long-term relevance and depth in many respects.

A second major problem is that this Plan is almost exclusively directed at car drivers. To deal with all forms of road use, including by pedestrians and cyclists, a holistic approach is needed which recognises how different stakeholders have their own agendas and preferences. This is how rational policy choices may be developed and implemented. Expansion of delivery vehicles suggests a need for more e-cargo bikes in towns and cities, and therefore better and wider cycle tracks; taxi drivers want access everywhere, which contributes to the problem of rat-running through residential areas which is often very unwelcome; enthusiasm for reducing traffic in towns and cities has risen with numbers of vehicles but the current Government has a form of immunity against recognising and responding constructively to this. There is ample evidence that adding pedestrianisation to shopping areas increases footfall and maintains shops, at least outside the UK's cost of living crisis, so favouring drivers really is not an economic choice. It is even less so when evidence suggests that pedestrians and cyclists show more inclination to shop and to spend than drivers, where cars are absent. This is all just a tiny glimpse of the tip of a very large policy iceberg suggesting a 'Plan for Drivers' aimed at courting car drivers is inherently unrealistic.

Photo credit: Nick Fewings, 2019.

<https://unsplash.com/photos/assorted-color-road-signs-srO-NYTfRz8>.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-drivers>. Issued on 2nd October 2023.

Let's step back a bit and consider the current context. Whilst the Plan does mention that there are 40 million vehicles in the UK already, it does not mention that this could rise by 22% up to 2060. The UK Department for Transport (DfT) analysed several scenarios which in fact suggest 8%, 22% or up to 54% increases by 2060.² Since the DfT and the associated agency National Highways tend to ignore or downplay induced traffic, it seems likely traffic increases could be at the higher end of the scale.³ Induced traffic refers to when additional road capacity is added with new roads of additional lanes, and how these create more and longer journeys.⁴

Members of the UK Parliament have told the DfT to concentrate resources on pothole and road repair and not new roads.⁵ The poor condition of the road network seems to have forced the 'new roads' funding to be up to about half deployed to repairs and renewals. After all, government planning for drivers by insisting on building new trunk roads has created a £16.3 bn backlog of road repairs. And resurfacing is only occurring on roads at a current average of once in 80 years.⁶

But the Government is still proceeding to build more trunk roads, ignoring MPs and both environmental and transport organisations, and plan for even more of them. Counter arguments stressing the need for a Low Traffic Future have been recently gathered by a coalition of groups with the same name.⁷

A plan for drivers which does not consider the exceptional physical limits our settlements place upon traffic expansion is of little use. The plan suggests welcoming of more traffic congestion, whereby lower average speeds and more stress for drivers is the actual plan likely to be delivered. Clearly, this will delay deliveries and economically essential journeys and could impact emergency vehicle movements too. More cars means worsening conditions for car drivers, so road traffic reduction and traffic calming measures would seem the best options for making driving easier, when driving is actually necessary.⁸ The Government is also ignoring long-term well-established trends increasing traffic calming, which is how councils of all political colours have responded to the growth of our overall traffic fleet upon settlements.

The Plan alleges Government has made significant improvements in our road network since 2010. Road repairs, potholes, noise, air pollution, traffic's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, deaths and accidents and time wasted in slow or gridlocked traffic are major features of the malfunctioning road network, which are also worsened by under-investment in bus services and active travel—and by failing to upgrade or re-open rail lines.

SUBSIDIES

The Plan side-steps the issue of subsidies from general taxation to driving. By 2009, these had reached about £26bn a year from general taxation on top of what motorists were paying, according to the Institute of Public Policy Research, and despite these subsidies in 2010 fuel duties were frozen. So, the unwritten 'plan' has supported transport as the major source of carbon emissions in the UK, ignoring commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions under the Paris Agreement. The loss in revenue of keeping these fuel duties frozen amount to about £80bn so far.⁹

² <https://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/traffic-expected-to-grow-under-all-scenarios-dft#:~:text=Road%20traffic%20in%20England%20and%20Wales%20could%20grow,most%20modest%20estimate%20being%20an%20increase%20of%208%25.>

³ Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment, 1994, Trunk Roads and the Generation of Traffic.

⁴ Academics such as Todd Litman and Rachel Aldred are amongst those who have written extensively on induced traffic. It is worth noting that whilst additional lanes, not just new roads, adds to road capacity but measures like bus lanes and cycle ways reduce road space.

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2023/07/26/shelve-major-new-roads-to-fix-potholes-instead-uk-parliaments-transport-committee-tells-dft/>.

⁶ See detailed current statistics from the industry: <https://lcrig.org.uk/2024/03/19/alarm-survey-2024-carriageway-repairs-backlog-increases-to-a-record-high-of-16-3-billion/>.

⁷ Low Traffic Future – Local action for a Low Traffic Future; local transport plans: a guide for councillors and campaigners, 2023.

⁸ This could involve a very large range of measures: reducing urban settlement car parking; making it harder to parents to park near schools, large increases annually in Active Travel (walking, cycling); more car parking exclusively for the mobility-impaired; electronic road pricing charging vehicles in ways which favour least use of most polluting and larger vehicles in most-congested areas. This approach has been used, with periodic revisions, in Singapore, since 1998. See: <https://www.mot.gov.sg/what-we-do/motoring-road-network-and-infrastructure/Electronic-Road-Pricing>. The Government of Singapore has created extensive materials online on Electronic Road Pricing.

⁹ For a comprehensive analysis on the impacts of the fuel duty freeze see: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-fuel-duty-freezes-have-increased-uk-co2-emissions-by-up-to-7/>.

These billions in subsidies to driving join subsidies to fossil fuel corporations in the UK each year of about £10-12 billion, rather than devoting such resources to speeding up a transition to sustainability in sectors such as transport and energy. Rather than planning to tackle 'rip-off fuel retailers', Government needs to recognise its failures on public health, air pollution, noise and congestion, and return to increasing fuel duties to accelerate a transition to sustainability, more Active Travel, more public transport use and fewer short-distance car journeys. Scrappage of the most polluting vehicles should be used to help this transition.

On short distance journeys by all modes, in 2021 25% of trips were under 1 mile and 72% under 5 miles. The restoration of the walking habits of the past is a good health promotion goal. These short journeys seem to suggest school run and supermarket trips might be factors worth addressing, and indeed many schools try to deter car use and supermarkets are often now delivering to homes.

But these activities are also age-related: people aged 60-69 make up the largest share of trips using car, motorcycle or other private transport at 66%.¹⁰

The Government claims a commitment to road safety and addressing accidents, but ignores the importance of 20 mph limits as a key factor in accident reduction. Evidence suggests big speed reductions on the previously fastest roads when 20 mph limits are introduced.¹¹ There is growing support for a 'Vision Zero' approach to traffic accidents, supported by Transport for London, Brake, and by local groups in Oxford like leading cycling campaign Cyclox.¹² There are also some suggestions about building upon the 'roadbelt' to counter the domination of settlements by roads, using space in settlements more effectively for a diverse range of uses.¹³

ACTIVE TRAVEL AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The Plan alleges the Government has made 'substantial investment' in public transport and Active Travel. This is open to challenge. Buses remain limited in geographical coverage and frequency of services.

The cut in fares to £2 is temporary, although extended to the end of 2024. There has been no recognition whatsoever that the comparatively low cost of an entirely fares-free bus system under public ownership is both affordable and consistent with meeting Climate goals and reducing air pollution, including from non-exhaust emissions.¹⁴

Active Travel has been cut by the Government to a derisory amount per year in England. Sustrans notes:

"Funding cuts announced in a written ministerial statement on 9th March mean that capital investment for active travel will plummet over the next two years. These cuts represent a two-thirds reduction from £308 million to £100 million over two years. Active travel funding for 2023/24 is likely to be reduced to £50 million, and the same for 2024/25. The cuts mean the Government's own target of 50% of urban journeys being walked, wheeled or cycled by 2030 will be impossible."

Public spending on cycling was running at £7 per person per year in England in 2019.¹⁶

¹⁰ National Travel Survey 2021 mode share, journey lengths and public transport use - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2021/national-travel-survey-2021-mode-share-journey-lengths-and-public-transport-use>.

¹¹ <https://www.20splenty.org/big-speed-reductions>.

¹² See details on Vision Zero at: <https://www.brake.org.uk/how-we-help/national-campaigns/the-change-we-want/vision-zero>.

¹³ https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Moving-towards-growth_080923.pdf?link_id=26&can_id=5e4bc0fed6c3dc2db42c6f59fdc3526c&source=email-tan-september-newsletter&email_referrer=email_2066144&email_subject=tan-october-newsletter. 'Roadbelt' is a new term referring to the preferences of some UK institutions to build roads on designated sites including Green Belt – around existing larger urban settlements in some locations.

¹⁴ From brake pad erosion, tyre erosion from contact with road surfaces, tyre abrasion of roads causing toxic particulates to be dispersed, and from the air movement created by vehicles dispersing pollutants.

¹⁵ <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/news/2023/may/don-t-be-fooled-by-the-government-s-good-news/#:~:text=Funding%20cuts%20announced%20in%20a%20written%20ministerial%20statement,to%20%2C%A350%20million%2C%20and%20the%20same%20for%202024%2F25>.

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cycling-england-london-bicycle-bike-transport-figures-a9029761.html#:~:text=The%20government%20current-ly%20spends%20%2C%A37%20per%20head%20per,the%20%2C%A318%20per%20head%20spent%20in%20the%20capital>.

London was an anomaly with £18 per person per year. The Scottish Government committed to raising overall active travel spending to £60 person per year from 2021.¹⁷ Wales is experiencing some 'roll back' in its figures for walking and cycling.¹⁸ Data has been compromised to some extent by Covid, pushing cycling up temporarily,¹⁹ followed by reductions in many places. To give a UK Government view from recent statistics:

“In the year ending September 2023, the latest provisional data shows that:

- cycling traffic levels have decreased by 5.0% since the previous year (September 2022). The provisional road traffic estimates have shown that motor traffic levels have increased by 2.3% over the same period - September 2022 to September 2023.
- cycling traffic levels have no change compared to the previous month (August 2023).

“Longer-term trends show that:

- cycling traffic levels have increased by 15.1% since December 2013.
- cycling traffic peaked in March 2021 during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic increasing by 62.7% from December 2013. COVID-19 restrictions were still in place during this peak and will have impacted travel patterns across England.
- cycling traffic levels have been decreasing since the peak in March 2021, falling by 29.3% between March 2021 and September 2023 but remain 2.2% above pre-pandemic levels (September 2019). In comparison, motor traffic levels have decreased by 2.7% between September 2019 and September 2023.”²⁰

There is an unstated very important issue with Active Travel. Since there are known health benefits to cycling and walking, costing these effectively would demonstrate the actual net costs of investment in Active Travel when its contribution to public health is considered.²¹ If the Government seriously supports health, productivity and employee effectiveness, it has to support Active Travel substantially for its clear benefits. The Government has actually noted various sources which support active travel modes as a contribution to health improvements.²² Despite this, Active Travel investment is not being prioritised and indeed never has been. So, the Plan's suggestion that, generally, measures are being taken that favour non-drivers are inaccurate in terms of tiny levels of active travel spending, for many years.

Support for new trunk roads has undermined road and pavement (sidewalk) repairs, active travel funding, and has encouraged the emphasis on car driving as a Climate, air pollution and health damaging activity. For comparison, the 2021 'Healthy Pavements' report for the DfT estimated that it would cost £1.7 billion to repair and maintain all the pavements (sidewalks) in England (excluding London).²³

ENFORCEMENT AND EFFICACY IN A COMPLEX TRANSPORT CONTEXT

The Plan suggests 'stopping unfair enforcement' as if breaches of the Highway Code and other traffic offences should be ignored, rather than seeking to encourage better driver behaviour; parking is to be made 'easier', which in itself does not mean anything; 'inconsiderate driving' is to be targeted but by whom in a country without far more traffic police, with increased powers, remains unclear; zero emission driving is to be helped, but there is no scrappage scheme to get the most polluting vehicles off the road, nor any regulation to help reduce numbers of SUVs which have grown substantially in recent years.²⁴



Photo Credit: Georg Eiermann, *Bicycles Before Westminster, London, Vereinigtes Königreich, 2023.* <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-group-of-people-riding-bikes-down-a-street-D9RhAHMiVQQ>

¹⁷ <https://road.cc/content/news/scotland-get-ps60-head-annual-spend-active-travel-285783> NB. Scotland has an elected Parliament with powers delegated from Westminster; Wales has a national assembly with its own powers similarly, but not identical in scope of such competences to Scotland.

¹⁸ <https://nation.cymru/news/statistics-deliver-blow-to-welsh-active-travel-policy/>.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.cyclinguk.org/statistics>.

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/cycling-index-england/cycling-index-england>.

²¹ See: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/get-active/2019/everyday-walking-and-cycling/health-benefits-of-cycling-and-walking/>.

²² See 'Physical Health' section at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/active-travel-local-authority-tool-kit/active-travel-local-authority-toolkit>.

²³ Thanks to Owen McKnight for this information.

²⁴ Possible report: <https://www.wearepossible.org/our-reports/tractor-attack>.

The UK Government plans transport, and Climate, actions best judged by efficacy at local level quite often. Visible, impacting change at local level can be replicated throughout local government with reasonable funding. It can also be overtly within the context of the Government's Climate aim of Net Zero by 2050. Constraining future bus lanes – as the Plan for Driver suggests – does not help this; giving local councils a larger role in road repairs implies a substantial growth in their funding, particularly when re-surfacing (not just pothole patching – needs to consider the greater weight of EVs on roads; councils also need staffing to permit pothole and resurfacing quality checks. To emphasise: the delivery of the Plan for Drivers would mean substantially increasing local government funding; there does not appear to be any sign this would take place.

Despite evidence in support of 20 mph limits, the Government opposes 'inappropriate blanket use' of them. But each school needs 'school street' status to protect children in particular by cutting traffic movements. Every residential area is entitled to protection from speeding and rat running, making virtually all areas suitable for 20 mph. This is before consideration of the obvious benefits of reducing accidents, deaths and other injuries.

Sadly, the Government has catered to the conspiracy theory of 15-minute cities. They wish to 'stop local authorities using so-called '15-minute cities' to police people's lives.' But this is utter nonsense as no local authority could afford the camera systems to detect vehicle movement, nor do they have staff for enforcing confinement of millions of people.

Government claims that Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs)²⁵ have not secured public support. This is actually not true, in Oxford for example, despite inflated versions of minority opinion in local and social media. A recent survey by the Coalition for Health Streets and Active Travel (CoHSAT) suggests [substantial support for LTNs](#).²⁶ A survey carried out by YouGov on behalf of CoHSAT²⁷ member group, Oxfordshire Liveable Streets, showed that 56% of respondents supported LTNs, while only 29% opposed them. As in the London LTNs,²⁸ the Oxford LTNs are strongly supported by those who live in them. And wild business claims of damage by LTNs are not plausible when Oxford is recently showing better retail performance than other areas.²⁹ Transport for London has done survey work on the impacts of London's LTNs.³⁰

Driver attitudes, collated by the Royal Automobile Club(RAC), show a diversity of concerns wider than the Government's Plan – including for example the physical condition of local roads.³¹ In Oxford, peer reviewed research indicates a very wide range of transport concerns amongst the public, including notably willingness to consider using public transport more if it was improved.³²

The Government plans to introduce 'fair fines'. But fines that do not appeal to their recipients as 'fair' may well be in the interests of society. Stopping drivers from using yellow hatched areas³³ is only one of many issues with current driver behaviour. Drivers who persistently stop on the cyclist's 'advance stop line' at many traffic lights do need to be fined, and it is quite appropriate for local councils to gather funds from fines obtained to support the very limited range of income sources they have in the present period. There is also the issue of how disincentives to bad driver behaviour are maintained, and increased if there are signs of continuing problems.

Quieter and cleaner neighbourhoods will be achieved by more LTNs and a roll out of electronic road pricing,³⁴ to encourage fewer journeys, and to replace fuel duty losses as EV growth continues.

²⁵ "LTN schemes seek to remove or substantially reduce through motor traffic from an area or neighbourhood." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/low-traffic-neighbourhood-review>.

²⁶ <https://cohsat.org.uk/majority-of-oxford-public-back-low-traffic-neighbourhoods/>.

²⁷ Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel.

²⁸ See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2023/07/13/latest-polling-shows-overwhelming-public-support-for-ltns/?sh=1f666e811551>.

²⁹ See: <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23854350-oxford-city-centre-bounce-back-footfall-bucking-trend/>.

³⁰ <https://content.tfl.gov.uk/impacts-of-ltns-in-london.pdf>

³¹ See: RAC Report of Motoring 2023: <https://www.rac.co.uk/report-on-motoring>.

³² Street Voice, a citizens jury on transport, health and climate change in Oxford – September 2022 report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee. See also article on this mode of consultation at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772569323001299>.

³³ Yellow hatched, criss-cross line markings, generally on junctions indicate an area in which traffic may not pause.

³⁴ See the current author's report on applying Electronic Road Pricing at: <https://www.catg.org.uk/reports/>.

It is very difficult to see how the prolific activity of roadside littering is going to be stopped as the Plan for Drivers suggests, as it is prevalent throughout the country. But the Government will ‘clamp down’ on it using unexplained means.

One of the few specifics in the Plan is Government claims of investing £24 bn in the Strategic Road Network. However, this gives an impression of new road building when much of the budget is being used for road repairs. But this allocation is for all surface traffic including delivery vehicles and Heavy Good Vehicles (HGVs) using the Strategic Roads, and the network is prone to severe congestion in rush hours in many locations. Reducing numbers of vehicles on some routes and at some junctions through the use of electronic road pricing is more prudent for improving conditions for those who must move by vehicle. Residential roads in many places are riddled with potholes and the scars of poor work by utilities and their contractors. Spending on any new trunk roads does not deal with this.

Bus lanes should certainly accommodate motorcycles and already are in use by cyclists. This means that bus lanes only being needed as bus lanes during periods of bus services is simply wrong. Like traffic signals keeping drivers waiting rather than pedestrians and cyclists, priority has to go to the most vulnerable road users not those who have wrapped themselves up in an SUV or the prevalent white vans so often favoured by construction workers.

Enforcement needs to ensure that the most congested, most polluted areas attract electronic road pricing at levels sufficient to deter most of those who could use other options. ‘Unfair enforcement’ sounds like dignifying griping by drivers whose behaviours may need correction.

Easier parking would follow from reducing total vehicle movements within settlements. The Government should introduce a pavement (aka sidewalk) parking ban, as already in use in London, with electronic road pricing to substitute for fuel duties as more vehicles are EVs, and use other traffic calming measures such as pedestrianisation, low-traffic neighbourhoods, more cul de sacs and reducing car parking in central areas.

The right to challenge car parking policies or charges set by local authorities is needless and should be abolished, not expanded in scope. Ordinary consultation processes should be sufficient. Parking charges have been raised by local authorities as Government cut the Revenue Support Grant to local councils, diminishing council income. Now, it appears the Government wants to penalise councils by controlling their parking charge increases – for which it is entirely to blame.

Inconsiderate driving certainly needs attention through driver training and re-training where necessary. As a cyclist, it’s difficult to avoid seeing some drivers on any journey showing signs of anger at other road users. There appears to be a small minority of drivers who are aggressive, impatient and unrealistic about rush hour-school run conditions in particular. Driver training needs to consider whether some drivers are calm enough to be on the road at all.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be reiterated that ‘The Plan for Drivers’ is not a plan, or a strategy, or an effective discussion document with uniformly realistic options. An unwritten assumption that car drivers all want the same things runs through this Plan. But car drivers may well want quiet, low traffic residential neighbourhoods where they themselves live; school streets to help protect their children; ‘Vision Zero’ for traffic accidents; reliable, timely delivery of goods from online businesses by eargo bikes; no SUV or other parking obstructions in their neighbourhood; no pavement (sidewalk) parking cutting off the pedestrian routes they use. No one is a car driver 24/7. Of course, if the intention of the Plan is to try to foster more culture wars around traffic issues, then its shallowness may be considered to be explained.

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