

Urban Vehicle Access Regulations (UVARs): Helping the transition to sustainable transportation in Europe

By Lucy Sadler, Cosimo Chiffi, Bonnie Fenton

Introduction

Many European cities restrict access to an area, road, or portion of a road to all, or to specific vehicle categories of, motor vehicle traffic. This is done to improve issues such as safety, health, the environment or mobility (such as reducing congestion or air pollution, or increasing sustainable mobility). When such restrictions are implemented in urban and metropolitan areas, they are referred in general terms to **Urban Vehicle Access Regulations** or **UVARs**.

In describing UVARs, we mostly refer to a zonal application covering an area that includes several streets, an entire neighbourhood, municipality or urban area. They can be permanent, temporary or for certain set times of the day/week/year. Most UVARs are where access to the area is regulated or restricted when certain conditions are met (for example being a specified vehicle or trip type, or after the payment of a charge/fee). The UVAR area usually has road signs at entry/exit gates explaining the rules that apply to all the roads inside the area. There are also some kinds of UVARs where the uses of the road space can be specified (such as loading and unloading or parking), in others the driving style (i.e. speed or priority for pedestrians/cyclists) is changed, to give increased priority to sustainable mobility modes (such as cycling, walking, public transport).

Over 700 UVARs are currently in place in roughly 500 cities across Europe. These are shown in Figure 1, with more details available at www.urbanaccessregulations.eu¹, where further details on these UVARs can also be found.



Figure 1: UVARs across Europe as shown on www.urbanaccessregulations.eu

1 Sadler 2022, www.urbanaccessregulations.eu



Figure 2: Road space consumed by on-street parking in Freiburg, Germany; more space is given to parked cars than to either pedestrians or travelling vehicles (photo: Lucy Sadler)

Why UVARs?

There are many valid reasons for restricting motor vehicle access to urban areas. These include:

- **Reducing Pollution.** Pollution kills over seven million people each year² – especially the elderly, those with pre-existing health conditions, or even COVID-19 – and causes lung disorders such as asthma in children. It also costs our society 6.1% of global GDP³.
- **Reducing Urban Congestion.** Urban congestion causes delivery companies to send out additional vehicles (which also sit in, and add to, the congestion) and makes journeys and deliveries less reliable. In Europe congestion costs 1% of GDP⁴.
- **Improving the urban quality of life.** Converting road space for motor vehicles into recreational or commercial space results in a much-improved quality of life for residents. In the 1970s, the central squares of many European cities were filled with parked cars. Now much of that space is used for outdoor dining and recreation. The wide consensus is that areas so converted, with outside dining or shoppers as shown later in Ravensburg or Freiburg are far preferable to the town square filled with cars⁵, and are more profitable for businesses⁶.

2 WHO 2022: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution>

3 World Bank 2022: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/pollution#1>

4 European Commission 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_559

5 Szarata et al, 2017 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352146517309158>

6 Clean Cities Campaign, 2021, <https://cleancitiescampaign.org/2021/12/09/why-fewer-polluting-cars-in-cities-are-good-news-for-local-shops-briefing>

- **Urban space is a valuable resource.** Space is limited in urban areas, particularly in cities, and due to this, the cost per square meter is usually high. At the same time, much space has been given free of cost (or for low cost) for parked and moving personal vehicles. This problem is worsening in many cities with an increase in the number and size of vehicles at the same time as an increase demand for housing in urban areas.
- **Improve fairness and equity.** People cycling, walking or using public transport travel more sustainably and consume much less urban space. Those who own no car (whether by choice or because they cannot afford one) are effectively subsidising the road space consumption and other costs caused by car drivers.
- **Because sometimes “carrots” simply aren’t enough** to achieve a city’s goals and the “stick” of an UVAR can be an effective tool to change behaviour. Even if there are good and affordable options available, many people still choose their individual motor vehicle – UVARs can help give a further ‘nudge’ in the more sustainable direction, and make driving less convenient or possible than the sustainable option. Cities cannot always afford to make public transport as cheap as each as the cost of petrol for the same trip - the cost of the vehicle is often not considered by the user – UVARs can help alter the price.

The need to reduce climate emissions to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement⁷ is an increasing driver of UVARs. While national policies can often improve the general conditions for lower emitting vehicles or fewer individual vehicles through taxes and other incentives, UVARs can help facilitate faster change in urban areas.

7 The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change adopted by 196 Parties in Paris in 2015. Its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. UNFCCC 2015 <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

There are five main types of UVARs:

1. Pedestrian zone: pedestrians (and perhaps cyclists) only
2. Limited traffic zone: only certain vehicles
3. Low / zero emission zone: access according to emissions
4. Congestion charge zone: entry upon payment
5. Spatial Interventions

These are described in more detail below.

1. Pedestrian Zone

A **pedestrian zone** or **pedestrian area** is typically a square, a road or a group of contiguous roads where no motor vehicles are allowed and the whole space is reserved for pedestrians. Bicycles are sometimes also allowed; their status may be equal to pedestrians or they may be ‘tolerated’, meaning that cyclists are allowed access, but must yield to pedestrians, who have priority.



Figure 3: Examples of pedestrian zones: Centre of Ravensburg (T), Freiburg shopping centre (B), Germany (photos: Lucy Sadler)

Sometimes – but only if signposted as such – pedestrian areas might admit a very limited number of vehicle categories such as people with reduced mobility (with proof, such as a blue badge), residents who need to reach their garage, delivery vehicles (usually in a short, off-peak time window) or public transport. Parking is never allowed and permitted vehicles must travel at walking speed. Emergency vehicles may of course access pedestrian areas at any time without the need for a permit.

The overall objectives of a pedestrian zone are to make the area more liveable and safer by prioritising walking social interaction, recreation or retail, but also to protect sensitive sites such as monuments and landscapes.

Pedestrian zones quite often cover small and fragmented portions of a city, although there are examples of long corridors connecting squares as in Varna⁸, Bulgaria (see **Figure 4**) or neighbourhoods as in Paris⁹, and fully pedestrianised city cores as in Ljubljana¹⁰, Slovenia and Pontevedra¹¹, Spain. However, more and more cities are implementing pedestrian zones over large parts of the centre to ensure they remain attractive to visitors.

Pedestrian areas usually use changes to the road layout to make it clear that cars are not allowed. These include cobblestones, physical changes to the roadway, roadblocks or street furniture to transform road space into public space. Frequently, simply the presence of monuments in squares reinforces the message that motor traffic is not allowed and improves the ambience of the area.

⁸ https://visit.varna.bg/en/peshehodna_zona.html

⁹ Paris has a system of 27 pedestrian zones active on Sundays, public holidays or during summer plus some permanent corridors along the river Seine – the scheme is called Paris respire (Paris breathes). <https://www.paris.fr/pages/paris-respire-2122>

¹⁰ <https://www.ljubljana.si/en/ljubljana-for-you/transport-in-ljubljana/transport-around-the-pedestrian-zone-of-the-old-town/>

¹¹ <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/countries-mainmenu-147/spain/pontevedra-ar>

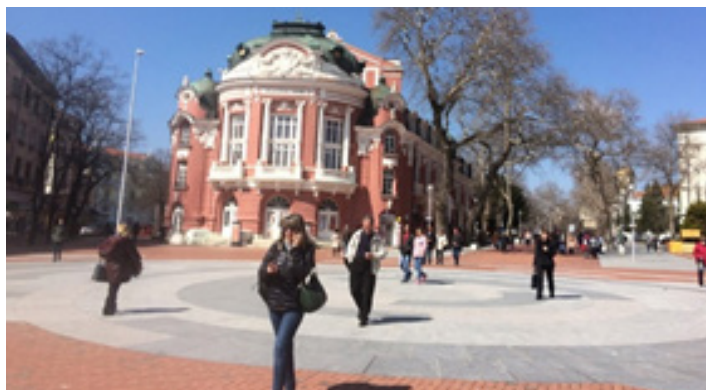


Figure 4: The city of Varna, Bulgaria has a 1.5 km pedestrian corridor linking the entrance of its Sea Garden, the church of St Nicholas, the theatre and the clock tower. Photo: TRT, <http://www.trt.it>

2. Limited Traffic Zone (LTZ)

Similar to the objectives of a pedestrian zone (liveability, road safety, cultural and natural heritage protection, climate protection) as well as to reduce congestion, limited traffic zones (LTZ) limit access to those motorised trips that are considered necessary for the functioning and daily life of the area. Residents, garage owners/tenants, caregivers, people with reduced mobility, freight carriers, maintenance and servicing companies are commonly authorised and categorised as pre-registered users. Other categories of vehicles that are clearly marked, such as public transport, taxis and emergency/police vehicles, have automatic access.

Usually covering wider areas such as historic centres, LTZs always work with permits. These authorisations must be requested and approved in advance of access. Some permits have a longer validity (e.g., for the categories indicated above) while others may allow occasional access from other user types such as hotel guests or those visiting residents. An LTZ might (in addition or exclusively) restrict access to specific vehicle categories. Quite common are restrictions for lorries and coaches or for particular vehicle characteristics, such as type, weight, size or pollution levels (noise, air quality). The EU ReVeAL project's [UVAR Guidance: Exemptions and Permits](#)¹² gives more details on this topic.

12 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/news-and-press/1541-reveal-exemptions-permits-guidance-note>

Parking is often allowed, and time windows are generally used to regulate freight transport and loading/unloading operations.

The overall principle is to reduce motor vehicle traffic either to the essential level, or a significantly reduced level, depending on the number and/or categories of permits granted. The policy objective is to prioritise walking, cycling and public transport.

LTZs are widespread in Italy. The first European Limited Traffic Zone was introduced in [Siena](#)¹³ in 1965 and there are now over 350 camera-controlled LTZs in Italy, but they also exist in other European countries (see Figure 1).

The permanent car-free area of the city centre of Ghent, Belgium is made up of four LTZs, several pedestrianised streets and a [circulation plan](#)¹⁴ for the surrounding area, where through traffic is prevented by road layout, one-way streets or roadblocks.

3. Low Emission Zone (LEZ)

A focus on pollution levels and meeting the EU health-based air quality objectives has led in recent years to the introduction of many low emission zones (LEZ), also called environmental zones in some countries (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark).

LEZs restrict access to those vehicle categories that meet set minimum air quality emissions standards, usually following the European vehicle emission standards for exhaust emissions, often called “Euro standards” (see e.g., [Dieselnet](#)¹⁵).

Different from an LTZ, the primary objective of a low emission zone is to reduce air pollution, rather than reduce vehicular traffic. Pure LEZs rarely reduce traffic levels; their immediate effect is to accelerate the renewal of the motor vehicles within the area. However, where there is a very strict standard, for example the [London Ultra LEZ](#)¹⁶ with a Euro 6 diesel standard (vehicles post 2013-15) introduced in 2019, has led to motor traffic reduction. The guiding principle is to discriminate by air pollution contribution rather than by transport mode.

13 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/countries-mainmenu-147/italy-main-menu-81/toscana-tuscany/siena-ar>

14 A circulation plan is a combines road blocks, one-way streets, cycle or public transport streets to ensure that through traffic is not possible, and so traffic travels instead on more appropriate roads, such as the ring road. It is a type of spatial intervention (discussed later).

15 <https://dieselnet.com/standards/#eu>

16 <https://tfl.gov.uk/modes/driving/ultra-low-emission-zone>



This generally leads to vehicle owners exchanging their older, polluting vehicles for newer, less polluting ones, or [retrofitting with a diesel particulate filter](#)¹⁷ to meet the emissions standard.

LEZs are usually phased in, with standards becoming increasingly strict over time. The later standards are likely to have more impact but may not be feasible earlier. Announcing all phases once the LEZ is confirmed, through extensive communication and outreach activities both inside the city and outside, allows owners and vehicle operators to be compliant once the scheme starts (e.g. second hand compliant vehicle, retrofit, new vehicle or change to public transport).

Some LEZs (e.g., [London](#)¹⁸) use a charging mechanism whereby vehicles that meet the standard can travel free of charge and those that do not are subject to a high fee (the fee being at a level similar to a penalty fine would be for entering an area where they would be banned). This can also be referred to as a pollution charge, or ‘charge-as-a-ban’ (see the next section).

When only zero emission vehicles are allowed, the LEZ becomes a **zero emission zone (ZEV)**; usually implemented to reduce climate change emissions, as well as air pollution. There are different ways to achieve a ZEV, and like LEZs they are often phased in. Implementation can be done by making an existing LEZ stricter or by adding a zero emission vehicle (ZEV) requirement to an existing limited traffic zone or pedestrian area delivery access. A good practice ZEV will also aim to reduce traffic (not “just” emissions) – by combining either with an LTZ or with changes in the road layout, pedestrianisation or bus lanes to reallocate road space to other modes and recreation to improve the area as well as have a larger impact on climate emissions.

17 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/low-emission-zones-main/how-to-comply-mainmenu-148/diesel-particulate-filter-dpf-selective-catalytic-reduction-scr>

18 <https://tfl.gov.uk/modes/driving/>

4. Congestion Charge Zone

Motor vehicle traffic might not be restricted by vehicle/user category or emission standard but by requiring payment to enter.

Again, a combination of measures is possible to achieve both pollution and congestion reduction. A pollution charge zone is an UVAR scheme where vehicles that do not meet a set emission standard must pay a significant fee whereas compliant vehicles are free (e.g., London’s LEZs, see the text in the LEZ section), in a congestion charge zone, all motor vehicles are charged. Sometimes there are differential charges for different vehicle types, for example higher charges for lorries than for cars or for more polluting vs less polluting vehicles (e.g., [Oslo](#)¹⁹).

The Milan Ecopass pollution charging scheme (2008-2011) both accelerated renewal of vehicles in the area and reduced congestion at the start but, as the standard was not tightened, it progressively lost its congestion reducing effect as more and more vehicles were allowed free access to the zone. It was therefore converted into a congestion charge zone (called “Area C”), where all vehicles entering must pay a fee as well as being at least Euro 4 emissions standard²⁰. This incorporates an LEZ character into the main congestion charging scheme. Other cities with congestion charges include [London](#)²¹, [Stockholm](#)²² and [Valetta](#)²³.

Charging schemes are also known as urban road tolls or road charging. Enforcement is usually with cameras and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR, to check whether a payment has been made) or transponders (devices using perhaps Radio-frequency identification (RFID) to enable automatic payment). As with other UVARs, there are sometimes exemptions or discounts for some vehicle categories.

19 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/countries-mainmenu-147/norway-mainmenu-197/oslo-charging-scheme>

20 Emissions standards, see e.g., Dieselnets for more information

21 <https://tfl.gov.uk/modes/driving/congestion-charge?intcmp=2053>

22 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/countries-mainmenu-147/sweden-mainmenu-248/stockholm-charging-scheme>

23 <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/countries-mainmenu-147/malta/valetta-charging-scheme>



5. Spatial Interventions

In all UVARs discussed so far, vehicle access regulations or charges are applied: access is regulated through legal regulations. However, there are also other types of schemes that can be considered UVARs and this is where motor traffic is regulated through changes in the spatial road layout to prioritise vulnerable road users and/or to reduce speed. The ReVeAL project refers to these as Spatial Interventions – and these also include pedestrian zones discussed above.

Spatial interventions may use combinations of aspects such as pedestrian areas, road closures, different road surfaces, traffic calming, public transport or cycling lanes, one-way streets, non-motor vehicle uses of parking spaces, changed road layouts, applied to a single square, road or a portion of the road to achieve a changed atmosphere to the street(s). The combination of these interventions results in an area with fewer vehicles, no vehicles, or ‘shared space’ - where motor vehicles share the road space with an equal priority to other road users such as pedestrians, cyclists or public transport, sometimes also called pedestrian priority zones.

Some typical examples include **residential areas**, **home zones** **encounter zones** and **superblocks**. For residential areas, there is a specific definition, set out in the 1968 UN Convention on Road Traffic²⁴ that regulates traffic signs internationally – although the zones are often now used outside residential areas. The definition and road sign are quoted below:

- (a) Pedestrians may make use of the road over its entire width. Games are allowed.
- (b) Drivers shall proceed at very low speed, as specified by national legislation and which in no case should exceed 20 km (12 miles) per hour.
- (c) Drivers shall not put pedestrians at risks nor behave in an obstructive manner. If necessary, they shall stop.
- (d) Pedestrian shall not impede vehicular traffic unnecessarily.

- (e) Parking is forbidden, except where allowed by parking signs.
- (f) At intersection, road users emerging from a residential area shall give way to other road users, except when otherwise provided in domestic legislation.



Figure 5: A German residential area road sign (*Spielstraße*), although these are used more widely than just in residential areas (photo: Lucy Sadler)

The shared character of the road is the most relevant element, but typically the physical configuration of the area also reinforces such coexistence. Vehicle users must adapt their driving/walking style while going in/out, moving and use such areas. Traffic calming interventions and opposing one-way streets/modal filters are used to prevent through traffic. The success of the Dutch **woonerf**²⁵ concept (*woon* = residential, *erf* = yard) is due to a combination of a strict law and road design elements. In France, Switzerland, Austria and Belgium, these are named **encounter zones** (*zone de rencontre*, *Begegnungszone*). These areas can be referred as **pedestrian priority zones**. The COVID-19 pandemic has also promoted this approach, for both temporary and permanent schemes, both in Europe and elsewhere.

24 UN 1968, article. 27 of the 1968 UN Convention on Road Traffic https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/conventn/Conv_road_traffic_EN.pdf European Appendix <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201731/volume-1731-A-17847-English.pdf>

25 <https://www.humankind.city/post/woonerf-inclusive-and-livable-dutch-street>



Figure 6: A newly implemented shared space in Bristol, UK
(Photo: Lucy Sadler)

A 30 km/h limit is usual in such zones, and similarly, but with less emphasis on road use and design, **30 km/h (20 mph) zones** can also support these aims, particularly where the legislation does not allow other UVAR types. Of course, traffic calming elements remain fundamental and should be present in addition to the prescribed speed limit signs for drivers.

Other spatial interventions combinations do not result in shared space, and are also more easily used in larger areas, and are particularly good at removing through motor vehicle traffic and increasing cycling and walking, as well as public transport use. **Superblocks** (*Superillas/Supermanzanas*) are a type of measure pioneered in Spain that use traffic filters – such as road blocks, closed streets, one-way streets, tactical pedestrian sectors – to remove traffic rather than banning it in neighbourhood areas²⁶ and give more recreational space. **Circulation plans** use similar mechanisms but on a larger scale, as used in a significant part of central Gent²⁷.

It should be noted that these types of UVARs are not always defined as UVARs and can be implemented on a smaller scale than many regulatory UVARs.

Parking schemes and UVAR

The question of whether a parking scheme is an UVAR comes up often and the answer varies depending on the definition of UVAR you choose.

26 Barcelona 2022 <https://www.barcelona.de/en/barcelona-superblocks.html>, Vox 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZORzsubQA_M, Nieuwenhuijsen 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUHSXmUoUrU>

27 <https://stad.gent/en/mobility-ghent/circulation-plan>

The regulation of parking is an essential component of restricting vehicle access; if there is no parking, there will (eventually) be much less motor traffic travelling into the area. So, in a broader sense, parking can be considered an UVAR (and is considered such in the EU [UVARBox project](#)²⁸ to digitise UVARs to support their use in navigation tools).

However, more usually in discussions of UVAR strategies or policies, parking is often included as an essential supporting measure that may be crucial for the functioning of the scheme, not considered as an UVAR in itself. This is largely because parking is a huge (and well-developed) field with its own guidance and expertise. Including it 'under' UVARs would not do it justice.

If motor vehicle access is restricted, parking spaces in the UVAR area can be re-purposed for other uses, including recreation or outdoor dining. Conversely, more parking spaces may be required at the edge of the UVAR area. Within the UVAR area, there are several ways to regulate parking. It could be 1) allowed/not allowed, 2) allowed only in signed on-street spots, 3) opened to all or reserved to some user categories (e.g., residents, people with disabilities, loading/unloading), 4) allowed in specific time windows or 5) paid/free. UVAR-related permits, exemptions and charges could also embed parking options or fees.

UVARs often regulate kerbside management, and so determining how this roadspace may be used. Options to regulate includes permits for loading/unloading of goods (or luggage), loading-only bays or lanes or passenger pick-up/drop-off activities. It often indicates time windows to limit the time available for such operations.

Equity when implementing an UVAR

When implementing an UVAR, it is important that access to *people, goods and services* is enabled, even if this may no longer be undertaken with the user's primary choice of transport mode. There may be some categories of trip or vehicle users that may find the currently available alternatives particularly difficult. There are a number of ways to look to resolve this, using what

28 UNVARBox 2022, <https://uvarbox.eu/>



ReVeAL calls ‘complimentary measures’. These might include

- Supportive mobility options. It may be that additional public transport, cycling or walking provision is needed or would help the UVAR to be a success
- Financial incentives may help especially those on low incomes perhaps scrap their older vehicle or retrofit the vehicle. Financial incentives may be grants, differential fees/fines or public transport vouchers.
- Exemptions, can be an important part of an UVAR, to minimise potential unintended consequences – especially for the more vulnerable in society or to enable it to be more politically acceptable. They need to be carefully used, as many exemptions mean the UVAR has little impact

Enforcement and Compliance

Enforcement is a key issue; a scheme that is not enforced, or has too many exemptions, becomes a scheme on paper only. Cameras with Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), manual with enforcement officers and police, or with movable or permanent physical barriers such as bollards. A high level of compliance is the goal as opposed to making money on fines or fees. The enforcement choice is dependent on many factors, which include the size of the area, type of UVAR, level of compliance that can be expected, financial cost to both implement and operate, legal options and the experience and culture of different enforcement methods.

Conclusions

Urban Vehicle Access regulations have been found in Europe to be a useful tool to make cities more attractive and sustainable, and reduce problems such as pollution, climate emissions or congestion, as outlined in this paper. While developing such schemes needs to be well considered and designed, the result can be worth it. Removing motor traffic space is often answered by predictions of chaos by some, research suggests that “traffic evaporation” is more likely to happen, in addition to the increased recreational space that is enjoyed by many – also in Asia and the USA²⁹. We have seen during the Covid-19 epidemic that many measures, that

29 Hidalgo 2021 <https://thecityfix.com/blog/traffic-evaporation-what-really-happens-when-road-space-is-reallocated-from-cars/>

we describe in this article as spatial interventions, have been rapidly implemented around the world to enable more recreational space in cities at the expense of motor lane traffic, giving a realisation of the benefits they can bring – both during the pandemic and in the longer term towards a more attractive sustainable world³⁰.

The different types of UVAR can also complement each other – the space that is freed by the traffic reduction by an LTZ or a road charging scheme can be used for spatial interventions to make the area more attractive. Schemes increasingly combine the different types of UVAR – for example an LTZ having emissions criteria to be permitted access, permits or exemptions having (differential) fees attached to them, or the level of the road toll depending on the emissions level.

UVARs can be a useful tool for an urban traffic planner, if carefully implemented. The EU ReVeAL project is producing tools to help support the implementation of UVARs, some of which are already available from <https://civitas-reveal.eu/tools>, and all will be available by the end of November 2022. An article giving more information on the ReVeAL tools that are produced will be submitted for the November edition of this magazine.

UVAR Resources

There are a number of resources on UVARs available to support transport professionals considering them. They include:

- **ReVeAL UVAR tools:** The EU project ReVeAL is developing tools to support cities implementing UVARs. These include factsheets about a wide range of UVAR building blocks, a set of guidance documents on various aspects of UVAR and a decision support tool to help cities select appropriate UVAR building blocks and understand the aspects to consider during the implementation process. Some are already available; the full toolkit will be available in November 2022: CIVITAS ReVeAL - Regulating Vehicle Access for Improved Liveability [civitas: https://civitas-reveal.eu/tools/](https://civitas-reveal.eu/tools/). The CLARS website: <https://urbanaccessregulations.eu/> gives information on European UVARs

30 Laker 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/world-cities-turn-their-streets-over-to-walkers-and-cyclists>, Combs 2021 <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S2590198221000294>



- Free CIVITAS UVAR online training program “Urban Vehicle Access Regulations (UVARs) – principles and practices”: Michelle article based on UVAR Exchange Final.docx
- The text of this article is based on text originally produced for the UVARExchange project <https://uvarbox.eu/uvar-exchange/>
- The UVARBox project, also mentioned in this article, is providing a language and tools to digitise UVAR rules for use in other digital tools, including navigation systems: <https://uvarbox.eu/>

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Author details:

Lucy Sadler, Cosimo Chiffi and **Bonnie Fenton**

are all on the consultant team for the ReVeAL project.

(<https://civitas-reveal.eu>)

Corresponding author is **Lucy Sadler**, Sadler Consultants Europe GmbH (www.airqualitypolicy.eu).

email: lucy.sadler@airqualitypolicy.eu

Cosimo Chiffi is with TRT Transport and Territory, Italy (www.trt.it) and **Bonnie Fenton** is with Rupprecht Consult, Germany (www.rupprecht-consult.eu).

31 UVARExchange 2022, <https://uvarbox.eu/uvar-exchange/>