



Behaviour Change Travel Mode Choice Interventions to Reduce Car Use in Towns and Cities:

Evidence submission and commentary

Copenhagen bicycle culture, by Jorge Lascar, <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/e505640a-422e-4703-9431-70bbd5b81967>.

By Eric Britton

Editor's note: This is an edited reprint of Eric Britton's article published in WTPP in 2011. I have taken the liberty to clarify some terms [in brackets] and to reduce the text somewhat. Read the full article in Issue 17.1, which was the transcript of his comments to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee's subcommittee, chaired by Baroness Neuberger, to "investigate the use of behaviour change interventions to achieve policy goals..... to alter travel-mode choice in order to reduce car use in towns and cities and therefore the level of carbon emissions from transport."

While the exact question you are addressing – better understanding matters of behaviour change and ways to reduce car use in cities – is a good one, I would propose that it will be useful to take a step back first to determine if that, in fact, is the best next step or issue to be considered under the circumstances. I would say that there is a broader set of issues and trade-offs behind it, which need to be sorted out first.

INTRODUCTION

The submittal that follows is quite rough due to time limitations, but here is a summary of the key points that I would hope to draw to your attention. Thank you for bearing in mind that these observations and suggestions come from someone who has been in and out of the UK for professional reasons over the years but whose work is primarily international.

I address this committee on the understanding that you are looking for information, ideas, perspective and arguments to define and defend the public interest: social, economic, environmental, without reference to party or politics of whatever stripe.



Old man with a small bicycle, photo by Photomiqs, <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/d7ea2ac5-55a2-4b5c-bea6-0a11230a01c6>.



NYC Rent a bike, Ed Yourdon, <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/98084ec8-bfec-4321-a8ec-5bdd7c25710c>.

PRELIMINARY POINTS

1. Our past international work makes it clear that the range of viable alternatives to own car travel are too few in number and far too low in quality to give citizens reasonable (i.e., competitive) options. This is true virtually all over the world and certainly true in the UK.
2. It is in this context that the whole idea of “behavior modification” comes into context. For if the game is to see how we might today or in the near future tempt people to opt for what for many users might be considered to be an inferior mobility options (example: inferior quality public transport), then there is something fundamentally disloyal about such a concept. **The first step has to be to develop competitive alternatives to car travel**, and then to use our various analytic and operational tool and measures to bring them to the attention to the public so that they can in turn make their own choices.
3. We need to bear in mind that advantages of car travel to car owners are considerable, and even more so from a psychological perspective if we bear in mind that the “next trip” one takes in one’s car is generally considered as being “free”. So whatever our alternatives are in a fair society, they must be many in number – bearing in mind that the car offers quite a broad range of potential services – and they must be seen as being competitive. Including being perceived as “free” as using your own car for that next trip.
4. Which of course is very far from being the case today. But at least once we become aware of this underlying reality, the real challenge of “behavioral change interventions” becomes far more clearly delineated.
5. Popular conceptions aside, **it is an incontrovertible fact that the majority of people in the UK are for a wide range of reasons not car owner/drivers**: they are either too young or too old to drive, too infirm, too tired, too nervous, lack the necessary physical flexibility and reflexes, not psychologically prepared for the responsibility, cannot really afford a car (though they still may have one), have dangerous driving habits (smokers, drugs, mobile phones, text messages and other dangerous distractions), or perhaps simply prefer to live without a car and the long list goes on. **This is an important political point.** We are looking at a majority of the population, and all these people vote (even if they are not effectively organised as are the car and road lobbies). These **citizens need and deserve first class alternatives to own car travel**, and the public authorities (and private players) are not yet providing enough of them.

- The UK continues to be an island when it comes to deep knowledge and direct working experience with what is going on at the leading edge in other parts of the world.
- You must be able to offer competitive (to cars) travel options if people are going to make new and better choices.
- “How can a man, riding on an ox, looking for an ox, ever find an ox?”
(You first have to get off the ox).



Near King's Cross Station - Traffic Jam on 00.24 hour from my window, UK, London, Vaidotas Stanevicius, 2009, <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/d608a2fe-1bf2-4f72-9b39-242fc85a37b7>.

6. This outside looking in view of transport, mobility and infrastructure in the UK makes it clear that you have grossly overbuilt your [automobile] infrastructure in and around cities – and are now grossly under managing it. This is, in fact, very good news. What it means is that you are not going to have to spend great gobs of taxpayer money on expensive infrastructure in the immediate future – you can instead get on with the management and creative innovation functions. The entire challenge is thus well within your means.
7. But you lack an overarching strategy. You have many groups working on various pieces of the puzzle, but as far as I can make out there is not broader unified vision or strategy. This is vital to determining what government could and should be doing next.
8. I therefore strongly recommend that you lay the base for a national dialogue on the topic of how to go from today's grossly unsatisfactory situation to a far more sustainable transport system as quickly as possible – and specifically in the period 2011-2015, starting this year. And as part of this dialogue there should be an immediate push to create and share information on numerous outstanding demonstration projects, which show the way in detail to what the broad strategic lines are trying to target and obtain.

Policy Soft Spots in the United Kingdom

I shall get to your questions shortly, but to be useful to you I must first take a few steps back and share with you what I, as an interested and not entirely uninformed observer of the UK transportation and government policy situation, have noted over several decades. I hope these remarks will serve your committee as evidence from an outsider international perspective that I have been able to develop through a long process of in place observations, consulting and advisory work exactly in the field of sustainable transport and sustainable cities over many years and around the world.

I look at the issues that define transport, sustainable and otherwise, in the UK with some knowledge and considerable sympathy, if at times a certain level of impatience as I ask myself: how is it that, with all the assets you have in hand, you are doing by and large so poorly in the broad area of sustainable transport, whether at the level of specific projects, cities or, indeed the country as a whole. Why is this? Well, as an outsider, I spot a certain number of soft spots which you really could correct once you put your minds to it. And once you have the appropriate strategic structure in place – this is really at the end of the day what is most lacking—an appropriate, articulated, explicit, responsible, consistent and continuing strategy for sustainability – many of the specific questions you bring up here will become clearer.



Rows of a new cars parked in a distribution center on a car factory on a sunny day. Parking in the open air, photo by Evgenii Emelianov, stock.adobe.com.



The so called soft spots in your policy frame include:

1. Your successive governments, of no matter what political stripe, give full expression to the idea of supporting sustainability and pattern-break innovations until they take office – at which point they become de facto bearers of the standard of old mobility, old ways, and unsustainable transport. This of course is not limited to the UK, but still that is no excuse.

2. Local government holds the key to the move to sustainable transport but is by and large today confused and nervous. The local council leaders have a hard enough row to hoe just to keep what they have going as well as they possibly can. They face real problems of resources, but above all seem to me to have a major vision failure. And if you don't have vision, you have nowhere to go.



E-Bikes and E-Scooters: Drivers of Climate Action, Institute for Transportation and Development Policy; <https://www.itdp.org/2019/09/24/e-bikes-e-scooters-drivers-of-climate-action/>

- The only viable strategic starting point is that it must be prime government policy (a) to reduce VMT steadily starting in 2011; and (b) make this the central core of all government policy and investment decisions for the period 2011-2015
- Local government holds the key to the move to sustainable transport, but is by and large today confused, disoriented and nervous. This is a critical problem that needs attention.

3. Your NGOs and various interest and action groups are often world class, however by and large are organised into quasi self-contained silos. And those who do take a broader approach are for the most part substantially underused assets. The attitude of government to these important assets strikes me as ranging from patronising to evasive to adversarial, and by and large altogether unhelpful.

4. Currently the deep cuts and lack of serious support for sustainability on the part of your latest government are putting just about everybody who is committed to and working on the sustainability and social issues in the sector on the defensive; so there is today a general climate of deep despair, which I very much hope your committee will be able to help reverse.



5. The only possible strategic starting point is to make it the prime government policy:
 - (a) to reduce [automobile] vehicle-miles of travel (VMT) steadily starting in 2011; and
 - (b) make this the central core of all government policy and investment decisions for the period 2011-2015.

Cutting back VMT has many enormous advantages—environmental, social, economic and strategic. And it can be done, but only with new thinking and strong leadership and participation from many levels of society. We have to help your government to understand this.

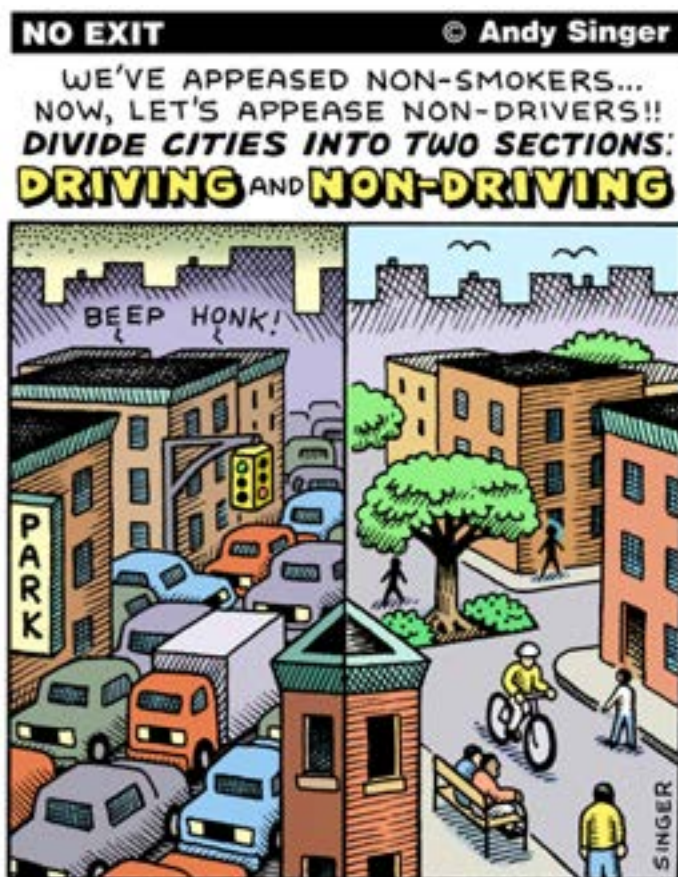
6. Once you have the strategic basics in place, the second core element of a viable sustainable transport policy has to be absolute consistency. No shilly- shallying. The same rigorous acid tests of cost-effectiveness, performance and impacts need to be applied to all public expenditures and investments. Once these principles are put into place, it is surprising how easy it becomes to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Core elements of sustainable transport policy:

- to reduce VMT
- consistent evaluation of cost and impacts of all transportation projects: the true costs including the externalities of road impacts are all too often ignored.

7. The soul of success in sustainable development is not only vision, but also continuity once you get into an action mode. There is a huge amount of start and stop in Britain, which does no one any great good. It discourages and acts to sap the courage and energy of the sector.

8. And finally the grim bottom line reality. If you spend all your money on [automobile] infrastructure you get infrastructure [more automobile use]. But if what you want is high quality and fair mobility, well you have to spend the money on people [person-trips, not auto trips]. Year after year, government after government, you are consistently spending the great part of taxpayer money for the sector to support cars and roads. But the appropriate starting place for transport policy is [moving] people, not [building] hardware. I guess the first step has to be for you to figure out who you are and who you want to be



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Bus passengers in the rain, New York, photo by Michelle DeRobertis.

Responses to three selected questions:

I thought it important that I set the stage in this broader way so that you can see from where I come on all this. But I shall now dig into three of the questions you ask.

1. What are the most influential drivers of behaviour affecting an individual's choice of mode of travel?

Let me look for now at just one specific modal choice example to see if we can find some clues: Why do people decide to join car clubs? There is plenty of experience and evidence on this. Here, as someone with rather deep knowledge of the field, is my quick read of the evidence from the perspective of the user:

- a. The alternative offers an improved mobility option in specific situations.
- b. It is considerably cheaper than owning and operating another car.
- c. It frees the driver from the charge and cost of dealing with parking

d. It opens up a number of advantages of being “car-free” – that is unencumbered by the burden (financial, time, inconvenience) of such things as vehicle maintenance, upkeep, insurance, fueling

e. There are bragging rights associated with backing away from being totally unsustainable.

f. Most if not all people who share cars in this way have at least some awareness that they are behaving responsibly in terms of environment and climate.

What can we ascertain concerning your question from this brief and admittedly incomplete off the cuff profile?

Simple: You must be able to offer a **superior travel option** if people are going to make new and better choices.

This is a challenge since the received wisdom has been that public transport (which is almost always very narrowly defined: fixed route, scheduled services, usually run on a deficit and government financed) is basically the poor man's transport that Mrs. Thatcher reminded us all about so vividly so long ago. **Waiting for a bus in the rain is not an option.**



Also: this suggests that we have a far broader and more strategic picture of what in fact are those “other modes”; as opposed to only travelling by (one’s) own car. There are a very wide range of alternative options and it is important to know and understand them in depth, before asking about choice criteria.

- You must be able to offer competitive (to cars) travel options if people are going to make new and better choices.

2. What is the role of infrastructure in encouraging and facilitating changes in travel- mode choice?



Pedi Cab, Timothy J, <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/6a2c2fa9-4464-4146-9159-7cbe5230bbf5>.

Of course, it is vital. But not perhaps as one might at first think. Here are a couple of important infrastructure truths which, once properly understood, give some useful clues for effective government policy at all levels.

- a. Our road and parking infrastructure in almost all of our cities across Europe, and certainly in the UK, have been grossly over-developed in terms of their dimensions and share of the total land area of the city. In summary: we have over-built and under-managed. When we understand this, it opens up a whole new strategy of policies and measures adapted to this situation.
- b. And we know too of course that the answers to the problems we face do not lie in more building and other forms of (road) capacity expansion. For either moving or parked cars. This hard-earned lesson is clear beyond any doubt.
- c. So, we go to work with what we have. (which turns out to be a very good thing indeed).
- d. 21st century infrastructure policies: (a) shift available street space away from inefficient users of that space (namely private cars); and (b) make it available to efficient users, namely pedestrians, cyclists, public transit, and other forms of shared transport.

e. The strategy has to be not a “war on motorists” but a deliberate and steady tightening of the noose on all inefficient users of the city’s scarce space and environment. In addition to reducing road space available for these inefficient users (a purely physical strategy), a critical component of the infrastructure-use strategy has to be the strategic reduction of parking space for private cars. This is a far more cost-effective policy than congestion charging, and lends itself to being planned and handled with political address.

f. A key tool in infrastructure management is that of slowing down all traffic in built-up areas. There is no good reason why all city traffic in the UK should not be strictly limited to a 10/20/30 mph strategy. The justifications for this are accident reduction and a range of public health and environment improvements.

g. But we will, for the couple of decades ahead, still be seeing lots of cars in and around our cities, so our strategy must take this into account and not simply plunge into a denial mode. Cars are not the enemy, they have a place in society, but their indiscriminate inappropriate use is something that we can remedy. With strategy, with technology, with people skills and with patience.

3. What are the most appropriate type and level of interventions to change travel-mode choice?

Critical intervention No. 1: Get pricing right

Once you have finally put into place a pricing system that fairly exacts the full social and environmental costs from the users of each transport mode, much of your problem simply disappears. Getting this right requires vision, courage, excellent analysis, careful interaction with all branches of the travelling public, and a well thought-out implementation and communications strategy that gets the great majority of the voting public on your side. This is possible, necessary and can be done. If you want to.

Other interventions

At the other end of the travel-mode choice chain, the most creative thing you could do in the UK in the years immediately ahead and starting now (since it is possible) is to organise and deliver, through creative partnerships, a broader palette of high quality alternative transport options. This is a long list which can start with things like access control measures (**editor: See related articles in this issue on Urban Vehicle Access Restrictions (UVARs) and Traffic-Limited Zones (ZTLs)**) strategic parking policies, innovative public transport, car clubs, ridesharing, new uses of taxis and small bus/van systems, safer and better cycling conditions in the city, ditto for walking, integrated ticketing and access systems, improved and consistent enforcement of regulations, and the long list goes on.

The target mode has to stretch way beyond traditional scheduled fixed route public transport and bus services. They (public transport) are going to be part of the solution, but only part.

A core driver for all new services is going to be information and communications technologies, so if you are going to use policy to drive innovation, here is a sector that bears far better promise than the traditional costly vehicle, motor and fuel technologies which are the proper affair of the private sector.



Photo credit: Eric Britton

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my experience and views with you. It is encouraging to know that you are giving these issues importance and looking for new thinking and new solutions to these pressing problems, challenges . . . and, yes, opportunities.

Eric Britton

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Note: An interview with the author appeared in *Mobility Magazine* on 20 January 2011.

Author details:

Eric Britton was Managing Director, EcoPlan International, The Centre for Technology & Systems Studies, 8/10 rue Joseph Bara, F-75006 Paris, FRANCE

(editor: Eric Britton died 31 October, 2021.)