

7. Transport

Congested Britain?

Public attitudes to car use

The coalition government's transport strategy aims to tackle traffic congestion and the environmental damage caused by car use by improving public transport, promoting the use of low emission vehicles and changing public behaviour in relation to short journeys. Understanding public attitudes is vital, to determine how these strategies will work in practice.

Concern about the negative impacts of car use is widespread, particularly in relation to environmental damage, but it has declined.



43% view **congestion** in towns and cities as a serious problem (down from 52% in 2001).



A clear majority are concerned about **exhaust fumes** from traffic (70%) and the effect of transport on climate change (68% – but this has fallen by 12 percentage points since 2005).

There is little public appetite for strategies to reduce car use, though a majority recognise people should do this for the sake of the environment. But there is clear capacity for changing public behaviour in relation to short car journeys.

57%

There is little support for **charging for road use**; just one in five think people who drive on busy roads (19%) or at the busiest times (18%) should pay more. But more than half (57%) agree that those who drive cars that are better for the environment should pay less to use the roads than others.



63% of people make a **journey of less than two miles** by car at least once a week. Around four in ten say they make journeys by car that could easily be completed by walking (41%), by cycling (43%) or on the bus (35%).

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Car and van travel currently accounts for 64 per cent of all trips made, and 78 per cent of all distance travelled in Britain (Department for Transport, 2011c).¹ The public's reliance on cars as their main mode of transport poses a problem for government as current levels of car use cause congestion on the roads and have a range of negative environmental impacts. This chapter examines what the public thinks about the negative impacts of car use, and explores views on various policy options to reduce these effects.

Recent governments have discussed and introduced a range of strategies to tackle congestion and the environmental impacts of car use. The 10 Year Plan, published by the Labour government in 2000, included a key aim of reducing congestion by 2010 (Labour, 2000). However, transport policy experienced a lack of continuity in leadership – by 2004 there had been eight transport ministers – and commentators viewed the aims of the 10 Year Plan as effectively abandoned (e.g. *The Independent*, 19 January 2004). The current coalition government aims to tackle the problem of the environmental impacts of driving, primarily by promoting and facilitating the adoption of low emission vehicles. In tackling congestion on the roads, the coalition government policy focuses on improving the flow of traffic on the existing road network rather than increasing road capacity (Department for Transport, 2011a).

In *The 24th Report*, Stradling *et al.* (2008) noted a high level of public concern about the effects of car travel on the environment and found popular support for a reduction in car use. Here, we use data from the 2010 *British Social Attitudes* survey to present an up-to-date picture of public attitudes to the negative impacts of car use and potential policies to reduce it. We begin by examining attitudes to congestion and the environmental impacts of car use and how these have changed over time. Next, we consider reactions to and support for various strategies for reducing car use that have been implemented or considered – including increasing road capacity and a range of initiatives to change public behaviour. Drawing the findings together, we consider what our findings mean for the coalition government. Is the government's aim to reduce the negative effects of car use widely supported by the public? And how might the public react to various strategies for achieving this?

Negative impacts of car use

We first consider whether the public regards current levels of car use as problematic, in terms of causing congestion and damage to the environment. We asked respondents the following question about congestion:

Now thinking about traffic and transport problems, how serious a problem for you is...

...congestion on motorways?

...traffic congestion in towns and cities?

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Figure 7.1 shows responses to these items since they were first asked in 1997. Traffic congestion in towns and cities is more widely viewed as problematic; 43 per cent state congestion in towns and cities is a serious problem, compared to 26 per cent who think this about motorways. Unsurprisingly drivers are more likely than non-drivers to view urban congestion (46 per cent compared with 35 per cent), and congestion on motorways (29 per cent compared with 19 per cent) as problematic. Nevertheless, more than one in three non-drivers view congestion in towns and cities as a serious problem, presumably because of journeys they have taken as passengers in cars or taxis, or on buses.

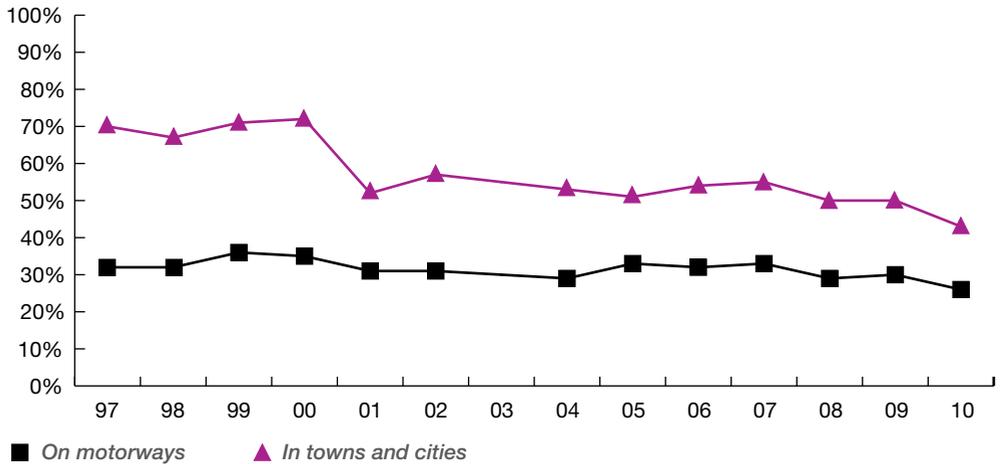
In *The 20th Report* Exley and Christie (2003) concluded that congestion in towns and cities was perceived to be less of a problem than in previous years. It was considered that, while this could result from improvements such as traffic diversions, it could also be that people had become more used to, and accepting of, congestion as part of their day-to-day lives. With more recent strategies to reduce congestion such as the introduction of the London congestion charge in 2003, and with a slow but steady decrease in car use since the early 2000s (Department for Transport, 2011b) we might logically expect agreement with the view that congestion is a problem to have declined further.

While the proportion who view congestion as a serious problem in towns and cities has reduced considerably since 2000, when 72 per cent thought this, the bulk of this reduction took place between 2000 and 2001, when this proportion fell by 20 percentage points. As noted in *The 20th Report* this change is likely to be the result, at least in part, of a change in the questionnaire. The question had been asked immediately after a question about rural congestion until 2000, after which the rural congestion question was dropped from the questionnaire (Exley and Christie, 2003). Since then, the proportion considering urban congestion to be a problem has fluctuated around the 50 per cent mark, though a further, less marked, decline of seven percentage points occurred between 2009 and 2010. The proportion viewing congestion on motorways as a problem has remained relatively stable since the question was first asked in 1997. However, the current proportion of 26 per cent is the lowest recorded for this question.

43%

think congestion in towns and cities is a serious problem, 26% think congestion on motorways is a serious problem

Figure 7.1 Views on congestion on motorways and in towns and cities, 1997–2010
% saying congestion is a serious problem



The data on which Figure 7.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

We have seen that congestion in towns and cities is viewed as less of a problem than it used to be. But what about the environmental impacts of car use? We asked respondents the following questions to gauge their level of concern about this issue:

How concerned are you about exhaust fumes from traffic?

How concerned are you about the effect of transport on climate change?²
[Very concerned, fairly concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned]

Comparing the results from Figure 7.1 with Table 7.1, we see that the environmental effects of transport are of greater public concern than traffic congestion. Seven in ten in each case say they are very or fairly concerned about the effect of transport on climate change and about exhaust fumes from traffic. Nevertheless, levels of concern have fallen since 2009, by seven percentage points in both instances. Indeed, concern about both issues appears to have been in a period of gradual decline since 2006. There are a number of possible reasons for this, discussed in greater detail in our chapter on the environment, which highlights a general decline in concern and a rise in scepticism about environmental dangers. It points to a dramatic fall in the perception of the risk posed by air pollution from cars, (in 2000, 54 per cent considered this to be dangerous to the environment, a proportion which has now declined by 26 percentage points). Given this context, we might expect a reduction in public concern about the environmental impact of road transport.

The environmental effects of transport are of greater public concern than traffic congestion

Table 7.1 Concern about the environmental impacts of transport, 2005–2010

	05	06	07	08	09	10
% concerned about exhaust fumes	81	82	79	74	76	70
% concerned about the effect of transport on climate change	80	81	76	74	75	68
<i>Base</i>	1101	3220	3094	3364	3421	3297

Despite the overall decline in concern, around seven in ten express concern about exhaust fumes and the effect of transport on climate change, while four in ten still view urban congestion as a problem. Given such widespread concern about the effects of car use, we now turn to examine public attitudes to the strategies that would ultimately address these issues.

Ways of reducing car use and congestion

A number of strategies for reducing car use and traffic congestion have been proposed or implemented in recent years. We now assess how palatable these would be to the public.

Increasing road capacity

One way to reduce traffic congestion is to increase road capacity. However, this approach would not negate the environmental impacts of car use – and could potentially increase them, by encouraging further car use, or by causing damage to the countryside. To explore attitudes to this approach, we asked a range of questions about the effects of increasing road capacity. Respondents were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

The government should build more motorways to reduce traffic congestion³

Building more roads just encourages more traffic

We also asked the following question:

*How concerned are you about damage to the countryside from building roads?
[Very concerned, fairly concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned]*

The responses, presented in Table 7.2, show higher opposition than support for the building of more motorways to reduce congestion. While three in ten agree the government should do this, almost four in ten disagree. The fact that around three in ten neither agree nor disagree suggests some indecision or ambivalence – perhaps not surprising, as we saw earlier that only a minority view congestion on motorways as a problem in the first place. There is also a widespread awareness of the potentially negative effects of increasing road capacity on both congestion and the environment; more than six in ten express concern about the damage to the countryside from building roads while around four in ten agree building more roads just encourages more traffic.

Table 7.2 Attitudes to road-building

	All
Government should build more motorways to reduce congestion	%
Agree	30
Neither agree nor disagree	28
Disagree	38
<i>Base</i>	928
Agreement that building roads just encourages more traffic	%
Agree	44
Neither agree nor disagree	21
Disagree	31
<i>Base</i>	928
Concern about damage to the countryside from building roads	%
Concerned	64
Not concerned	36
<i>Base</i>	3297

Overall, the public do not tend to favour building more roads as a strategy for reducing congestion. What, then, are public attitudes towards reducing car use within the existing road infrastructure through changing public behaviour?

Changing public behaviour

We begin by exploring perceptions of the responsibility of individual motorists to reduce their car use for the sake of the environment – as it was envisaged that attitudes to this issue would influence individual willingness to reduce car use. We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

People should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like, even if it causes damage to the environment

For the sake of the environment everyone should reduce how much they use their cars

6 in 10

agree that everyone should reduce how much they use their cars for the sake of the environment

Their responses, presented in Table 7.3, demonstrate majority support for the idea that everyone should reduce how much they use their cars for the sake of the environment; almost six in ten agree with this sentiment. However, support is far from unanimous – and nearly three in ten agree people should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like, regardless of environmental damage. We might expect the latter view to be more popular among drivers, as non-drivers might have stopped using, or chosen not to own a car, because of environmental concerns. The results are not so straightforward. In fact a similar proportion of drivers and non-drivers agree that people should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like (28 per cent compared with 23 per cent), however drivers are less likely to disagree with the statement (29 per cent compared with 41 per cent).

Table 7.3 Views on car use and the environment

	All
For the sake of the environment everyone should reduce how much they use their cars	%
Agree	58
Neither agree nor disagree	23
Disagree	15
<i>Base</i>	3,297
People should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like, even if it causes damage to the environment	%
Agree	27
Neither agree nor disagree	36
Disagree	33
<i>Base</i>	3,297

While a majority think motorists should reduce their car use for the sake of the environment, this could only happen in practice if viable alternatives for completing individual journeys were available. The coalition government has a specific target to increase the number of short journeys (defined as being five miles or less) made by walking, cycling or public transport (Department for Transport, 2011a). In the 2010 *British Social Attitudes* survey, we explored the potential for such a strategy to reduce car use, focusing on the shortest of these journeys – those of two miles or less. When we asked respondents how many such journeys they made by car in a typical week, around two in three (63 per cent) reported making at least one such

63%

make a journey of two miles or less by car at least once a week

journey, indicating a strategy to reduce car use, targeting short journeys, could have considerable impact. To explore the viability of such a strategy, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

Many of the journeys of less than two miles that I now make by car I could just as easily...

...walk

...go by bus

...cycle, if I had a bike

As shown in Table 7.4, around four in ten feel that they make short car journeys that they could just as easily make by walking (41 per cent), by bus (35 per cent) or cycling (43 per cent), as by car. Many therefore feel they could just as easily complete their journeys by another mode of transport – yet have not done so. This is despite the fact that majorities of each group feel people should reduce their car use for the sake of their environment – 66 per cent, in each case, of those who could just as easily complete their short journeys by walking, by bus, or by cycling. There appears to be a barrier in translating the sentiment that motorists should reduce their car use for the sake of the environment into individual practice. In fact, as shown in our chapter on the environment, just 19 per cent of drivers say that they have cut back on driving the car for environmental reasons – indicating a sizeable proportion think individuals should be doing this, but have not done so yet themselves.

Table 7.4 Views on making short car journeys less often by walking, taking the bus or cycling

	All
% agree many car journeys of less than two miles could be made as easily...	%
...walking	41
...by bus	35
...cycling, if I had a bike	43
<i>Base</i>	<i>2,791</i>

It may therefore be the case that more coercive measures are needed to reduce car use, by making the car a less attractive option for completing particular journeys. We focus our attention on this range of strategies next.

Many feel they could just as easily make their short journeys without their car – yet have not done so

Charging for road use

An alternative way of tackling car use is through discouraging travel by car, by making it less attractive. One way of doing this that has been discussed, and implemented in certain areas, is to charge drivers who drive on busy roads or at the busiest times, providing a disincentive to adding to congestion. The current government has chosen not to use this approach in tackling congestion, but what are the public's views on this type of policy? We asked people how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

People who drive on busy roads should pay more to use the roads than people who drive on quiet roads

People who drive at the busiest times should pay more to use the roads than people who drive at other times

People who drive at busy times only do so because they have no other alternative

People who drive cars that are better for the environment should pay less to use the roads than people whose cars are more harmful to the environment

It is too complicated to charge drivers different amounts depending on when and where they drive

We analysed the views of those living in London separately, as this city has had direct experience of a congestion scheme since the London Congestion Charge was introduced in 2003.

As shown in Table 7.5, there is little support for charging people who drive on busy roads or at busy times; just one in five support each of these strategies. The low support for such schemes is likely to reflect their inherent flaw; in many areas of the country, people have no alternative to using their cars to travel to work, for example. This argument is upheld by the fact that more than six in ten feel people who drive at busy times only do so because they have no other alternative. Another flaw is the complication of implementing such an approach, with almost seven in ten agreeing it is too complicated to charge drivers different amounts depending on when and where they drive. Interestingly though, we do find majority support for the idea that those who drive cars which cause less damage to the environment should be charged less than those who do not – almost six in ten agree with such a strategy.

Those living in London exhibit higher support for congestion charging schemes, compared with those living elsewhere. For example, those living in London are more likely to show support for charging those who drive on busy roads (27 per cent

1 in 5

support charging people who drive on busy roads or at busy times

compared with 17 per cent) and charging those who drive at busy times (27 per cent compared with 16 per cent).⁴ It could be that such schemes are unpopular in theory, but are viewed more positively once the public has seen them operate in practice. Perhaps people have become aware of the benefits of the London scheme, and have changed their opinions as a result. However, perhaps a more significant reason for the higher level of support in London is the high standard of alternative methods of transport available.

Clearly, across Britain as a whole, there is little support for charging motorists for use of the roads as a way of reducing congestion. However there is majority support for lower charges for cars that are environmentally friendly.

Table 7.5 Views on charging drivers different amounts, by area

	Inner and outer London	Outside of London	All
% agree people who...			
...drive on busy roads should pay more	27	17	19
...drive at the busiest times should pay more	27	16	18
...drive at busy times only do so because they have no other alternative	61	65	65
...drive cars that are better for the environment should pay less to use the roads than people whose cars are more harmful to the environment	50	58	57
% agreeing			
It is too complicated to charge drivers different amounts depending on when and where they drive	63	68	67
<i>Base</i>	267	2,524	2,791

Conclusions

Public concern about both traffic congestion and the environmental damage caused by car use has declined, nevertheless, the majority of the public remains concerned about the impact of transport on the environment, and urban congestion is still a serious problem for many. A key challenge for the coalition government will be translating this sentiment into practice and achieving changes in public behaviour.

A key challenge for the coalition government will be translating this sentiment into practice and achieving changes in public behaviour

In tackling the problem of congestion, the government's current strategy focuses on improving traffic flow on existing roads, an approach which is likely to be well-received given that the public has little appetite for building new roads. The avoidance of schemes that penalise those using busy roads may also be a popular decision among the general public, not least because, if such schemes were to be put in place, it is felt that many drivers would have no alternative ways of making their journeys. However, with considerable public support for a reduction in car use for the sake of the environment, how can the government attempt to reduce the number of cars on the road? Perhaps the most promising avenue would be to focus on short journeys – as a sizeable proportion of the public agree that many of these could be made just as easily by an alternative mode of transport. Yet, the fact that many continue to use cars for such journeys, suggests that translating attitudes that are supportive of reducing car use into actual behaviour change, is likely to be a particular challenge.

Notes

1. It should be noted that this follows a slight decrease in car use since the mid-1990s. Figures from the National Travel Survey (NTS) show that the number of car trips taken as a driver has fallen by five per cent since 1995–97, while the number of car trips taken as a passenger has fallen by 11 per cent since 1995–97 (Department for Transport, 2011b).
2. The question about climate change asks about all forms of transport, rather than just road transport, meaning respondents may have also considered air travel when responding to it. However, due to the location of the question in a set of questions about road transport, this can be seen to provide a good indication of concern about the effect of road transport on the environment.
3. This question refers to building more motorways specifically; it is possible that respondents' attitudes to motorway building differ from their attitudes to road building in general.
4. Support for charges for drivers at busy times and on busy roads is highest among people living in inner London, however due to the small base size of those living in inner London, this analysis groups together inner and outer London residents.

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Appendix

The data for Figure 7.1 are shown below.

	97	98	99	00	01	02	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
% saying congestion is a serious problem...													
...on motorways	32	32	36	35	31	31	29	33	32	33	29	30	26
...in towns and cities	70	67	71	72	52	57	53	51	54	55	50	50	43
<i>Base</i>	1355	1075	1031	1133	1099	1148	1053	1101	3220	3094	3364	3421	3297