

ZCB and drivers

Richard Hebditch of the Campaign for Better Transport

Even more than with other sectors, there is a dangerous complacency amongst policymakers about reducing carbon emissions from transport. Transport is seen as difficult, the last sector to contribute its share of carbon reductions. And when it does come to reducing CO₂, the focus is on two big wins with electric vehicles and biofuels. No hard choices need to be made and the current transport mix can continue with the same levels of energy consumption and without the need for a radical rethink of how transport can be delivered. There is also the comforting thought for transport policymakers that the increase in biofuel usage and in electricity production is someone else's problem.

All this complacency might be forgiven if carbon emissions were falling from transport, but this is not the case. And it is not as if our current transport system is delivering the country's wider needs, whether framed in environmental, social or economic terms.

We can, however, have an approach that delivers these outcomes and also cuts carbon, achieving the vision of a zero carbon Britain. Key to this is to cut traffic, to cut the distance travelled by car year-on-year. Indeed, even with the most ambitious electric vehicle roll-out, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) says that cuts are still needed to achieve the government's carbon reduction targets.

But politicians of all parties are fearful of the reaction of drivers to any policies that might affect them. The legacy of the fuel protests of 2000, the massive petition against road pricing in 2007 and the wider claims of a 'war on the motorist' blind politicians to measures that would benefit many, and ignores the real victims on our roads: pedestrians and cyclists.

But there are genuine concerns that underpin these more extreme protests and views. Cars are the default mode of transport for most and people

cannot necessarily see how they can use alternatives. The cost of petrol is a major burden at a time when people's wages are under pressure, and they see prices in general rising. Plus people can feel they have to travel by car when local shops and services are closing. Any attempt to move to a more sustainable transport system has to recognise these things.

The scale of ambition needed to cut net carbon emissions to zero by 2030 can only be delivered upon if we start with where people are now, listen to their concerns, and build an approach that works with them.

Firstly, we need to consider that there are some significant changes in car ownership and use. Where public transport is good and there are local shops and services (otherwise known as London) car use is falling fast, with car use by Londoners declining by 35% over the past 15 years. Even outside of London, car use is falling. And younger people are changing their travel behaviour, with both young men and women less likely to have a driving license – for 17-20 year old men declining from 52% in 1991 to just 31% now. This is partly driven by financial pressures, but car manufacturers are also worried by the decline in cars as objects of desire, as young people place a greater priority on online networking (which also drives changes in travel behaviour).

Secondly, we know that motorists are not all the same and have quite different views on their use of cars. The transport academic Jillian Anable has done work to segment the population based on their attitudes to driving. Her research suggests that less than one in five is a 'die hard motorist'.

There are also strongly held attitudes that can be built upon to create a consensus for change. For instance, the public are sceptical about road building. Beyond the small circle of people around George Osborne, most think new roads will just create more traffic and solve nothing. And we know that most people would cycle more if they felt safe to do so. They also want to preserve local shops and services and to have friendly communities with green space nearby and opportunities for children to play.

With this in mind, the measures in the Zero Carbon Britain report could win popularity. To do

so, we need to ensure that they are fair. For instance, carbon taxes would provide a clear signal to people to switch to lower carbon modes, but in the absence of other policies, there is a danger that those on lower incomes would end up paying for the rich to make those carbon savings (such as with subsidies for expensive electric vehicles). Carbon taxes can be fair if there are measures to compensate those on lower incomes, through higher universal credit payments and changes to income tax thresholds, for instance.

Thirdly, people do need realistic choices. The development of smart tickets like Oyster cards coupled with much better online information about services is starting to make door-to-door journeys by public transport much easier. But, outside of London, public transport is still very fragmented, with few incentives for individual bus or train operators to link services or provide simple and affordable tickets across different services. It is not enough to leave public transport provision to private companies. Often the measures that would make public transport a realistic choice don't provide a profit, and so central and local government have to step in.

Finally, the prioritisation of walking and cycling in our towns and cities has to be rooted in a conception of what we want places to be for. We need a long-term vision of these as places for people. This is the lesson of successful towns and cities for walking and cycling like Copenhagen, where a step-by-step approach has worked successfully. This agenda is not justified solely on carbon reduction terms, but on the benefits of cutting traffic in the places where people live, work and shop, as well as the benefits for individuals in more physical activity and avoiding high petrol costs.

As a start, the UK government should work with the devolved administrations to reduce the cost of travelling by public transport, rather than simply looking to expensive cuts in fuel duty. We also need national and local governments to work together to make green transport choices easier. There are good examples of this with the Local Sustainable Transport Fund in England and the Active Travel Bill in Wales. But we should be prepared to go further and ensure that the increasing powers for local councils are matched with increased responsibility

to act on climate change, for example, through local carbon frameworks with clear targets.

But above all, we need politicians to recognise that whatever transport mode we use, we all are part of an interlinked transport network. The tribal language of 'ending the war on the motorist' has to stop. Travel should broaden the mind, not divide us. If we start with recognising that, then together we can ensure a transition to zero carbon transport that works for people and the planet.

About the author:

Richard Hebditch is Campaigns Director at the Campaign for Better Transport. The organisation's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving that vision requires substantial changes to transport policy which Campaign for Better Transport aims to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

Campaign for
Better Transport 