

Less Traffic

Why Scotland needs Road Traffic Reduction

1. INTRODUCTION

Road traffic reduction is *the* most vital component of a sustainable transport strategy. Without policies, programmes and projects to cut traffic levels, there is little or no prospect of achieving crucial targets for reducing climate change emissions.

But this isn't just a question of Scotland making a fair contribution to solving a massive global problem – it's also in our own short and long term interest. Too much traffic divides communities and degrades the environment, in rural as well as urban areas. Less traffic would mean fewer air pollution deaths, reduced congestion costs, less community severance, and less impact on the natural environment.

Commendably, in 2002, the Scottish Executive set a road traffic stabilisation target (returning traffic levels to 2001 levels by 2021). However, a comprehensive action plan and interim targets are needed to demonstrate that the Executive really wants the National Transport Strategy to reduce traffic levels.

Moreover, in the five years since the Scottish target was set, the scale of the global warming crisis has become ever clearer. More radical targets are almost certainly required, and the sooner we begin to deliver sustainable transport, the more swiftly we can move to the low carbon economy that we desperately need.

2. TOO MUCH TRAFFIC IS BAD FOR US ALL

Scotland's existing transport situation is unsustainable. It neither meets our current transport needs, nor does it ensure that future generations can satisfy theirs.

Road transport is a major – and growing – contributor to climate change, and it overwhelmingly relies on a non-renewable fuel source (oil) whose global production is predicted to peak within the next two decades. It also inflicts a high cost on individuals and society in a wide variety of ways:

- Air and noise pollution cause serious health problems, particularly amongst children and the elderly. Over 2,000 deaths a year in

Scotland are now attributed to health-damaging particulates from vehicle emissions.¹

- Obesity in children has increased, as walking and cycling have declined and parents have switched to the car for the school run.
- Unacceptably high numbers of people are killed and injured on Scotland's roads every year – 368 children were killed or seriously injured in 2005, part of a total of 17,821 casualties.²
- Neighbourhoods lose 'liveability' and communities decline as crossing roads becomes more difficult and people become more isolated in their homes and cars.
- Too much traffic is also bad for the economy. For the city of Edinburgh alone, it has been estimated that a forecast 20% increase in traffic levels by 2021 would double the time lost in traffic due to congestion.³

Current forecasts suggest that traffic levels on Scotland's roads may rise by 27% between 2005 and 2021,⁴ revised from 27% between 2001 and 2021.⁵

If no action is taken to reverse traffic growth, the costs to society, the economy and the environment will reach unprecedented levels.

3. IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO ROAD TRAFFIC REDUCTION?

The road lobby would have you believe that as long as steps are taken to address the negative impacts of traffic growth then traffic levels can happily be allowed to keep growing without limit. This is fundamentally and dangerously wrong.

It is a myth that congestion can be reduced while traffic is allowed to grow without restraint.⁶ Sweeping claims are made for the congestion-relieving potential of major new roads such as the M74 Northern Extension and Aberdeen western bypass. But, as a rule, expanding road capacity in urban and suburban areas will generate extra traffic which soon fills up the new roads – as seen in the case of the Edinburgh City Bypass, London's M25, and elsewhere across Britain.

It is also a myth that transport growth is an inevitable side-effect of economic growth, and that measures such as road pricing would therefore undermine economic development.⁷ In 2004 the Executive stated, "Historically growth in the economy is accompanied by growth in traffic volumes. We need to break that link."⁸ We agree.

Not only is congestion known to harm businesses (through loss of productive staff time, delayed deliveries and travel stress for staff), investment in urban public transport has been shown to generate more jobs than money spent on car-based schemes.⁹

Lastly, technical fixes in transport (such as alternative fuels) are often put forward as a politically acceptable way to solve the negative environmental impacts of road traffic. However, even if this could be proven to tackle emissions from road transport, it would still fail to confront the wider problems of traffic growth: congestion, urban sprawl, and the many social and health impacts of a continued switch to motorised transport.

A switch to electric and hydrogen cars will remain a longer-term ambition. However, even if they became immediately widely available, it is difficult to see them as a solution due to the inadequate supply of electricity from renewable sources to power Scottish transport. Seeking technical fixes may be a superficially attractive approach, but currently remains an impractical way of tackling climate emissions.

Targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector are crucial, however, they would not in themselves address the wider impacts of transport - road congestion, air and noise pollution, road crashes, and community severance. It is therefore crucial - for economic, social and environmental reasons - that Scottish transport strategy focuses on policies, programmes and projects to secure road traffic reduction.

4. THE CURRENT SCOTTISH TARGET

The Executive's 2002 commitment to road traffic stabilisation flowed from two Road Traffic Reduction Acts passed through the Westminster parliament during the 1990s,¹⁰ and from the guidance issued to Scottish local authorities on traffic reduction as part of its guidance on Local Transport Strategies.

However, progress has been generally poor, with Audit Scotland commenting, in 2006, that there was "a lack of incentive for local authorities to develop robust targets, with many recognising that the delivery of plans to reduce traffic volumes was not wholly in their control" and some local authorities appearing "reluctant to take action without similar support from the Executive in respect of trunk roads".¹¹

We agree. Unlike in England, the Scottish Executive has failed to make funding for local authorities' transport spending dependent upon their prioritising measures towards reducing traffic levels.

When lack of progress was officially confirmed,¹² the Executive suggested that it might give up on its traffic stabilisation target altogether,¹³ despite having by then also having committed itself to reducing greenhouse

gas emissions in line with UK obligations under the Kyoto agreement.¹⁴ Fortunately, under pressure from TRANSform Scotland and other sustainable transport groups, the Executive confirmed in December 2006 that it was retaining its target to return traffic levels to 2001 levels by 2021.

5. TRAFFIC REDUCTION IS ACHIEVABLE IN SCOTLAND

Encouraging evidence is available on our very own doorstep. Between 2004 and 2005 (the most recent data), vehicle kilometres on Scotland's roads rose by only 0.03%. Car use has risen only 1% since 2002, and actually fell by 0.6% between 2004 and 2005.¹⁵ At the same time, passenger journeys on Scottish rail services increased by 9% (during the 2005-06 financial year), and passenger journeys on local buses grew by 2% (the sixth consecutive annual increase).¹⁶

In February 2007, First Minister Jack McConnell commented:

*"Public transport now accounts for more than 70 per cent of our total transport budget, and the result is that we are seeing a reduction in the number of car miles driven on Scotland's roads. Two years ago, there were 150 million fewer car miles driven on our roads - the first fall since the 1970s."*¹⁷

It may be too early to tell whether levels of car traffic have stabilised - these statistics provide only a broad estimate of traffic levels - but they nevertheless provide a very encouraging sign that traffic reduction is indeed possible in Scotland.

6. LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE

Worldwide there are plenty of examples of successful proactive interventions to secure road traffic reduction, including:

- In London the implementation of congestion charging has produced a rise in bus use (28% during 1995/97-2005) and cycling, while the level of traffic driving through the zone has reduced by 20%, from 250,000 vehicles a day to 200,000.¹⁸
- A project by sustainable transport charity Sustrans and partner Socialdata in Peterborough and Worcester has demonstrated that improved public awareness of local alternatives to the car can result in significant shifts towards sustainable travel modes. This innovative personalised marketing scheme has reduced car trips in the target areas by as much as 13%.¹⁹
- Even the most radical form of urban traffic management - road closures - is likely to find long-term favour with the public, and deliver economic benefits, if carried out appropriately. Pedestrianisation measures in Oxford's city centre (since 1999) have resulted in more shopping activity within the affected areas, rather than less.²⁰

- Denmark's capital city Copenhagen has reaped the benefits of road traffic reduction on the basis of better public transport services and parking restrictions. Its road network is no larger now than it was in 1970, and traffic levels have fallen by around 10%.²¹

7. THE BENEFITS OF TRAFFIC REDUCTION

Road traffic reduction would yield enormous and widespread benefits across the environment, society and the economy. In broad terms, it would mean:

- Scotland would begin to make a fair contribution to solving the global climate change crisis.
- We would address the environmental injustice that sees those on lowest incomes experience the worst effects of traffic pollution.
- Faster and more reliable bus journeys would directly benefit the third of Scotland's households without a car (59% of households in Glasgow and 42% in Edinburgh).
- With less traffic and less congestion the economy would operate more reliably and efficiently.
- Reduced traffic would mean fewer deaths, injuries and illnesses from air pollution and road crashes.
- Streets would become safer, and encourage exercise by enabling children to walk to school.
- Walking and cycling, the most sustainable modes of transport, would become more attractive for all age groups.
- Neighbourhoods would become more 'liveable'.

8. HOW MUCH TRAFFIC REDUCTION – AND WHERE?

The 2006 Stern Report on climate change and the economy flagged up the significant proportion of carbon emissions that originate in the transport sector, noting that "deep cuts in the transport sector are likely to be more difficult in the shorter term, but will ultimately be needed".²²

Whilst other sectors of the economy have been yielding reductions in carbon emissions, transport emissions continue to grow. There are a wide range of estimates as to how much emission reduction is needed to protect the planet, but the key issue at this stage is to secure widespread 'in principle' acceptance of the need for significant traffic reduction.

Scotland is sometimes stereotyped – not least by the tourist industry – as a predominantly rural country. However, 69% of Scotland's people live in urban areas of more than 10,000 population – and these are the areas with the greatest potential for traffic reduction.

Experience in Switzerland, Denmark and Austria has also shown that vehicle use can be reduced in sparsely

populated rural areas where an efficient and integrated public transport system is available.²³

A report produced in 2003-04 by Professor John Whitelegg of the Eco-Logica consultancy concluded that proven methods of transport policy intervention could deliver significant reductions in traffic.²⁴ The biggest reductions, unsurprisingly, were forecast for the largest population centres where public transport, walking and cycling alternatives are most accessible, but a wide range of settlement sizes were projected to make a significant contribution to traffic reduction:

- Cities of 1 million+ (Greater Glasgow) – 20% reduction
- Cities and towns of 100,000 to 999,000 – 15% reduction
- Towns of 10,000 to 99,000 – 10% reduction
- Towns and villages of 1,000 to 9,000 – 10% reduction.

These represent very significant reductions in traffic which would make an enormous contribution to creating a more sustainable and socially-just transport system. And the tools needed to achieve this are already available; we now only need the political will.

9. HOW WE CAN DO IT – POLICIES, PROGRAMMES & PROJECTS

Much of the work to reduce road traffic and create a more sustainable transport system will inevitably rely on the Scottish Executive and its tax-raising, spending, regulatory and promotional powers, but there are also important delivery roles for Regional Transport Partnerships, Local Authorities and the private sector.

Policies:

- The Executive's current road traffic stabilisation target needs to be reviewed in light of the latest understanding of the severity of climate change. An appropriate new national traffic reduction target for 2021 needs to be at the core of Scotland's national transport strategy.
- Interim targets need to be set in order to ensure that each four-year Scottish Executive administration is obliged to work towards the long-term target.
- Ministers should be obliged to publish an implementation plan to meet these interim targets, and to report annually on progress.
- Scottish Executive funding for Regional Transport Partnerships and local authorities' transport budgets should be contingent upon their delivering against agreed traffic reduction targets.
- A national strategy for walking should be put in place as a matter of urgency. Walking is not only the most sustainable mode of transport but remains the second most common in terms of journeys. Walking is the only form of transport for which the Executive has no strategy, yet it can play a crucial role in traffic reduction and is already far more popular than commonly realised – in Edinburgh for example 25% of all journeys are on foot.

Programmes:

- Implement a national road user charging scheme, either in conjunction with the UK government, or as a Scotland-only scheme should the UK government delay action even longer.
- Deliver a national Smarter Choices programme, to be delivered at local and regional levels - making commonplace the implementation of schemes such as workplace travel plans, school travel plans, car clubs, and car sharing. Available research suggests that such measures are very cost-effective in delivering change in travel behaviour.
- Public travel awareness campaigns to encourage a shift towards more sustainable forms of transport such as walking, cycling, bus and rail.
- Increased expenditure on cycling, walking and safer streets initiatives – including Home Zones, traffic calming and other speed reduction measures. Funding allocations to Regional Transport Partnerships and local authorities need to be ring-fenced.
- Intervention is needed to ensure that bus and rail fares do not rise beyond the cost of motoring - *as has consistently been the case in recent years.*

Projects:

- Scrap traffic-generating road schemes such as the M74 Northern Extension and the Aberdeen

western bypass. For the cost of just three-quarters of a mile of the M74 Northern Extension, safe routes for walking and cycling to every one of Scotland's 3,000 schools could be funded.

- Investment in the inter-urban Scottish rail network so that it is competitive with road journey times.
- Increased grant aid funding to help shift freight from road to rail and sea – for example, establishing new railheads and improved route infrastructure for the modern generation of taller freight containers.

10. CONCLUSION

A dramatic reduction in unnecessary car journeys is crucial to the health and welfare of future generations. However, progress will be impossible in the absence of properly developed targets, realistic delivery plans and robust monitoring procedures.

Getting people to reduce their reliance on car travel requires political leadership and integrity. It requires politicians, as well as decision-makers within the media, to acknowledge the entire spectrum of car use-related cost, instead of focussing narrowly on the problem of congestion.

Scotland has an opportunity to be at the forefront of progressive transport policies which demonstrate our willingness to contribute to globally tackling climate change. Traffic reduction must be at the heart of Scotland's national transport strategy.

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