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Conclusions and recommendations



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The exploratory analysis presented in this report has revisited the issue of car dependence within the contemporary policy context and has identified a wide-ranging debate on its nature and extent. This partly reflects substantive differences in viewpoints, but it is often more the result of confusing and conflicting use of terminology, describing numerous and very different aspects of people's patterns of car ownership and use under the banner of 'car dependence'. From this we conclude that it is not a particularly useful or accurate descriptor to encapsulate the current role of cars within UK society.

The report identifies that car use in the UK has continued to spread across the population since the RAC Foundation's 1995 *Car Dependence* study. This is particularly the case for groups that have traditionally not had access to a car, such as lower income households, older people and women. Car owners are also continuing to drive later in life, especially men, as people are living longer than ever before and are keen to retain their active lifestyles. Even non-car owning households make an average of two car trips a week and a quarter of all their shopping trips are by car. The relationship between household income and car ownership is weakening, as lower income households are acquiring cars. This suggests that for most of UK society, car use is now the norm.

It is also the case that the type of area where people live and their level of access to public transport is becoming a stronger predictor of people's car use than the traditional predictor, household income. This suggests that the role of place and the different opportunities that it offers in providing viable alternatives to the car will be an important consideration in any future policy measures for car use restraint. The differential impact of policies for different people in different places is a highly under-researched area and also has been largely overlooked by policy makers.

Despite the growing penetration of car ownership and use across the population, in recent years car use per person has levelled off and some aspects of personal car travel have declined slightly. Depending on the measure used, growth in average car use per person ceased at some point between 1995 and 2002. The halt in the increase in average car use per person is consistent with a continuing growth in car ownership, because cars are being used less intensively over time.

Looking at a more aggregate level, national car road traffic continues to grow slowly, but in the recent, pre-recession years, only in line with increases in the national population of driving age. If this situation continues, then future aggregate growth rates for car traffic will be less than has historically been observed and may require a reassessment of our long term traffic forecasts- car traffic may simply mirror the increase in the number of adults in the population. A recent study of driving patterns in the USA has found a similar pattern.

Even if car use is stabilising, there are likely to be a variety of economic and environmental pressures to curtail car use in the future. Despite some successes with voluntary policies to reduce people's car use through place-based parking charges, travel awareness and other personalised travel campaigns, central and local policy has largely been unable to affect drivers' choices to use their cars for most journeys. The literature has demonstrated that the needs and circumstances of the driving population vary enormously, in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, social and psychological drivers and motivations, their economic and physical circumstances and their roles and responsibilities.

This means that some people are more resistant to change than others and some more vulnerable. The Lex/RAC Motoring Reports consistently shows that between 78 to 90 per cent of drivers say they would find it very difficult to adjust their lifestyle to being without a car. Loss of freedom and personal control is a big factor in this, but also the perceived lack of availability of viable public transport alternatives for some or all of their journeys.

Our focus groups show that many people are currently prepared to hold on to their existing car use behaviours, even when this requires compromising other areas of household expenditure or putting up with challenging driving conditions, such as in traffic congestion. This is largely due to both their personal circumstances and the wider constraints and inconveniences they perceive they will experience if they switch their journeys onto public transport. Emotional or psychological attachment to the car is an issue for some people, but for most, the practical utility and lower cost of the car is the key.

Our professional interviews suggest that local authorities are moving away from blanket policies to target modal shift, towards a more balanced policy approach across all modes. However, it is unclear how they anticipate they will be able to deliver the necessary change in car use reduction to achieve a low carbon future in the context of their current strategies and programmes. At present the focus remains on 'picking the low-hanging fruit', whilst waiting for central Government to determine how, where and when such a strategy should be delivered. However, the Department for Transport also appears to have reached something of an impasse at present; despite a clear indication that it is aware that the transport sector needs to make a contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

From the limited available documentation, it would appear that four broad policy directions are envisaged:

1. Improved vehicle and traffic management technology
2. Travel planning and other softer measures
3. Road-based user charging, road tolling and congestion charging in inner urban areas
4. Personalised carbon allowances and carbon trading schemes

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It is, as yet, unclear what level of contribution the Department feels each of these broad strategies will deliver, but it is evident that three of the four are aimed at encouraging reductions in overall car use through behavioural change. It is also clear that the achieved reductions will need to be significantly greater than the 11% reductions that have already been witnessed through best practice travel planning initiatives in urban areas. This suggests that future policies will need to place a far greater emphasis on road pricing and/or rationing car use in some way.

Considerable research has been carried out since the mid- 1990s and the transport profession has gained experience in observing the ability of policies to influence car use through a variety of initiatives, from the London Congestion Charging scheme to the Nottingham tram lines and the application of 'smart travel choices'. However, most adjustments made by travellers have been marginal in nature and there is a general lack of understanding of the likely consequences, both for the economy and society, of major reductions in car use, beyond those which can be achieved by voluntary means within a stable environment.

This is clearly a subject for significant further research, in order to better inform policy debates in several government departments and to help to reduce the negative impacts of future economic pressures and policy measures on car-using families. While there will be scope to explore some of these issues through the re-use of existing data sets, we recommend that detailed empirical research is needed in order to fully examine the nature and extent of the 'costs of adjustment', particularly where economic and political pressures result in households having to cut back their car use, beyond which they would voluntarily. This should seek to identify the kinds of measures that could be taken, both by the public and private sectors, to reduce any undue burden and/or social exclusion arising from economic or political pressures to reduce car use.