

# The Road Ahead

A transport policy for difficult times

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RAC  
Foundation

## Foreword

The development of transport policy has rarely been so critical to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the country. From fuel price rises and congestion to road safety and carbon emissions; from ticket prices to overcrowded railway carriages; how we get from A to B – and at what cost to people and the planet – is of fundamental importance to us all.



The future appears bleak. Our transport system is already at capacity. The road network in particular is creaking, and once we emerge from the current recession, traffic will increase; driven by a rising population and renewed economic growth.

Whilst the improvement of services and efficiency in areas of public policy such as health, education and the economy are known ‘vote winners’, no government can afford to ignore the practical issues associated with getting people and goods from where they are to where they need to be.

Most drivers do not get behind the wheel for fun. They do so because they have to. The days have gone when everything you required was literally on your doorstep; shops, education, workplace, family, healthcare. Over the past half-century people have been required to travel ever greater distances to meet their basic needs and the car has allowed them to do so. Today, car use pervades all sections of society.

For the majority of the population the car *is* ‘public transport’. It transports most of the people most of the time. The RAC Foundation believes a credible transport strategy must recognise this and contain policies based on evidence, not on wishful thinking.

Any new government will have many and varied challenges to face, made tougher by the economic climate. But developing the appropriate transport infrastructure for the decades ahead must be a priority. Without it economic recovery will be impeded.

For the foreseeable future, people living in this country will in large measure be dependent on personal road transport: predominantly cars. Business will be equally reliant on the road network. Accommodating these individual and corporate needs requires serious planning and sustained investment, and the responsibility for providing this lies overwhelmingly with government.

*Stephen Glaister*

**Professor Stephen Glaister CBE**

**Director**

RAC Foundation



## Where we are now

There are **28.5** million cars licensed in Britain – up from **24.6** million in 2001

**Four-fifths** of the population live in a household with a car

**70%** of adults now have driving licences

**92%** of all passenger travel takes place on the roads – just **7%** is by rail and **1%** by air

**Two-thirds** of all trips are by car

In 2006 **55%** of the lowest income households had access to a car. In 1989 it was **32%**

**11%** of household spending is on motoring

Road users contribute **£47 billion** to the Exchequer each year

Only **£9 billion** is spent annually on road building and road maintenance

Both fuel duty and Vehicle Excise Duty are described as **environmental taxes** in the national accounts

Transport produces a **quarter** of the UK's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Just over **half** of this comes from cars

But cars are getting greener. In 1997 the average new car emitted **190** gCO<sub>2</sub>/km. In 2009 it was down to **149**. And the EU says it must be no more than **95** by 2020

For every mile they travel, drivers contribute a net **4p** to the Chancellor's coffers

Passengers on local bus services cost the Treasury **6p** per mile and rail passengers **21p** per mile

**£87 billion** is the value the Highways Agency puts on England's motorways and major A roads – the strategic road network

Investment in the roads tends to offer better **value for money** than rail schemes

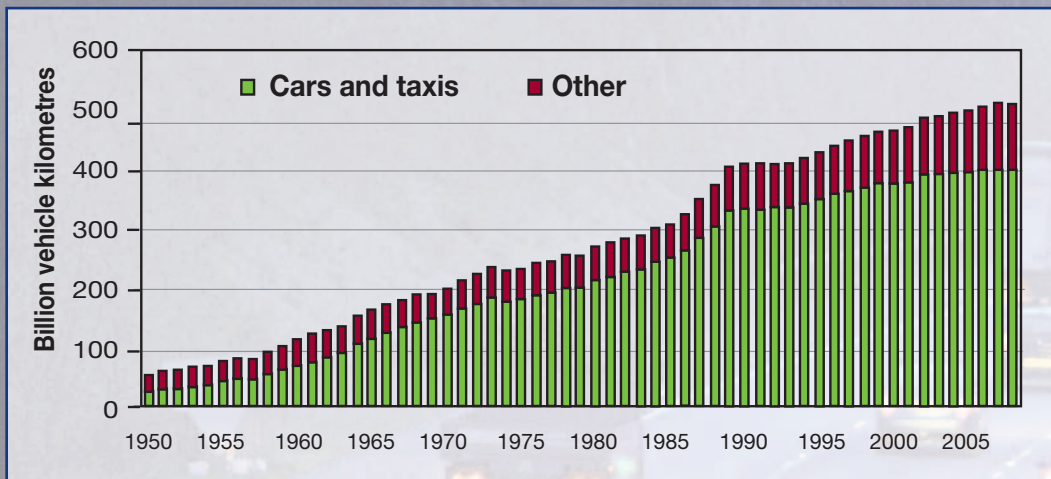
In 2008 there were **2,538** fatalities on the roads. Back in 1965 the figure was **7,952** despite there being only a third as many licensed vehicles as today

There have been **29** transport secretaries since 1955



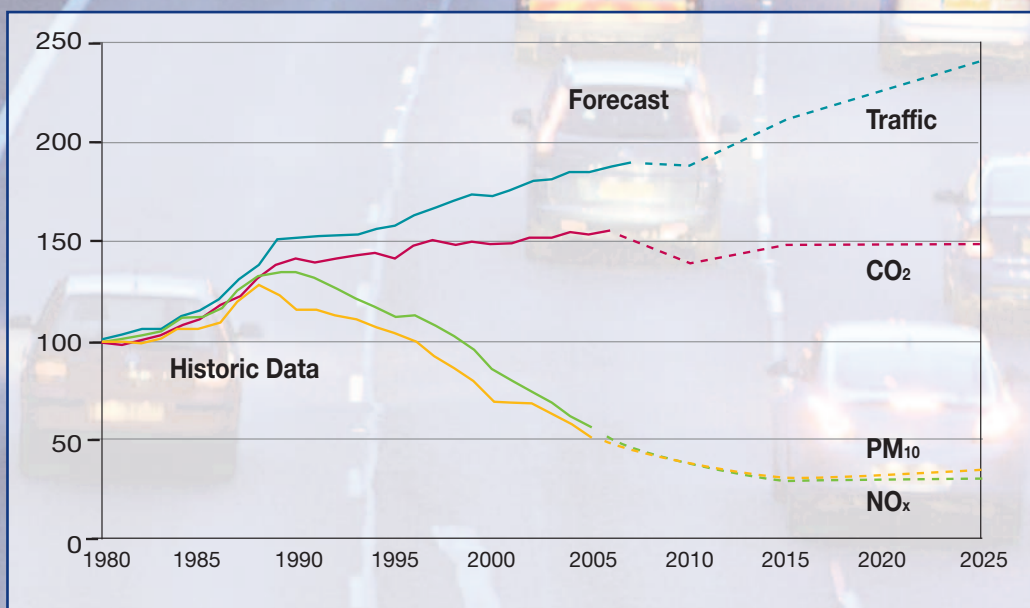
# Where we are going

With few exceptions road traffic (total vehicle kilometres) has grown steadily for more than fifty years, the slight dips being most closely associated with periods of economic downturn and high fuel prices – as seen over the past couple of years. But on each occasion, as the economy has recovered and unemployment fallen, the upward trend has resumed. The Department for Transport’s (DfT) own chart illustrates the ongoing rise in motor vehicle use.



**All motor vehicle traffic, Great Britain: 1950-2008 (Source: DfT, Road Statistics 2008: Traffic, Speeds and Congestion)**

The forecast rise in population offers little hope that traffic and congestion will do anything but follow the same trend. According to the Office of National Statistics the population will increase to 71.6 million by 2033, a 16% rise compared to 2008. And whilst there are indications individual car usage might have peaked, the DfT is clear where overall mileage is heading – upwards.



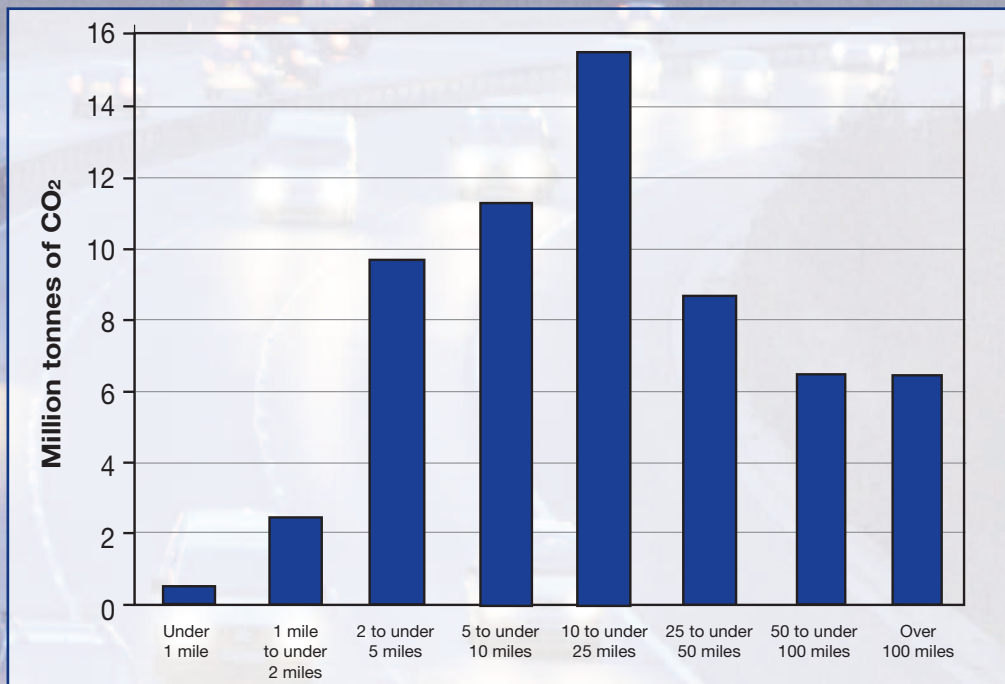
**Road traffic and road transport emissions, past and forecast (Source: DfT, 2008, Road Transport Forecasts)**



The graph does offer some good news though; more traffic need not lead to a similar increase in carbon emissions. A 17% improvement in the environmental efficiency of cars since 1997 has already helped offset the impact of traffic growth. And it is anticipated to keep doing so.

Why? Because of the huge strides still being made in conventional engine technology; the emergence of hybrids; and the development of alternative fuel sources such as electricity, bio-fuels and hydrogen.

So much for the cars themselves; what about the people who drive them and the journeys they make? How can we influence motorists' behaviour to reduce the environmental impact of car travel? The answer is, 'not easily', as the table below suggests:



**Estimated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from household cars by journey purpose**  
 (Source: DfT, 2009, *Delivering Low Carbon Travel: An Essential Guide for Local Authorities*)

When car journeys of varying length are compared, it is those between ten and 25 miles that are seen to produce the largest amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>. And yet these trips are some of the hardest to replace by other means of transport. Buses tend to be used for shorter distances whilst railway services are inflexible and offer limited choice outside London. For many middle-distance trips, there is no practical alternative to the car.

So the question is not; how do you eradicate the car? But, how do you accommodate it? How do you make it greener, whilst preserving personal mobility? All the while recognising that for most people, most of the time, the car *is* 'public transport'.

Other data in this document comes from the following sources: Budget Report (HM Treasury, 2009), DVLA, National Travel Survey (DfT, 2009), Rates of Return (RAC Foundation, 2009), Reported Road Casualties Great Britain (DfT, 2009), Roads Administration (RAC Foundation, 2009), Roads and Reality (RAC Foundation, 2007), Road Users' Alliance Road File 2010, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, Taxes and Charges on Road Users (Transport Select Committee, 2009) The Car in British Society (RAC Foundation, 2009), The Case for High Speed Rail (RAC Foundation, 2009), Transport Statistics Great Britain (DfT 2009)



# How we might get there

## Customers and consumers

Most car users drive not because they want to, but because they have no other way of accessing essential services. Successive governments have implemented and supported policies that have forced people to take to their cars; promoting out of town shopping, closing post offices, shutting community hospitals, and so it goes on.

Road users already pay through the nose for the privilege of driving – some £47 billion per year in taxes and charges. They deserve something in return: more reliable journey times; better maintained roads; protection from cowboy clampers; recognition that the profile of the driving population is changing - more people on lower-incomes than ever before now have access to cars, and the situation is the same amongst the elderly.

## Getting most mileage from public money

In general, road improvement schemes offer better value for money than investment in the rail network. And when every penny counts this should be at the forefront of policy makers' minds.

It should also be a serious consideration when it comes to high speed rail (HSR). The current best estimates indicate taxpayers could end up footing a bill of between £17 billion and £27 billion for a north-south HSR network.

The RAC Foundation is not anti-HSR, but is concerned about its affordability, and whether the benefits claimed for the scheme really justify the huge cost to the public purse. Decisions about HSR must be based on facts, not faith.

## Driving forward the green agenda

Transport generates almost 25% of the UK's total domestic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, half of it coming from cars. So how do you reduce this figure? Less traffic and less congestion is one way. Then there is the technological approach. If all drivers swapped their cars for the current best model in the equivalent class, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from cars would be cut by a quarter.

Newer vehicles are also safer.

Reports such as those by Eddington, Stern and King, have all said great environmental benefits can still be had from further refinement of existing technology – smaller, lighter cars; leaner burning internal combustion engines.

Hybrids are becoming more common and a programme of developing electric vehicles for the mass market is well underway. We are not there yet, but ultra-low carbon vehicles will come to play a major part in greening road transport. Their affordability and practicality will be key.



## Be bold, be brave

Without intervention, road congestion is set to rise. The Labour government recognised that to tackle the jams some sort of demand management might be required, and until early 2009 it was committed to national road user charging. That pledge might have been ditched, but the problem remains.

National charging combined with big reductions in fuel duty could alter driver behaviour, cut congestion and actually make a lot of people better off rather than worse off.

Remember, almost half of motorists do fewer than 5,000 miles per year and many more do not travel at peak times or on clogged up roads.

To complete the shift from taxing ownership to taxing usage consideration should be given to abolishing VED. People should not be penalised – through road tax - for having their car do nothing more than sit on the drive.

## Saving lives, saving money

Road accidents cost the British economy £18 billion annually – 1.5% of GDP.

But when it comes to accidents not every road is the same: 50% of deaths occur on just 10% of the road network. Single-carriageway 'A' roads are the most dangerous though they can be made considerably safer. Road engineering might not prevent all accidents but it can significantly reduce their effects and offer a considerable return on 'investment'.

Between 2007 and 2008 the number of road deaths fell markedly, but the DfT estimates as many as 800,000 people are still being hurt in traffic accidents each year – three times the officially recorded number. Such appalling figures beg a different approach to road safety, and this is why the RAC Foundation is calling for an accident investigation system for roads which concentrates less on establishing culpability and more on learning lessons. The Foundation believes there is a strong case for creating a body not dissimilar to the accident investigation branches in rail, air and marine transportation.

## Long-term thinking

The road network is an essential utility. And like other utilities there should be a mechanism to ensure long-term delivery of service. Take the water companies as an example. They are legally obliged to predict demand over a 25-year timescale; and then meet it. Even in the transport sector, every five years the rail industry is given two documents; one says what has to be done to the network; the other says how much money will be made available to do it with. An independent regulator makes sure the targets are met.

There needs to be a similar system for roads as a matter of priority. In addition, a consumer watchdog should be appointed to represent the interests of the motorist.



## Here are the facts behind some of the myths which continue to taint the transport debate.

1. **Building roads will NOT have a significant effect on climate change.** New roads can reduce carbon emissions by cutting congestion. Cars generate less CO<sub>2</sub> whilst moving than when stationary. If building is combined with a form of national road user charging, emissions could fall by 10%.
2. **New roads DON'T just 'fill up'.** Though new routes might be busy and some of the traffic newly generated, much will have transferred from existing bottlenecks. Total congestion will ease.
3. **Traffic pollution is NOT getting worse.** Emissions of major pollutants are down a third since the 1970s due to better vehicle technology, tighter regulation and old cars being scrapped.
4. **Roads do NOT occupy large areas of land,** covering just 2% of the surface of Great Britain. Most are local streets and rural lanes.
5. **Roads are EFFICIENT users of space** compared to railways. They carry five times more passenger traffic than the railways, yet take up only 50% more land.
6. **Britain is NOT unusual in relying on roads.** Our reliance on roads is similar to other European nations, but we have the lowest level of motorways and main roads relative to population.
7. **Building roads WILL benefit low-income groups.** The car is the dominant transport mode for all income groups, being used for 70% of all the distance travelled. It is the more affluent travellers who make the most use of trains.
8. **Road traffic DOES pay its way.** Road users pay £47 billion a year in motoring related taxes, dwarfing the £9 billion spent annually on the road network. Even accepting that road users have to pay for their external costs (pollution, congestion, etc) the charges are still too high.
9. **Building new roads is NOT too costly.** Road building is affordable if there are good economic reasons behind developing a route. And road schemes generally have a higher benefit cost ratio than rail schemes.
10. **Public transport is NOT a ready alternative to the car,** accounting for just 13% of personal travel. Trains serve distinct markets, and there is little scope for new routes and extra passengers, whilst buses run on just 23% of the road network. *The car is the truest form of 'public transport'.*

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The RAC Foundation is a charity (No. 1002705) exploring the economic, mobility, safety and environmental issues relating to roads and the use of motor vehicles. It campaigns for a fair deal for responsible road users.