CAST BRIEFING 21 - December 2023

How public engagement can support reducing car use:
A briefing for policy makers and communicators

Key messages:

- **Changing mindsets on car use is hard:** Soft informational or educational measures are insufficient by themselves. Alternatives to the car have to feel reliable, attractive and flexible.

- **Freedom matters:** For some, cars are symbols of freedom and flexibility, an idea with deep roots. New stories are needed, delivered over time via trusted messengers, as part of a wider public engagement strategy on climate. For example for some audiences it might work to reframe 'freedom and flexibility': in congested cities, the car can be the slowest and most expensive way to get around.

- **Fairness matters**: Policy must be seen to be fair. People have different circumstances and some have little choice but to use a car. Policy-makers should be responsive to economic and cultural grievances, in particular where people feel they are being penalised when they have no decent alternative.

- **Habits and norms matter**: For most people in the UK it is normal to use a car, but habits can alter surprisingly quickly when we make big changes in our lives like moving house or starting a new job. Policy can help harness this, for example supporting businesses to help employees cycle to work.

- **Public engagement is essential.** This means better communication and two-way conversation. Communication should be tailored to different audiences, designed to reframe deeply-held ideas about the car.

Centre for **Climate Change** and **Social Transformations**

CLIMATE outreach

Results

This is a briefing from Climate Outreach and the Centre for Climate and Social Transformations (CAST). It summarises for policy makers key evidence on the social, cultural and communication challenges in reducing car usage.

It draws on our organisations' extensive evidence base into how to build and maintain active public engagement with the net zero transition. It was further informed by discussions at an expert policy roundtable in October 2023.

This briefing follows on from CAST Briefing 20, which looks at the role of public engagement in addressing perceptions of unfairness in net zero policy more generally.

Introduction

Reducing car use is an important part of climate and public health policy. The Climate Change Committee and Department for Transport both recommend reducing car use and encouraging more public transport and active travel.

But this is politically and culturally challenging terrain. There is strong public support for policies that improve public transport but there has been significant resistance from some to the expansion of the Ultra-Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) into Outer London.

Changing norms around car use is a long-term game. There are no easy solutions. Part of the answer is investment in making alternatives to the car feel reliable, attractive, safe and flexible. There is also a central role for sustained public engagement as part of better participation in net zero, engaging sincerely with economic and cultural grievances, before they grow or spread. Consistent political leadership is a must-have, with clarity on why car use should be reduced, and the benefits this will bring to different people.

CAST's evidence base identifies three key ideas that make some people resistant to reducing car use. Cars are symbols of freedom and flexibility; some feel unfairly targeted; and norms and habits can be hard to shift.

[1] The policy roundtable was held on 25 October 2023. The discussion was held under Chatham House rules. This briefing has captured many of the main points raised, but CAST / Climate Outreach take full responsibility for the briefing's final recommendations, and it should not be seen as necessarily representative of the views of all participants.

Results

Freedom and flexibility

Freedom: The attitudes and beliefs of car owners vary by location (e.g. rurality), age, gender, income, and disability (see below). But for much of the last century, the car has been marketed as a symbol of freedom and flexibility, and infrastructure has locked in car use for many. These are deep-seated ideas and will take time to change. It is no surprise that car reduction policy is better supported where it isn't seen as overly coercive or an infringement on personal freedoms and is seen as having wider societal benefit.

Flexibility: A 2020 survey found that 79% of people believe car journeys to be more convenient than using other forms of transport, and even people amenable to reducing car use still see them as important for flexibility and emergencies. Part of the answer is serious investment in public transport and active travel, as has been seen in London.

However 'Freedom and flexibility' are malleable concepts and should be reframed in communications. For example, studies show that walking and cycling have become more popular and are seen as the easy, flexible and quick way to get around a congested city, without the stress of parking or traffic. As people's car use reduces, it could be the case that they become more receptive to the idea that maintaining a car is a burden; however, communications first need to address the perceived barriers of inconvenience and infrequency of service linked to public transport.

Fairness

Fairness matters to people on a profound level and is core to a lasting and widespread political mandate for anything, including reducing car use. Perceived fairness across societal groups and the effectiveness of climate policies are among the most important determinants of high acceptability.

Fairness is complex. Many would argue that it is unfair for policy makers *not* to reduce car use, given climate, air pollution and other impacts. Meanwhile, to do so may cause legitimate grievances, which should be understood and addressed through policy and engagement.

Car reduction policies can lead to two distinct types of 'unfairness':

[2] Forthcoming Thorman et al. (2024) 'Victims and Villains of driving in the CAZ: Discursive minimisation of in-groups, extreme case formulation of out-groups, and performative concern for social justice and equality'.

Results

***Perceived* unfairness**: Some may feel that car reduction is an attack on their way of life or values, whether or not the policy will make much difference to them. This has been seen in some of the anti-ULEZ protests in outer London. Not every grievance can be addressed and some are more legitimate than others, but none should be dismissed - small grievances can quickly grow. Cast Briefing 20 explores this further.

Impacts: some people may indeed be particularly impacted, if they have little capacity to adjust. Not everyone can easily reduce their car use: this can vary by, for example, whether one lives in a rural vs urban area, or working from home vs commuting every day. There are also safety concerns for women and access concerns for older populations and those with disabilities.

It's important to note that views are by no means homogenous. Car ownership and use vary by income, geography, demographics and economics. Some people are more likely to own a car - and thus by definition more likely to be impacted. For example:

- People on higher incomes own and use their cars more.
- Personal car ownership increases with age to a peak of 58% amongst 55-59-year-olds, after which it declines again.
- People with children at home have higher car ownership.
- Households living in rural areas are more likely to own a car than urban residents. In 2021, 33% of households in towns and cities didn't have a car, compared to only 5% of households in rural villages.
- Studies in Cardiff show that active commuting is high in central areas, whereas car use is more common in the outer areas of the city.

Again perceptions of fairness can change where people believe there are other ways to get around. Outer areas of Cardiff that are serviced by relatively car-free cycling routes see higher levels of cycling. This shows good quality infrastructure can help promote active travel even over larger distances. Another CAST study in Cornwall showed that car use is also the dominant mode of travel, but there is strong interest in e-mobility, including electric bikes, amongst residents, which could help reduce car use in rural areas.

[3] Forthcoming Thorman et al. (2024) 'Victims and Villains of driving in the CAZ: Discursive minimisation of in-groups, extreme case formulation of out-groups, and performative concern for social justice and equality'.

Habits and norms

Transport behaviours can be stubbornly resistant to change as so many of them are automatic, unconscious, and context-specific. Destinations (such as commuting) may become deeply associated with driving. Changing habits is a long-term game, where engagement goes hand in hand with providing, incentivising and championing other types of transport.

CAST's evidence is that soft informational or educational measures are insufficient for achieving significant lifestyle changes. When people have strong habits (e.g., to drive), information (e.g. about public transport) tends to be ignored. Furthermore, even when people have negative perceptions of driving, it is seen as a 'necessary evil' where people feel they have no alternative. Some people - through their individual circumstances, travel patterns or geography - may indeed have little choice but to drive.

Changing norms requires people to feel that it is normal to use their car less, that it's not a worse option to do so, and that they feel the wider benefits of doing so. For most people practical considerations are more important than social and symbolic ones. It may take time to convince people that public transport or other forms of travel can provide the same level of freedom, flexibility and security as car ownership. Alternatives need to *actually be good*: bad experiences with public transport can turn people against it for the long term - one reason why underinvesting in public transport can be a dangerous vicious spiral.

The good news is that the public already widely perceives shifting how we travel as effective in reducing personal emissions, and there is some willingness to change. Walking and cycling more, and using public transport, already enjoy relatively high levels of public acceptance, although most people struggle to imagine a future where car ownership is not a dominant approach to travel.

There are times when behaviour can change more rapidly. In particular moments of change or disruption - like moving house, or having children - are when we can be receptive to changing habits or behaviours. Reaching retirement age can similarly break old patterns and lead to changing travel behaviours. Studies of the impact of COVID-19 on travel behaviours show this led to substantial increases in active travel and home-working, which has partly endured since restrictions were lifted. This evidence shows it can be as important to think about *when* to intervene, as *how* to foster sustainable behaviours.

Policy recommendations:

1) Give people a genuine say on proposed car reduction policies that affect them

It's not possible to please everyone. But policy and engagement should help people feel that they and/or their communities have been listened to and their concerns understood and genuinely taken into account. This means not paying lip service to involvement, and designing policies to reduce any unfair impacts on particular people.

Wide involvement can bring to light viewpoints that may otherwise be missed in invited engagement processes**.** Such involvement should happen early in the process. CAST evidence shows the importance of people seeing that their involvement has been taken seriously.

EXAMPLE*: Engagement works well when people can visualise what a proposal might mean for them, and have a chance to see whether and how it will be 'better' for their lives in practice. CAST research in Manchester with 'Our Streets Chorlton' engaged local people during community activities, interviews and surveys to build support for reducing car use for short journeys. The community-led initiative built social networks and engaged the local community. Piloting trials that closed residential and school streets to give priority to pedestrians helped local people better engage in discussions about reducing car use, and created spaces for learning about traffic and air quality.*

2) Invest in alternatives to the car

Communication and involvement has an important role to play in highlighting alternative ways to get around that people might not be aware of. Awareness raising may be particularly effective where car travel is already seen as a hassle because of cost or traffic - for example, among urban populations, and low-income workers - and following a 'moment of change' like relocation when there is greater receptivity to information about different travel options.

But information alone is not enough. Behaviour change needs 'upstream' investment in infrastructure - for example, transforming urban space to support active travel and improving public transport. People will have to be convinced that public transport or other forms of travel can provide in practice the same level of freedom, flexibility and security associated with car ownership. A wholesale modal shift away from car use towards active and shared travel might

[4] Forthcoming Thorman et al., (2024). 'Locating common discursive strategies for transport and mobility choices in order to produce better policy communication'.

[5] Forthcoming Thorman et al., (2024). Op cit

only happen when the right infrastructure is put in place. Policies are also needed to simultaneously make car use less attractive and to break car use habits, for example implementing clean air zones and pedestrianisation.

***EXAMPLE**: The expansion of cycling networks has been associated with a significant increase in cycling across UK and European cities. Congestion charging is also one of the most effective ways of reducing car use, but needs to be accompanied with visible and effective investment in public transport.*

3) Spend time and money on proper public engagement

Climate Outreach and other organisations are calling for a national and properly resourced public engagement strategy, delivered through trusted messengers so that everyone is galvanised by their part in cutting emissions and transitioning to net zero. As explored in Cast Briefing 20, public engagement is about both authentic and impactful communication, and sustained involvement.

Transport-specific engagement should follow the same principles and should be part of a wider net-zero strategy. Communications should respond to the values, concerns and circumstances of different people, drawing out and making tangible the benefits of action people care about, such as reduced air pollution and safer streets. Engaging local campaigns which localise transport policies and the subsequent benefits can increase engagement.

EXAMPLE: A recent study from IPPR involving conversations with local campaigners, councillors, and the public found that there is a low understanding of the links between air quality and car use and that car users are more exposed to certain types of air pollution. The study recommended better communication and engagement, as well as clearer information, to address this lack of understanding. Communications about reducing car use should make clear the benefits this would have to air quality.

Further reading

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CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change.

We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, University of East Anglia, University of York, University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

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