

Six things the new government should do to improve transport planning in the UK

The Transport Planning Society believes in the power that good transport planning has to help create a better society and a better country. Transport planning can support local communities, enable economic wellbeing, be sustainable, improve the local environment, tackle issues of social justice, and make a significant contribution to cutting carbon emissions.

This cannot be done without government setting a clear framework and in many cases direct intervention, especially on how transport is charged for, how it is funded, and how investment is prioritised. The Society looks forward to working with the new government to realise the value of good transport planning, and to ensure that transport investment decisions are based on sound evidence. In particular, it is imperative, regardless of the political persuasion of the government, that the following six areas are acted on early in the next Parliament.

1. Deliver climate change actions that will reduce transport emissions

Transport is the leading sector in the UK for CO₂ emissions at 33% of all emissions in 2018. Actions proposed by past governments to decarbonise the transport network - largely confined to the electrification of the existing vehicle fleet - have been judged insufficient by the Committee on Climate Change if the UK is to meet its carbon emissions targets. More radical action is required to achieve a decarbonised transport system within the next 30 years. This action needs to start immediately.

Every effort should be made to manage demand for motorised travel in the short to medium term. The introduction of zero carbon vehicles will simply take too long. Reprioritising spending from infrastructure which supports unsustainable travel modes should, at least until technological solutions have been fully implemented, be suspended. This includes slowing down road building in the medium term programme and halting airport expansion for the immediate future. Cars bought today will continue to be used for well over a decade - which is why the purchase of fossil fuelled vehicles needs to be stopped as soon as possible and a powerful phasing in tax applied at the point of purchase.

Many of the other actions that we have proposed here will go some way to decarbonising the transport system, and encourage a shift towards sustainable modes of transport. Additionally, good planning demonstrates the decarbonisation potential of transport schemes as part of the appraisal process, meaning that appraisal processes would need to change towards favouring schemes that achieve decarbonisation.

The consequence of this is spending priorities would be significantly changed to prioritising low or no carbon emission schemes, that also achieve numerous other policy objectives such as improved health and economic performance. These include demand management and active and sustainable travel modes.

2. Closer integration of land use and transport planning and decision making

As referenced by Transport for New Homes, too many new developments are designed and built first, with non-car modes of transport as an afterthought. This ranges from sites being delivered in inaccessible locations to sites being delivered with no footways or public transport access. Getting new developments right from the outset is critical to embedding sustainable transport behaviours in the eventual occupants of that site. Current government guidance focuses on ensuring that the planning system delivers more homes and supports economic growth ambitions. These are important policy goals but should not come at the expense of good planning.

The responsibility for this is split between two government departments - the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government and the Department for Transport. There are joint working arrangements between the departments on land use and transport planning, and we recommend that such working arrangements are strengthened and reinforced. This should include the appointment of a ministerial lead on land use and transport integration.

There is a parallel need for workplaces and distribution centres to be designed to be serviced by sustainable means and recognised in local plans. There is a need to co-ordinate planning for land use, logistics, transport and technology in a way which support key social aims.

3. A long term, significantly increased funding settlement for active travel

Across England, an average of £7 per head is spent on walking and cycling infrastructure investment. This compares to £37 per head being spent on upgrades to the Strategic Road Network across England between 2015 and 2020, and £30 per head spent on cycling infrastructure in the Netherlands. Even a modest increase in spend to £18 per head as seen in London has seen a significant increase in walking and cycling in some areas. A related issue is the emphasis on capital rather than revenue funding. The positive results from the range of travel planning initiatives are well documented mean that spending in this area will require a substantial revenue element.

Strategic roads and the railways benefit significantly from five year funding and planning cycles. It gives those responsible the opportunity to plan upgrades with the certainty that funding will be available over an extended period. No such certainty exists for travel planning, walking and cycling at any level, and government must take leadership on this issue. Funding sources, such as City Challenge, are welcome but insufficient and often short term. Considering the significant social, health, and environmental benefits of walking and cycling, it is imperative that it receives a similar and elevated funding settlement to rail and road.

4. Integrating public transport in the city regions

The economic and environmental performance of city regions outside of London is being held back by public transport networks that are fragmented and poorly integrated. The significant growth in the use of local public transport in London over the last 15 years compared to declines in use in other areas (primarily driven by a 500m per annum reduction in local bus journeys since 2000) shows that public transport in our city regions is in a poor condition.

Cities outside of London must be given the powers to plan and integrate their public transport networks similar to those enjoyed in London. When they have been given powers over their transport, they have often thrived. Two successful examples are the Manchester Metrolink and devolved rail franchising in the West Midlands. The emergence of strategic transport bodies, such as Transport for the North and England's Economic Heartland, show there is an appetite for taking on greater powers. These should be accompanied by a change in funding to reduce the disparity between London and other conurbations in terms of spending per head

We also recommend the removal of rules that act as barriers to integrated ticketing on the basis of concerns over competition. We also recommend that the data provisions of the Bus Services Act in relation to fares, timetables, and real time running be extended to all modes of public transport, if necessary through primary legislation.

Finally, schemes that significantly improve strategic connectivity between and within cities and regions outside of London by public transport should be prioritised as a means of significantly increasing economic productivity. This includes committed schemes such as HS2 and Trans-Pennine Electrification, but the Government must also work proactively with the regions to identify and accelerate new strategic public transport schemes.

5. Develop the case for National Road User Charging

A new national discussion needs to take place on both how transport is funded, and whether the costs of individual modes of transport reflect the cost of their wider impacts on society. Within this, the case for National Road User Charging needs to be revisited.

Studies over a number of years have indicated that despite fuel duty and Vehicle Excise Duty raising significant funding (estimated to be over £30bn per annum), this does not cover the external cost of congestion alone. Not considering other external costs of motoring such as health issues and environmental pollution. Additionally, whilst there is a prescribed policy goal for public transport to reduce levels of public subsidy, no such commitment is given for private transport. In the mean time the fuel duty escalator should be restored and the use of new vehicle technology prioritised for rural areas to counter potential disbenefits to the less well off car users.

Since the previous significant debate on road user charging in the late 2000s, the technology required has developed rapidly. Road User charging for freight vehicles has been technologically viable for some considerable time and is in place in many countries across

Europe. It could be implemented quickly and provide useful feedback for a national system for all vehicles.

Additionally, the emergence of electric vehicles during the last 5 years will challenge the existing vehicle tax revenues as a means of funding investment in the transport network. A comprehensive review of the case for road user charging is needed over the life of the next Parliament.

6. Putting social need at the heart of new technology deployment

The Future Urban Mobility Strategy presents a significant opportunity to deploy emerging transport technologies in a socially just manner. The strategy has been successful in shifting the debate on the deployment of new transport technologies away from the operational and economic, and into the realms of meeting social needs. Transport is a major contributor to social exclusion and isolation, as well as a number of other social challenges. Now, there is an opportunity to use new technologies to tackle these issues.

An immediate action is to fund the Future Mobility Zone pilots that were due to be announced when Parliament was dissolved. It is imperative that lessons are learned from the integration of several technological solutions which are enabled by these Zones, particularly in tackling social needs and respecting the urban environment.

It is also critical that the voices that are traditionally not in the room when it comes to transport decision making have an increasing influence in the profession and the work it does. Committing to greater representation of women, ethnic minority groups, different sexual orientations and religious beliefs is useful, but greater concrete actions are needed. Actions that the Department for Transport can lead on through its engagement activities.

In summary

The next government, regardless of its political affiliation, needs to take bold action in transport if it is to tackle the significant global challenges to which it contributes. This requires a radical shift in approach to how transport is delivered in the UK, ranging from how transport is funded, to who delivers what and how it is funded. What we have covered in this article articulates the priorities of transport planners, whom are ready and willing to deliver.

This change does bring challenges with it, but also significant opportunities. Simply seeing transport as a means of delivering economic outcomes first, and other things as subsidiary to that underplays what it can achieve. Our priorities help transport planning to realise how it can make the lives of people better, in all aspects of life. The Transport Planning Society is committed to help in achieving them.