

Affordable Public Transport for a Fairer Scotland

Article by Becca Massey-Chase

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With energy prices spiralling, green policies like free public transport or capping ticket prices are on the table. Evidence of the transformational potential of alternative public transport models is growing from experiments around the world. A new report by the Institute for Public Policy Research gathers insight on how affordable transport in Scotland can tackle inequality and advance the country's climate goals.

There are strong local and global imperatives driving emissions reductions in transport. When this is focused on reducing car trips, not just changing or improving the vehicles we use, then there are great rewards for people's health and wellbeing, and those currently disadvantaged by our transport system stand to gain the most.

A new report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) concludes that – when done alongside improvements to public transport, walking and cycling interventions, and support for people to live well locally – reducing car use in Scottish cities can tackle inequality, especially for those on low incomes, at the same time as tackling the climate crisis.

A new approach to transport

Like the rest of the UK, Scotland has a transport system that is not working for many people. People on low incomes are less likely to have access to a car, but more likely to be exposed to the negative aspects of a transport system dominated by cars.

In Scotland, only 40 per cent of households with a net annual income of up to 10,000 pounds (11,390 euros) have access to a car, compared with 97 per cent of those with an income of over 40,000 pounds (45,683 euros). Meanwhile, low-income households are more likely to suffer from polluted air and more likely to be killed or seriously injured on the roads. In fact, children in the 20 per cent of most deprived areas in Scotland who are travelling on foot or by bike are more than three times as likely to be involved in a traffic accident than in the 20 per cent least deprived areas.

People on low incomes are much more likely than high earners to rely on buses. They are also less likely to be served by buses that meet their needs, with a transport system that prioritises commuter journeys into the centre of towns and cities, and with fewer services available for the more local trips such as to the shops or for childcare.

The IPPR research found that over 60 per cent of people on low incomes in Scotland say they worry about being able to afford transport. The odds are stacked against those who are already materially worse off, with those with less money often locked out of savings they could otherwise access if they could afford higher upfront costs. This is clear in the electric vehicle market, where electric cars are expensive to buy but cheaper to run, but

also in costs like monthly bus passes, and the increased costs of food shopping when paying for travel to cheaper shops is out of reach.

Affordability and reliability of transport are vital for those managing the mental and practical burdens of making ends meet.

So - what needs to be done?

Reducing the need for cars

Scotland's climate change legislation sets a legally binding target to reach net zero in 2045, five years ahead of the rest of the UK. To get there, the Scottish government have also set interim targets - including a 75 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030.

Scotland is also unique amongst the UK nations in setting out a target for reducing the distance travelled by cars; by 2030 this must reduce by 20 per cent. Edinburgh and Glasgow have gone further with local targets of 30 per cent.

Over half of people from low-income households across Scotland surveyed agreed that reducing the need for cars would make Scotland a fairer country. However, this support was conditional on making it easier and cheaper to get around without a car in general, and improving public transport services in particular.

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This means more reliable services, more affordable fares, better connections to further out neighbourhoods, and better training for staff working on buses and trains on how to ensure people from all walks of life feel welcomed and included.

Better public transport is a crucial part of fairly reducing car use. It also makes it easier for those on low incomes, many of whom do not have a car, to get about and access what they need.

To see a shift away from car journeys, we also need improved provision for people to get around on foot, bike, or wheelchair. Of course, reducing car use is not just about shifting how people get about, it is also about how much and how far people travel. It should be easier for people to access goods, services, amenities, and social connections within their local area.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent the cost of fuel at the pumps rocketing. The former Chancellor and UK Prime-Minister-hopeful Rishi Sunak, announced a fuel duty cut in his spring statement. However, research from the New Economics Foundation has found that only 7 per cent of the savings from cutting fuel duty will go to the poorest fifth of households; one-third will go to the richest fifth. It is a policy that is not targeted at those most in need.

Cheaper or even free public transport alone is not enough to create the needed shift away from cars.

Genuine concerns about car reduction initiatives can be weaponised by those with vested interests in the status quo. To ensure fairness is baked into the shift away from car use, policymakers must engage with the needs of those on low incomes at every step of the way.

Looking across Europe for inspiration

The UK can look to its European neighbours for inspiration in how to combine tackling the cost of living, improving energy security, and reducing emissions in one clear action: cutting public transport costs. Spain has seen a 30 per cent discount on public transport, including metros, buses and trams, and is set to make some rail travel free from September until the end of 2022. A 3-month experiment – which the government promises to continue – allowed travellers in Germany to buy a monthly public transport ticket for nine euros. These tickets allow people to travel on local and regional services.

And there are many more examples of subsidised or free public transport to look to. Free local public transport covers 100 towns and cities worldwide, including 20 in France, as well as in Poland, Sweden, Italy, Slovenia, Estonia, and beyond. Luxembourg is believed to be the first country in the world to offer free standard-class public transport for all – across trains, trams, and buses.

Cheaper or even free public transport alone is not enough to create the needed shift away from cars. It is not a panacea. It provides an immediate benefit to many—especially those who are currently worst served by the current system— but to exploit its potential in reducing carbon emissions, fare reduction needs to be implemented alongside improved services, better provision for active travel, and disincentives to drive.

Leaving none behind

The IPPR study surveyed the views of people living on household incomes of less than 15,000 pounds (17,084 euros) per year in Scotland. This demographic showed significant support for measures that would restrict car use in cities, particularly for giving more space to pedestrians. Yet almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of people on low incomes do not believe their needs are considered in decisions about transport. Maintaining public support is vital, so what can practitioners delivering car reduction schemes do to maximise fairness in the schemes they deliver?

Policymakers must be clearer on whose voices matter in consultations, and secure early involvement from those who are often disadvantaged by the transport system. They should also help build a strong evidence base of public support for action. The public support is there and demonstrating it to policymakers can encourage them to spend hard-won political capital on pushing for radical changes.

Achieving a large-scale change in transport demand cannot just fall on the transport system; it needs wider changes in land use, digital access, and service design. And the Scottish government is taking steps on these. There is also support for the principle of 20-minute neighbourhoods – the idea that you should be able to access what you need locally – and funding for walking and cycling.

The Scottish government's Covid-19 pandemic response included emergency funding for infrastructure interventions that created pedestrian, bike and wheelchair paths on the streets. Programmes like these demonstrate what can be achieved quickly. They are also an opportunity for cities like Glasgow to test and then make permanent successful schemes. However, polling for Disability Equality Scotland showed that 71 per cent of its members felt that the initial design of some of these projects made it more difficult to get around, pointing to details like missing drop kerbs. It could not be clearer that for schemes to be effective, they need to be fair.



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