

The Role of Road User Charging



If the number of cars and lorries on the roads fell, there would be a reduction in noise. But the opposite has been taking place. Between 1994 and 2019 all motor traffic increased by 36% (lorries up by 12%; cars and taxis up by 29%; and vans by 106%). The challenge now is to reverse that trend. Road user charging is an essential building block to making that happen.

Road user charging will cut traffic levels (1) but can it be fair?

The award-winning journalist Janice Turner wrote in her Times column (22/10/20):

“Drivers will refuse to pay to collect tiles from B & Q or take their old mum to Tesco...businesses will revolt.”

Introduced tomorrow, it would hit a lot of people very hard: low-income and disabled drivers; carers; owners of delivery vans and many small businesses; even a lot of families on average incomes, given the high cost of public transport.

Road user charging must not destroy livelihoods

It is easy for those of us who care about noise to dream of the role road user charging could have in creating quieter streets and more liveable neighbourhoods. But if it targets the less well-off and destroys livelihoods, it becomes yet another idea promoted by the better-off – which includes most NGOs and many pressure groups – at the expense of those struggling to make ends meet. It is critical that those who might potentially lose out are involved in framing any plans: carers who need their cars, by small business people who need their vans, by mums on outlying estates who rely on shared taxis, by shift workers and by disabled people.

Imagine this scenario
Public transport is very cheap so most people would be spending less on transport than they do today. Car use would fall. Congestion on the roads would be eased, saving people who need cars and vans time and money. Conditions for walking and cycling would improve. Is this an impossible dream? I don't think so.

What other measures are needed to make road user charging effective and fair?

1. Re-allocation of road space

A sensible reallocation of road space from cars and lorries to more sustainable modes of transport would assist pedestrians, cyclists, buses, taxis and trams and would encourage more use of these modes. But banning cars on streets should be the exception; not the norm. A city without cars will not function; in the same way that a city with too many cars does not function.

2. Quality conditions for walking and cycling.

There is scope for modal switch. About half the journeys we make are under two miles and 75% less than five miles. But let's be realistic. Not everybody will choose to cycle. Good bus services are essential to reducing car use of these shorter journeys.

3. The embrace of new technology.

The UK is beginning to buzz with exciting new vehicles: cargo bikes, e-scooters, e-bikes and pedicabs. Cargo bikes have the potential to cut van traffic. Research by the consultancy WSP has found that up to 14% of vans could be replaced by cycle freight in London by 2025. Electric bikes, too, have a lot of potential. A recent report from the Urban Transport Group found 100 million car and taxi trips in the city regions could be replaced by e-bikes each year (2). There are also increasing opportunities to make use of shared transport.

4. Convenient, accessible and affordable public transport.

Cheaper fares are essential for road user charging to work fairly. But they don't require massive public subsidy.

Cheap fares can be financed in a number of ways:

- By using some of the money raised from road user charging;
- By imposing a transport tax on big employers (as places like Paris already do), on the basis that their employees benefit from cheap fares;
- By introducing a small annual transport levy on our rates.

5. A comprehensive transport and planning network in place

London has such a network. A lot of UK cities don't, although a number are developing one. The network would need to include planning and housing policies that were not based around the car and, if necessary, work-place parking charges. The tricky issue of residents' parking would also need to be dealt with.

What about car-ownership? Once people own a car, they tend to want to use it. Not just because of its perceived convenience but also to get a return on their investment. Good alternatives in themselves do not seem to be enough to persuade many out of their cars. Road user charging may tip that balance.

Road user charging may well be inevitable. As electric vehicles become commonplace, fuel duty will begin to dry up. The Treasury will need an alternative source of revenue.

References:

- (1). <https://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/u/files/6%20An%20Eco%20Levy%20for%20driving%20-%20cut%20carbon,%20clean%20up%20toxic%20air,%20and%20make%20our%20towns%20and%20cities%20liveable.pdf>
- (2). <https://www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/types/reports/fully-charged-powering-potential-e-bikes-city-regions>