

# Political or personal choice? Buying into decarbonisation

Getting members of the public to support green initiatives is one thing, but those in government still need to make the tough calls, says **Beate Kubitz**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Beate Kubitz** is a writer, researcher and consultant in new mobility. She is the author of the *Annual Survey of Mobility as a Service in the UK*, as well as reports on car clubs, bike-share, open data and transport innovation. She is director of policy and communications for TravelSpirit and previously worked for CoMoUK.

The Government's transport decarbonisation plan (TDP) combines ambitious targets with reassuring promises that we can decarbonise without changing our way of life too much.

Transport secretary Grant Shapps says: "We will still fly on holiday, but in more efficient aircraft, using sustainable fuel. We will still drive on improved roads, but increasingly in zero emission cars.

"For most of us, changing how we travel may be a blend, not a binary – it's about using cars less, not giving them up completely. You'll still keep a car for some journeys – or maybe borrow one from a car club – but you'll also have an electric bike to get you to the station, perhaps take it on the train and ride it off the other end, doing the door-to-door journey in a different way. If your commute isn't possible at all by public transport, you might, instead, use a new app to find someone in the same industrial estate you can share a car with, cutting costs and parking hassle. Some big employers are already doing this to save hundreds of car journeys a day."

The question is, however, how realistic is this 'softly, softly' approach? How much can be achieved through consumer buy-in – and how much depends on the political will to make changes?

Radical change – using political levers – is tough for Government to embrace. As former under-secretary of state for transport Norman Baker puts it: "A lot of environmentalism is about stopping people doing things, but politicians like to open things rather than stop them."

Road building is a case in point. Politicians, generally, like building and opening roads – a tendency Baker ascribes to 'macho culture'. However, many view it as a short-term and over-simplistic fix for traffic problems and, at the very least, problematic for carbon reduction.

"On building roads I despair," Baker says. "I've been saying for years, if you build more roads, you attract more traffic. You can't build your way out of a problem.

"For instance, the controversial Newbury by-pass was built to solve the town's traffic problems. When it arrived there was a general attitude of 'there you are, problem

solved'. However, in only a few years, the traffic problems are back."

A general momentum in favour of the prevailing attitudes to growth and car use has made it difficult to make real changes to shape behaviour and change consumer buy-in. The political urgency is further reduced by the perception that an environmental platform is not really a vote-winner.

Baker says: "The environment has not been a vote changer. It pops up now and then. But it's never been number one."

This prevailing attitude threatens decarbonisation efforts. Transport behaviour change is notoriously slow. People make decisions about how they travel at intervals of years rather than weeks and months.

At a recent Young Bus Managers' Network event, long-time bus industry entrepreneur Julian Peddle recounted his experience owning and operating the Milton Keynes buses between 1997 and 2006.

"When I bought the business in 1997 I can confidently say it was one of the worst bus services in the country. But, with a partnership between ourselves and the local authority, we managed to double ►



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## Mayors and their transport pledges

Area	Election winner	Key policies	Manifesto extract
Greater London	<b>Sadiq Khan</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active travel</li> <li>• Low Traffic Neighbourhoods</li> <li>• Green freight</li> <li>• Silvertown Road Tunnel</li> </ul>	"Investment in cycling has seen the length of protected bike lanes increase five-fold in my first term... I'll go further, lobbying the Government for funding to electrify buses, working with businesses to support greener last-mile alternatives such as cargo bike schemes and working toward more freight consolidation and rail freight."
Greater Manchester	<b>Andy Burnham</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bus franchising</li> <li>• New cycling and walking routes</li> <li>• Hire bike scheme</li> <li>• Metrolink extension</li> </ul>	"We will bring buses under local public control, to make buses work for us, the people of Greater Manchester, and not the private bus companies."
Liverpool City Region	<b>Steve Rotherham</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contactless ticketing</li> <li>• Bus service reform</li> <li>• Merseyrail network expansion</li> </ul>	"I will publish a comprehensive long-term plan for a London-style local transport system bringing together our buses, trains and ferries and combining them with a comprehensive cycling and walking network."
West Yorkshire	<b>Tracy Brabin</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced bus partnership/franchising</li> <li>• HS2/Northern Powerhouse rail</li> </ul>	"As the MP for five years for towns and villages, I know the bus system isn't working. It's expensive, unreliable and disconnected. Buses should be publicly controlled, putting people before profit. In my first 100 days I will start to make this a reality."
West Midlands	<b>Andy Street</b> (Conservative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metro line expansion</li> <li>• New railway stations</li> <li>• "Very Light Rail" tram /streetcar development</li> </ul>	"Open the new metro stations in Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell and Wolverhampton, and begin expansion into North Solihull. Reopen five rail stations in Walsall and South Birmingham in the next three years, and make progress on 18 other new stations across the region. Agree a major programme of new segregated cycle routes and complete the roll-out of the West Midlands bike hire scheme."
Tees Valley	<b>Ben Houchen</b> (Conservative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airport rescue plan</li> <li>• Rail connectivity improvements</li> <li>• Road schemes</li> <li>• Hydrogen vehicles</li> </ul>	"In January 2018, the mayor delivered on his pledge to the people of the Tees Valley to bring our airport back into public ownership to secure its long-term future. A 10-year rescue plan will now be implemented to bring the airport back to life."
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	<b>Nik Johnson</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bus franchising</li> <li>• Bus rapid transit</li> </ul>	"As commuter patterns change I'll back high quality, greener public transport."
West of England	<b>Dan Norris</b> (Labour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean air zones</li> <li>• Liveable streets</li> </ul>	"To create a more effective system that meets local needs, I will... start a widescale transformation of our public transport network, investigating options such as mass transit and bus franchising."

► patronage over nine years ... not easy, but one of the things that I would point out is that for the first four years passenger numbers hardly budged," he says.

"We managed 20% in the first four years, with the remaining 80% in the next five because it takes a long time to get people to actually believe you are going to improve the

buses. And you need to get political buy-in for that, because, if you don't have political buy-in, it's a waste of time."

It's clear that while there is a legislative framework for decarbonising, it's hugely complex and depends both on technical and behaviour change, making the problem particularly intractable and

change laboriously slow, to say the least.

Sweeping political actions have bigger impacts. The 2003 introduction of congestion charging in London (a mayoral manifesto commitment by Ken Livingstone) had an immediate impact. There was a 37% increase in the number of passengers entering the congestion charging zone

### SOURCES

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NORMAN BAKER, FORMER UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT

by bus during charging hours in the first year. Congestion in the charging zone also reduced by 26% by 2006. There was also an impact on carbon: Greenhouse gas emissions were reduced by 16% from 2002 to 2003. NOx and PM10 within the congestion charging zone decreased by 18% and 22%, respectively, by 2004 [1].

It has been much less easy to bring in similarly radical changes outside London. To a certain extent this is because political structures were absent prior to the advent of the metropolitan mayors, with the first metropolitan mayor elected in 2017.

However, in the recent mayoral elections, while transport has made it onto several mayoral manifestos, radical action to reduce car use has not.

Probably the most high profile transport-related manifesto promise has been Manchester mayor Andy Burnham's drive to end deregulation of Greater Manchester buses.

With the exception of the Tees Valley mayor, low carbon transport has been on the winning agendas, with clean air, low traffic and improvements to public transport across the board.

This lack of appetite for advocating curbing cars can be seen in air quality action

for major cities which has veered away from charging zones as much as possible, fearing economic and voter fall out. High profile campaigns have been waged against traffic curbing measures and even against cycle lanes perceived as reducing the space for cars (as covered in previous issues of ST).

This area of discourse is often characterised by 'common sense' solutions. While transport experts understand the nuances of induced demand, it seems self-evident to many people that building bigger roads and providing more space for cars will ease congestion. Traffic evaporation is too counter-intuitive for many people (even Elon Musk has struggled with the concept), despite measurements showing declining traffic volumes and improving air quality where car lanes have been constricted.

Countering these simplistic solutions, Baker says, is "a matter of political courage."

Rather than agreeing with the 'it stands to reason' brigade, he says politicians should be promoting the counter-arguments.

"Where we're seeing car congestion is getting bad, say to car drivers that bus lanes cut the number of cars," he adds.

By demonstrating the economic benefits of the more sophisticated approaches, politicians should convince people to

▲ Using your car less will help overall congestion issues

37%

increase in bus passengers entering the zone after congestion charging introduced in London

support them, he argues: "While the Government won't take on the car, you can see it's not necessary for success.

"Take Brighton. It's a nightmare to drive round, but buses and trains are frequent. Brighton does really well economically."

There is frustration in central government that schemes allocating more space to active travel have been removed in response to local outcry. Transport Minister Chris Heaton-Harris has formally written to the leaders of all English local authorities with transport responsibilities to warn them that they will lose funding if cycle lanes and low-traffic neighbourhoods are removed before giving them chance to work or without evidence that they are failing.

Over time, a number of longer standing 'politically courageous' schemes have borne fruit. The workplace parking levy in Nottingham has had the desired result of reducing driving into the city centre while raising funds to expand the tram network and improve buses.

Leicester has announced its intention to follow suit, but there's already local opposition, despite the obvious economic and social benefits shown in Nottingham.

A smaller-scale intervention, Mini Holland in London's Waltham Forest was hugely



► controversial when it was announced, and, indeed, throughout its consultation and implementation period.

Councillor Clyde Loakes says: "When the Mini Holland funding was announced we had to throw our hat into the ring. It was exciting to bid for money that sat with our values and particularly with our public health and active travel agenda.

"We'd already set aside money to improve junctions and spend a lot of money on modal shift, but consultation has always only achieved 'lowest common denominator' improvements. This was not transformational. The proposed money was a large injection of cash for radical intervention at pace."

Controversy over Mini Holland was intense and Loakes was pitched into angry public meetings with a lot of vocal opposition. It has required a great deal of political courage to keep up the momentum and not water down the plans.

"Part of the reason has been a recognition that the loud voices project well and have a high profile, but represent far fewer

people than they appear to, when they are scrutinised more closely.

At the same time as the Mini Holland plans provoked debate, they also pushed climate and transport up the agenda.

During the recent election, Loakes observed: "When you go knocking on doors people will talk to you about the active travel agenda. In the 2018 local elections everyone had a view, wherever they lived, whether it was in one of our 'village' areas or on a boundary road. I think it's taken transport to another level as being in the top 10 things people will raise.

"Previously, it might have been the odd comment about speeding or parking."

It's significant for the Mini Holland plans (and political courage of this kind) that Loakes was re-elected on an increased majority – while all the other parties stood on anti-Mini Holland platforms.

"I think they were paying too much attention to angry threads on social media and relatively small events and protests," he says.

"There is a huge amount of quiet support in the middle ground. We are seeing a

▲ **Waltham Forest's Mini Holland is a small scale project that's improved areas affected by congestion**

difference in the area with better community cohesion and resilience."

This is an interesting theory, and one supported by research into attitudes to climate change in the UK.

The Britain Talks Climate survey found that there is a great deal of common ground within the public on climate change, even between people who have very different experiences, economic situations and political allegiances.

While people have tendencies to express or emphasise different areas, they coalesce around certain values – "protecting future generations, creating a healthier society and preserving the countryside in ways that end our throwaway culture – have almost universal resonance across Britain [2]."

Polling shows cross-community awareness of climate change and support, but a real feeling that what individuals can do is limited.

Some of these values have come to the fore during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The same survey found that: "All segments acknowledge some

(unintended) positive aspects of the Covid-19 lockdown – for example, fewer vehicles on the roads leading to cleaner air and louder birdsong – and have become more aware of the need to protect ourselves against future climate impacts, as well as the need to protect our healthcare system against ‘double’ catastrophes (such as a heatwave during a pandemic).

“Other messages have become more salient during this time, with every segment agreeing that our recovery from Covid-19 offers opportunities to create new green jobs, bolster British manufacturing and hold businesses to higher sustainability standards.

“Strikingly, no one wants to go back to ‘normal’ after the worst of the crisis is

over. Social systems usually resist radical change, but people don’t want to come out of this crisis the wrong way, and recognise that a window of opportunity for fundamental change has opened up.”

Perhaps one of the lessons of the pandemic is that people are more prepared to take part in measures to protect others than politicians assume (particularly when everyone is following the same rules).

While intervention at local level to shape the way that people travel – enabling active travel and rebalancing car use to a smaller percentage of trips – is really important to people’s day-to-day lives, Baker points out that Government has other levers at national level: “People will do what’s best for their pocket. The job of Government is to design systems that mean what’s best for society is what’s best for their pocket.”

This is where consumer buy-in can be harnessed to promote decarbonisation. However, the uncomfort-

## SOURCES

[2] Wang, S., Corner, A., and Nicholls, J. (2020). Britain Talks Climate: A toolkit for engaging the British public on climate change. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

▼ **It would take political courage to make motoring more expensive and use the money to support lower carbon transport modes**

able truth is that there is virtually no form of consumer buy-in that is entirely devoid of politics. The cost of both carbon-light and carbon-intense options is shaped by the tax regime.

Fuel duty in the UK has remained static for the past 10 years, weighing in favour of internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles and lowering the relative cost of motoring while bus and rail fares have risen.

The 100% write-down of the value of electric cars has made them attractive to business and the self-employed, and burgeoning numbers of electric fleet vehicles speaks to the success of the policy.

This balancing act in the tax regime shapes consumer choices. At present, the impacts on positive actions are not big enough. While tax-savvy business people can defray some of the investment required to go electric, consumers have little urgency provided their costs remain constant.

For consumer buy-in to really take off, the whole tax framework will need to support low carbon choices. This implies a regime which supports taking the bus, switching from air to rail, reducing car trips and eliminating all petrol and diesel journeys.

The Treasury could, for instance, raise fuel duty and air passenger duty and switch the £27 billion allocated to road building to supporting lower carbon transport modes.

That, however, would require ‘political courage’.

There’s been an attitude that ‘technology will save us’ and we’ll innovate our way out of the climate crisis.

However, innovation, alone, can only achieve so much.

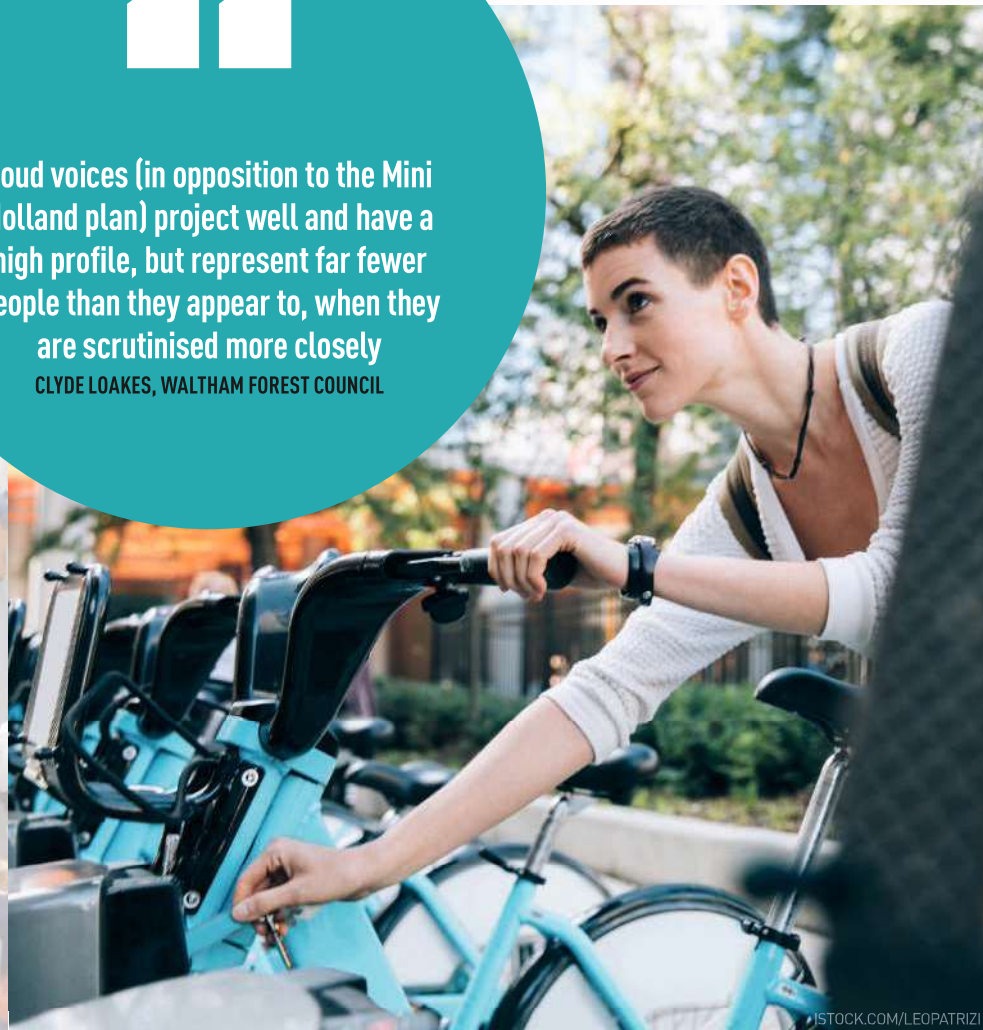
Uptake – whether we like it or not – is shaped by the instruments of state.

From local councils creating low traffic areas, putting in cycling lanes or ensuring people have access to public transport, right the way through to the tax framework at national level, decarbonisation is a matter of political will. [ST](#)



**Loud voices (in opposition to the Mini Holland plan) project well and have a high profile, but represent far fewer people than they appear to, when they are scrutinised more closely**

**CLYDE LOAKES, WALTHAM FOREST COUNCIL**



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