# The journey towards sustainable travel

August 2021

transportfocus

# Foreword

**This report is the first in a series looking at how governments' plans to decarbonise transport can be implemented. As the Covid-19 crisis hopefully fades, the climate crisis is back in the news. Transport Focus wants to play a leading role in how behaviour change can be encouraged so that people can more easily choose more sustainable forms of transport.**

We know from previous insight over many years that cost and convenience plus, to a lesser degree choice and control of when and how to travel, determine how we choose to move around. More recently we have seen that Covid-19 has made us more likely to prioritise feeling safe when we travel. If we are to encourage more sustainable travel, it's vital that the convenience side of this equation is given prominence alongside cost and value for money. Even a free bus might not be enough to tempt people to change their behaviour.

This insight and our upcoming work will be helpful to governments and the transport industry as it looks to achieve net zero emissions.

**Anthony Smith**

Chief executive

# Background

**There is no doubt that Covid-19 has had a major effect on why, where and how we have been travelling since March 2020. Our regular habits and preferences have been disrupted and we are all working out again where we go, when and how. This includes getting to work or going away with the family for the summer holiday. Some of us are wanting to get back to what we used to do and others are rethinking their old behaviour.**

At the same time, another crisis hasn't gone away - that of climate change. While it doesn't have the same immediate life or death daily statistics as the pandemic, there is no disputing that its effects are also global and enormous and action is needed.

This is why we felt it was a good time to look at how much people know and care about sustainability and carbon reduction and how they feel about making changes to their own behaviour now and in the future. We deliberately asked about people's lives in general to understand what sustainability means in any context, and then looked at their transport use in more detail.

This report is a summary of the main conclusions and sets the scene for future work. It is just the first step in our work on decarbonisation and sustainability in transport. As the user representative, we are well-placed and keen to assist in helping improvements to be made. Our role means that we must make sure that we understand what transport users know, what they need to know and what they need to be provided and by whom. Then we can help them make informed decisions around their future behaviour in transport and more broadly.

# Objectives and method

**This research was conducted with the overall aim of establishing a base of knowledge about people's attitude to sustainability in 2021.**

We wanted to understand:

- What people think about sustainability and climate change right now.

- What actions have they taken to impact their own carbon emissions and being more sustainable? What supports/drives those actions?

- Specific behaviours relating to transport and the role of sustainability/carbon in making decisions about their own transport use.

Over the course of three weeks in March 2021, we spoke to 80 people from across Great Britain, using online focus groups and an online community, to explore their attitudes, behaviours and future intentions. The project was done by Quadrangle, an agency with significant experience in the subject of sustainability.

# Key findings

## There is a basic understanding of 'sustainability', but it is too vague to feel actionable.

**People don't have a clear sense of what the core issue is, or the relative importance of different issues that come under the sustainability umbrella. The most obvious and commonly mentioned area is plastic pollution. This is very tangible and visible and it feels like there are concrete steps that can be taken.**

But beyond that people have a lot of uncertainty about the issues, which is compounded by contradictory information. People are left unsure what they can and can't believe about the situation overall. This means that it is difficult for people to measure their own performance or output, or to understand what actions they could take to make a difference.

"To summarise, I'm pretty much confused by everything. I want a Ferrari but I want to slow down Earth's temperature increase. I want my drink in a cheap tough bottle, but I don't want to harm turtles. I want a nice warm house but don't want to pay increased charges for sustainable energy. I want my cake and eat it. Hopefully, the next generation will make a better job of it."

## Some do not identify with sustainability, seeing it as a personal choice.

Some are actively not engaging with sustainability. This may be because:

- They have other priorities taking their energy.
- They actively do not want to be associated with the image they have of people who are sustainable.
- They do not see themselves as able to get involved, even if they would like to. This could be for financial, geographic or other reasons.

"Sustainability is being pushed on us but it is not an important consideration for me – I'm not ashamed of it!"

"I feel like sometimes it can seem like a bit of a blame game. Like if you're not kind of following the trends you kind of seen in like a negative light especially like with veganism and stuff."

## Because change feels beyond their control, people expect (and mostly accept) that change will come from above.

Supermarkets and food and drinks manufacturers are felt to have a key role to play in taking action – primarily due to concerns about plastics and food waste being very top of mind. But governments – both central and local – are also felt to have a major responsibility for tackling sustainability issues. People feel it is unfair to put pressure on consumers to change their behaviours when there are much bigger forces at play within business, and the economy more generally, that could have a greater impact on addressing the situation. They would also like to see more sustainable choices being made cheaper and more readily available than the less-sustainable alternatives.

"I feel predominantly it's up to the government to initiate schemes to encourage results pertinent to sustainability."

## Within this overall sustainability conversation, transport doesn't immediately come into people's minds.

People do recognise that transport is a major cause of carbon emissions, but it doesn't come top of mind in terms of actions they could be taking. They don't see that there are any viable alternatives to their current modes of transport, so switch off from considering it as part of any individual actions they might take. Infrastructure is seen as a major barrier to more sustainable transport choices – whether that's around electric vehicles or access to public transport in more rural areas. There is no anticipation that this will change soon in order to offer them better options.

> "I don't think we're very close to being sustainable when it comes to transport at all. It's all about convenience, if the world doesn't change, then how is it feasible to walk everywhere…"

> "I'm better driving my car than those people that go to farmers' markets but then fly four times a year."

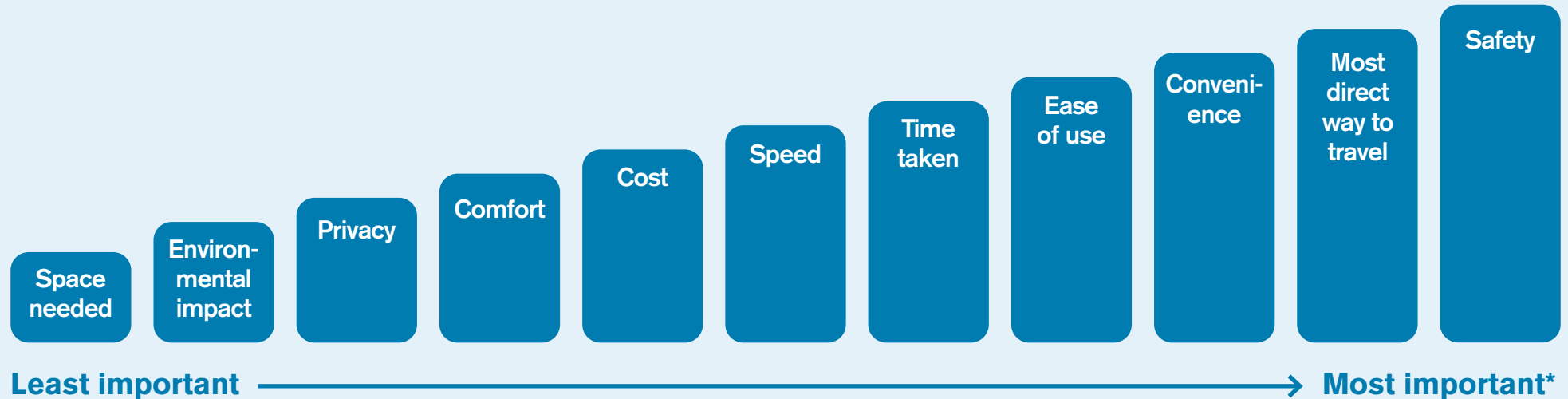## Sustainability is not a key driver of transport decisions – and it will struggle to become one.

When people are making choices about transport, sustainability is not a primary need or driver. Safety, convenience, ease, speed and cost all rank above sustainability when people are making decisions about how they travel. People are generally not prepared to make significant sacrifices in order to travel more sustainably – whether that is in terms of time, cost or convenience. The compromise doesn't feel worthwhile due to the overall negative impact on them as an individual.

There is also an element of fairness and futility when it comes to travelling sustainably. Some people question why they should change to a more efficient car when other people fly regularly. Or they feel they have other areas of their life where they are more responsible.

> "I don't have kids so it's OK that I have a car."

# Environmental concerns are a low priority when people are deciding how to travel.

Space needed

Environ-mental impact

Privacy

Comfort

Cost

Speed

Time taken

Ease of use

Conveni-ence

Most direct way to travel

Safety

**Least important** ———————————→ **Most important***

**There is no clear and credible alternative to current behaviour – making journeys using sustainable transport feels almost or entirely impossible. Consumers have a tendency to be absolutist.**

It's impossible for people to imagine change without expecting significant compromise or a more negative experience. People feel such changes would have a high negative impact on 'me'. They feel it would make such an insignificant impact on the problem that it is not worth the sacrifice.

Because consumers don't accept that any other options are feasible, they find it easy to justify their behaviour - even if they do think it isn't sustainable.

* Rank order of 'very important' factors among our community - not quantitative data.

"It can be hard to behave 'sustainably' because I am used to travelling by air and car and it's hard to commit to sacrificing this. It's really hard to not act selfishly– especially when it feels that my personal contribution isn't making any difference at all. It's really easy to get discouraged when you see bigger contributors to climate change and pollution not taking enough action themselves."

# Sustainable transport behaviours have both positive and negative associations.

**People see sustainable transport as:**

**Expensive:**

- cost of buying electric vehicles
- cost of public transport – especially for families
- general sense (from grocery shopping) that sustainable = expensive.

**Inconvenient:**

- compromising what is important to them – in other words not getting the speed/directness of travelling by car
- public transport associated with discomfort, stress/uncertainty (particularly in the context of a pandemic).

**However, there is the potential that more sustainable transport could offer:**

- cleanliness and air quality - reduction of fumes and grime
- quietness of electric vehicles and of there being fewer cars on roads
- efficiency
- health benefits (physical and mental) of walking or cycling.
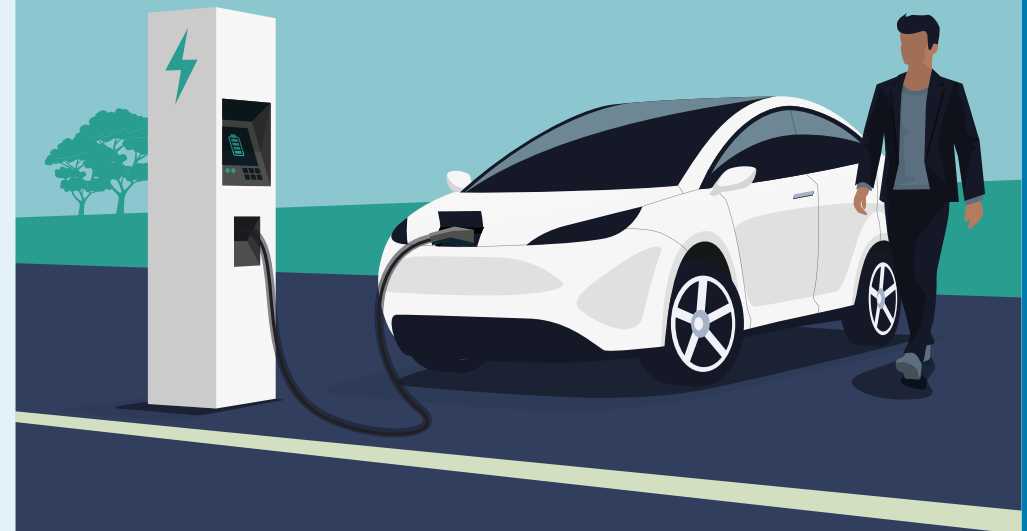
# Some potential interventions have potential to build on.

**There are no easy wins, so improving sustainability in transport overall will require a combination of interventions and considering how they address issues at a personal, social and structural level.**

There are significant expectations that government will lead the way, through meaningful change to infrastructure, before more punitive measures are put in place.

## Personal

- Move solutions from 'high impact on me, low impact on problem' to 'high impact on problem, low impact on me'. Any change needs to feel minimal to the individual, but effective in terms of addressing the problem.

- Make it measurable and something people can tangibly engage with – let them know that small changes are okay.

## Social

- Don't always lean on sustainability as a key driver – avoid the identity/badge and focus on other benefits of sustainable behaviours.

- Encourage the sense of collective action, but acknowledge individual realities.

## Structural

- Local and central government and industry need to lead the way – force change (as Covid-19 action has proven it can). It's not a one-size-fits-all response and will require a combination of national and local initiatives.

- Businesses need to innovate visibly for the future to provide confidence that change is possible and desirable.

# What next?

**1.** There's a lot more detail behind this research – see the full version of the report on our website. Even better, we'd love to come and talk through the details and what it means.

**2.** This has given us a great understanding of all the issues and the complexity of what is needed to support consumers to change behaviour.

**3.** It is a really good time to explore the issues as we come out of Covid-19 and people start their own 'new normals'. Great upheaval like we have experienced makes people re-evaluate and possibly change their habits – this could be both an opportunity and a threat.

**5.** We're planning to do more work in the future more specifically around transport use and behaviour change. Both at the overall consumer level, like this project, and specifically around different modes.

**6.** Get in touch with your questions and ideas.

**4.** We want to understand more about sustainability for transport users.

# Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this report should be addressed to:
Louise Coward
Acting head of insight
Louise.coward@transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus
Albany House
86 Petty France
London
SW1H 9EA
www.transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

**Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing the interests of:**

- bus, coach and tram users across England outside London
- rail passengers in Great Britain
- all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network).

**We work to make a difference for all transport users.**

transportfocus