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Consultation on the consumer experience at public chargepoints: response from Transport Focus

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network, SRN), and we welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The need for all car and van drivers to switch to electric vehicles in the coming decades is a significant change from established practices for road users, and so Transport Focus has been researching their views, experiences and priorities around making that change. We had a very useful initial meeting with Sophie Adams at OZEV on 11 March at which we outlined our approach.

We ran a webinar on 10 March, attended by the Minister, Rachel Maclean, and Emily Sam of OZEV, at which vehicle and charging network suppliers heard the concerns of users and current non-users and identified priorities for overcoming consumer resistance. We fed into the event evidence obtained by Transport Focus from our engagement with over 1,300 road users on their views about electric vehicles.

The great majority (82%) of respondents are aware of the intention to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and 27% say they are likely to buy an electric vehicle (EV) within the next five years. The current cost to buy or lease an EV emerged as the main bar to going electric for the remaining 73%, with concern about where to charge and the related range anxiety also being cited by significant numbers of those not yet likely to go electric. The summary report of that evidence is attached, and, in identifying considerations such as these related to the public charging network, underlines the importance of the proposals on which you are consulting in facilitating the switch away from petrol and diesel cars.

Over the past month we have also carried out in-depth engagement with a demographically representative group of 25 EV users about the issues around public chargepoints raised by your consultation document. This new research has generated useful evidence of road user opinion on the specific questions you have posed, as set out in the Annex to this letter. We will provide the full report to OZEV as soon as it is available.

We obtained from this research a clear sense that EV owners love their vehicles and the overall experience of driving electric, which is generally straightforward and enjoyable. Most participants in our research charged their vehicles most of the time at home (where a separate set of issues were identified). On the road, there were definitely aspects which require effort that would not be faced by drivers of conventional vehicles, but there was a general feeling that the spread and quality of charging networks is improving. Users reported that coverage of chargepoints was less of an issue for them than it is generally perceived by current non-users – although reliability of chargepoints was another matter. Our users were cautiously optimistic about how the network issues would be addressed in the run-up to 2030 – but had an unprompted sense that Government had to do more to bring the infrastructure for EVs up to speed. Care will be needed though in the intervening years, as user numbers rise sharply, to manage expectations about the charging infrastructure to avoid user frustration when things don't work seamlessly.

It should be noted that current EV owners appear to be an unusually engaged group, ready to put in the extra effort to make a success of being an early adopter; the industry and Government should note that this may not be true of the much larger number of new EV owners in future years.

The user experience at chargepoints will be an important factor in broader public perceptions of the ease of switching to EVs, in particular giving confidence that an EV is for longer trips too, not just for travelling around your own town. Addressing the perception, whether accurate or otherwise, that chargepoints are unreliable is important. With our experience of tracking consumer satisfaction in transport, including through the Strategic Roads User Survey, Transport Focus is well-placed to measure satisfaction with recharging facilities on Highways England's roads and so drive up quality.

We would welcome further discussion with OZEV to address any questions about the evidence we are supplying in response to this consultation, and to discuss how we can support your objectives for EV roll-out.

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy