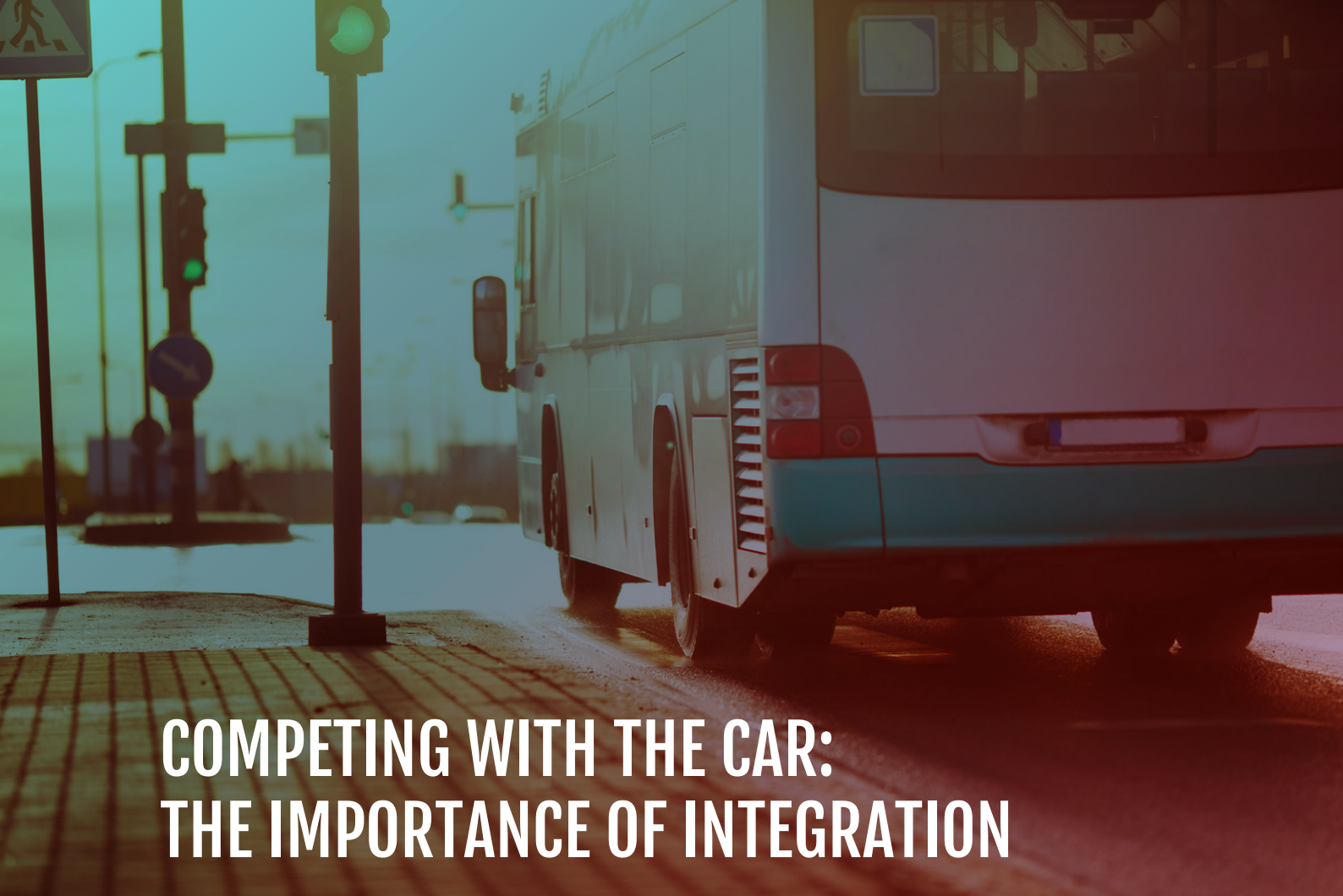


COMPETING WITH THE CAR: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION



Without major shifts in strategy, the UK's future is an ever-expanding urban sprawl, longer journey times and increasing congestion. Summing up SYSTRA's 3-part Local Transport webinar series which took place over the past 12 months, our SYSTRA contributors have pulled together a useful summary.





COMPETING WITH THE CAR: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

The Government has ambitious plans for housebuilding. It wants to ramp up the number of new homes being delivered to 450,000 homes a year by 2029, with a goal of 1.5 million homes by the end of its five-year term.

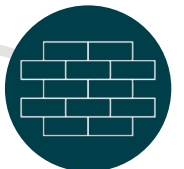
To do this, it intends to give mandatory targets to local authorities, create new towns and will allow developments on sections of green belt around existing towns and cities, now defined as 'grey belt'. Among the concerns raised by local councils is the increased strain on local infrastructure that demanding new homes targets will bring. New homes mean more cars on the UK's already challenged local and national road networks. Research from the New Economics Foundation, published in November 2024, shows that over the past 15 years, dependency on cars in new housing developments has risen in every region of the UK, apart from London.

Without a serious change in direction, the UK is facing a future with more congestion and longer journey times alongside all the other negative impacts that come with those problems: lower productivity, increased poverty, noise and air pollution and unliveable urban areas.

According to the latest Department for Transport figures, 58% of all journeys were made in cars in 2022, accounting for 78% of the total distances being travelled.

It doesn't have to be this way

An integrated approach to planning, with reliable public transport networks at its core, could reduce this destructive trend. But that would require big vision, political bravery and new approaches to transport funding.



What does good look like?

For inspiration, we could look to our European neighbours such as Sweden and the Netherlands. They set national strategies which define where to locate new houses, taking into account multiple factors including land use, nature, environmental impacts and public transport.

Providing excellent public transport links to new towns is the first task on the agenda for these countries. Rather than sighting new housing zones close to good road links, the aim for planners in the Netherlands is to avoid adding traffic to the national highway network; instead, growing areas such as Binckhorst outside The Hague or Hoogkerk on the outskirts of Groningen are served by new rail and light rail links.

Densities of housing tend to be higher for our European neighbours. With medium-rise apartment buildings arranged around green spaces and sustainable transport – with walking and cycling made easy – there are enough people to make these new locations attractive propositions for retailers, cafes and other small service businesses.

Interchanges between modes of transport are made simple too. In Rosendal, a new residential area called Växjö in Sweden, residents and visitors can arrive by train and simply cross over the platform to where the bus stops are located, with the whole town connected by bus routes and cycle paths.

Another noticeable characteristic of public transport in these countries is that it is clean, comfortable and pleasant to ride on. And the frequencies of services are sufficient to allow people to reliably plan their journey times.

Downward spiral

One of the poorest understood impacts of an economy where cars trump public transport, is that the poor get poorer. Research from the Social Market Foundation shows that 8% of households in the UK are in transport poverty – in terms of their family finances, a figure that rises to over 10% in some parts of the Midlands, Northern England and Scotland.

The Foundation has shown that the freezes on fuel duty made by the UK Government over the past 10 years give the least financial benefit to the poorest car users, who tend to drive small cars and use fuel very efficiently. Meanwhile, its researchers have found that for every 10% increase in public transport speed relative to driving, the average household saves £435 per year. If every city had a transport system like London's, urban poverty would fall by 22% and poverty over the UK would fall by 7%.

Yet, the UK is locked in a downward spiral. Even where services are available, fewer people can afford to use them, so fares continue to rise to maintain those services – making them even less affordable.



THE FUNDING CHALLENGE

If the current Government is to take bold decisions to match policy to its intentions, there is the thorny issue of funding to consider. 'Transport for Quality of Life' has estimated that providing a public transport network that could persuade people to switch away from cars would require additional operating funding of around £19bn per year by 2030 and additional capital spending of £10bn a year over 10 years.

Transport currently receives a small proportion of the central Government funding pie compared with the health and education for example, but spending on transport needs to rise if its sustainability targets are to be met.

Transport for Quality for Life suggests that some £60bn a year could be generated if the Government bites the bullet and makes life less pleasant for drivers. Proposed measures include cutting the road building budget, introducing road charging – pay per mile instead of fuel duty – and encouraging measures such as workplace parking levies.

Another stream of funding could be secured by following the lead of Canada and Australia, merging local government pension funds and directing some of their investment into UK infrastructure projects as equity and loan capital. Public private partnership (PPP) finance models, though unfashionable in the UK now, have also proved successful in other countries such as France where they have delivered cost efficient high-speed rail projects.

There are signs that the Government understands the need for a national, strategic approach to transport planning, with the creation of Great British Railways. But it needs to go much further if its mantra of economic growth is to become more than just words. Without radical change, poverty will increase, bills for social and health care will burgeon further and productivity will remain stagnant.





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