

# Low-Carbon Mobility in London: A Just Transition?

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**London is a leading example of how cities are transitioning toward low-carbon mobility, but it is unclear how just this transformation is. Offering more and better support to citizen-led initiatives that support walking and cycling can make the shift to low-carbon mobility in London more just.**

## Transition

Transport is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs) globally and a sector where it is particularly challenging to achieve deep cuts in emissions. Responsible for  $\pm 70\%$  of transport's GHG emissions, cities are the places where fossil fuel dependence can be overcome most easily.<sup>1</sup> London, UK, is a paradigmatic example of a city undergoing a low-carbon mobility transition—a structural transformation in technology, physical infrastructure, markets, regulation and governance, cultural values, and user practices toward greater environmental sustainability.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of infrastructure, London has seen significant expansion in urban rail (e.g., London Overground, trams in South London, and Crossrail), cycling (e.g., Cycleways, “Mini-Hollands,” and bicycle sharing), and electric vehicles (e.g., publicly available slow- and fast-charger networks and dedicated e-taxi bays). New urban development has also been concentrated around public transport stations—a planning strategy known as transit-oriented development (TOD). At the same time, London has become a symbolically important site where transnational firms providing car-sharing, ride-hailing, and dockless bicycle-sharing services want to be seen as active.

Moreover, this physical transformation has been accompanied by changing social habits (Figure 1). There has been a 30% reduction from 414 to 289 trips by car or van per person per year between 2002 and 2017 (the corresponding number for England outside London is 9%, albeit from the much higher base level of 713 in 2002).<sup>3</sup> Also, almost all census tracts in central London have seen a decline in household car ownership levels of 10%–25% between 2001 and 2011, and reductions of up to 10%

occurred over much of Outer London—the ring of inner suburbs within the administrative area of Greater London—in that decade.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the biggest changes have occurred in regulation and governance. These include the formation of Transport for London (2000) as the metropolitan-level authority responsible for transport planning and the delivery and operation of multiple services and the implementation of the London Congestion Charge (LCC) (2003), Low Emission Zone (2008), and Ultra Low Emission Zone (2019). Academics and policymakers alike have studied extensively how the LCC was implemented as a “stick” in a wider package of “carrots” (including investments in public transport) and sought to understand whether and how its successful implementation can be replicated in cities elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> London's experience is unusual because in almost all cities where a congestion charge has been proposed, implementation has failed as a result of widespread and sometimes fierce resistance by many residents, businesses, and other stakeholders.

## Mobility Justice

It is less clear, however, whether the transition in London's mobility system can also be considered *just*. Critical reflection on this point is both normatively appropriate and instrumentally important, if only to reduce resistance to further change and accelerate the low-carbon mobility transition.

Questions of justice are also attracting increased attention in the energy and mobility literatures.<sup>6–9</sup> There is no consensus about conceptual or methodological approaches, although justice in energy transitions is increasingly taken to comprise three dimensions:<sup>7</sup>

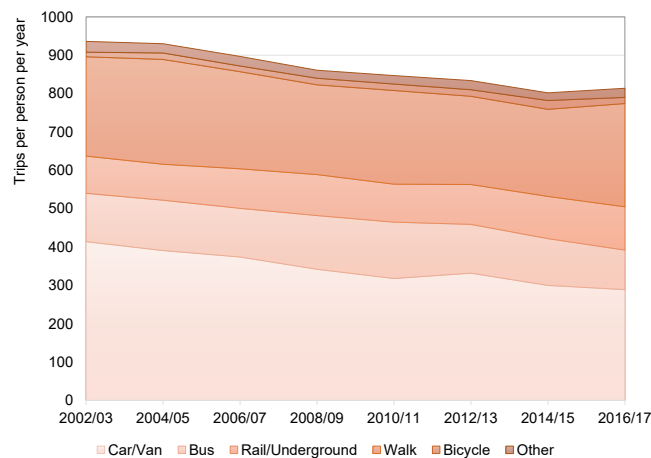
- **Distributional justice:** the distribution of benefits (resources and opportunity) and costs, harms, and risks associated with particular decisions, actions, and changes.
- **Procedural justice:** the nature of decision making and governance, including the level of participation, inclusiveness, and influence participants can wield.
- **Justice as recognition:** acknowledgment of and respect for the rights, needs, values, understandings, and customs of groups involved in, or affected by, decision making and governance.

When attention is directed toward London's low-carbon mobility transition, then issues of distribution, procedure, and recognition can readily be identified. Questions of distribution have so far been the most widely acknowledged. Attempts to increase the uptake of cycling, for instance, fail to entice all Londoners; groups that are already more likely to cycle—male and aged 25–45 years,<sup>10</sup> as well as white and highly educated—have benefited most. Electric vehicles are not affordable for many households, and charging them remains easiest for households with off-street parking, which is also more common among higher-income groups. As in numerous other cities, TOD strategies without strong governmental control over land values and housing prices seem to push poorer households out of locations near public transport stops, where the benefits of access to rail and buses are greatest. Furthermore, commercial car-sharing services remain spatially concentrated in higher-density, medium-income neighborhoods, where the demand and ability to pay for their services are sufficiently stable to sustain

commercial operation. More generally, changes in urban mobility have been much more transformational in central London than in Outer London.

To be fair, the current metropolitan government headed by Mayor Sadiq Khan is aware of many of these distributional issues. This is why his comprehensive and in many ways progressive transport strategy from 2018 emphasizes the need to offer transport alternatives to the private car that are “accessible and appealing to all Londoners” (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> Still, the capacity of metropolitan- and local-level public authorities to reconfigure distributional and procedural justice of their own accord is limited. They can develop physical infrastructure for walking, cycling, and public transport and freeze public transport fares. Nonetheless, their hands are tied by national regulation, cuts to local transport planning budgets after a decade of austerity politics by national government, their dependence on private companies for the provision of car-sharing or ride-hailing services and the design of new housing and urban developments, and the (tacit) assumption that the private sector has a leading role to play in smart-mobility developments.

The challenge of achieving greater justice is confounded by the difficulty of fully considering the heterogeneity in transport-related needs, values, understandings, and customs across London’s diverse population within a starkly history-dependent approach to urban transport planning. The continued commitment of the latter to increasing efficiency—more, faster, cheaper, and more reliable movements per time unit—and contributing to economic growth constrains the capacity to heed the recognition dimension of justice in transport planning. Consequently, the 2018 Mayor’s Transport Strategy is quite selective in the social groups whose needs it acknowledges; it does refer to children and to older and disabled Londoners but has little to say about, for example, migrants from non-Western backgrounds or those



**Figure 1. Change over Time in Trip Rates by Transport Mode in London**  
Source: Department for Transport.<sup>3</sup>

in precarious employment. Moreover, the needs of recognized groups are framed in terms of efficiency, convenience, accessibility, safety, and the freedom to “turn up and go.”<sup>11</sup> This framing undoubtedly captures key concerns among the groups in question. However, it also continues to posit a generic utility-maximizing human individual as the golden standard for all Londoners rather than engage with those groups’ complex and differentiated needs, values, understandings, and customs regarding urban transport on their own terms. The latter is, however, essential if London is to achieve a rapid and just transition toward low-carbon mobility.

### Grassroots Initiatives

A strategy document can only say so much. Across the stakeholders in London’s transport system there is greater recognition of the diverse needs, values, understandings, and customs regarding urban transport than acknowledged in the 2018 Mayor’s Transport Strategy. Despite its importance, that strategy also illustrates the limitations of the traditionally dominant approach among most transport researchers and practitioners, which is to rely on the national state and local state to lead the way to a better future.

When it comes to low-carbon mobility transitions, the state is better thought of as both insufficient and necessary for achieving just change.<sup>12</sup> It is insufficient because large sectors of the (local)

state remain enthralled to transport discourses, vested interests, and planning approaches that keep prioritizing and valorizing efficiency, speed, and a generic human subject. It is necessary given its capacity to redistribute some of the benefits of changes in urban mobility—witness the London strategy’s understanding of “good growth” as growth that benefits “all of the city’s current and future residents”<sup>11</sup>—and its ability to support and empower actors who can advance a just low-carbon mobility transition.

Key among the latter are grassroots or citizen-led initiatives that support cycling and walking—the most (distributively) just transport modes given that restrictions on access and imprints on the wider urban environment (e.g., air and noise pollution, CO<sub>2</sub> emission, eviction, and displacement) are usually much smaller than for other modes. As the mobility equivalent of grassroots innovations for sustainable development,<sup>13</sup> those initiatives comprise not only activism around cycling safety or campaigning for better pedestrian crossings but also the hugely diverse activities and schemes run by citizen collectives that across London seek to improve access, knowledge, skills, aspiration, autonomy, and/or influence over institutionalized policy regarding walking and cycling. Examples include bicycle-riding or -mechanics instruction, bicycle provision, collective rides, and group walks. These activities and schemes tend to cater to the needs of specific disadvantaged social groups, such as those with disabilities, cultural and religious minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, women and gender-variant people, low-income residents of deprived neighborhoods, children, and older people. They address the distributional and recognition dimensions of justice by enhancing walking- and cycling-related skills, building people’s confidence to go out and about or fix a bicycle, harnessing social relationships, and generating positive emotions in ways that are tailored to the target group in question.

Furthermore, given the participatory and deliberative character of the organizations behind the activities and schemes, advancing procedural justice in low-carbon mobility is another contribution many initiatives make. The emphasis on the distribution, procedural, and recognition dimensions of justice reflects that most leaders, staff, and volunteers run initiatives on the basis of visions of a more socially and environmentally just society and want to lead by example.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the capacity of citizen-led initiatives that support walking and cycling to encourage a just transition to low-carbon mobility in London should not be overestimated. Walking and cycling can—and should—be the backbone of London's mobility system, but multiple kinds of motorized transport will always be needed, not least because of the physical distances within Greater London. In addition, the citizen-led initiatives discussed above are usually (very) small in terms of spatial extent and number of beneficiaries. Their continuation is regularly threatened by limited funding, shortage of good staff and volunteers, or a lack of physical space in a city where appropriate accommodation is scarce and expensive. Furthermore, not all initiatives want to grow in size, and questions of finance, staff, and space often become more pertinent if they do. Besides, the professionalization and standardization that usually accompany expansion could compromise their participatory and inclusive decision-making processes and diminish the ability to cater to certain needs, values, understandings, and customs within their target group.

Still, those initiatives could make a greater contribution to a just low-carbon mobility transition in London if they were supported more widely and effectively by the local state. Transport for London (TfL) and the boroughs already assist in multiple ways but could offer more by means of more flexible and long-term funding, administrative support, training for staff and volunteers, and access to

cheap and secure physical space. This would enable the initiatives to reach more potential beneficiaries and to experiment with additional activities and schemes. Other actors, including TfL and more established and larger-scale charities, could learn from the initiatives and scale up activities and schemes that have proven to work—as has happened previously, for instance, with the provision of bicycles to individuals who cannot afford to purchase them.

### Conclusion

Care should be taken not to transfer responsibilities that the (local) state would have considered their own in previous times to citizen-led initiatives that support low-carbon mobility for disadvantaged groups in London. The latter should not become a stopgap for a government selectively rolling back its operations. Nevertheless, it is equally evident that those initiatives can reach, support, and engage with groups that have much to gain from more walking and cycling in ways that state organizations are unable to do. They should, therefore, be supported more than at present on terms developed in close collaboration with the organizations behind them.

The walking- and cycling-related initiatives that these organizations run offer but one route toward just low-carbon mobility. However, symbiotic and strongly supportive relationships between local state and citizen-led organizations—with significant autonomy for the latter—can boost the expansion of just low-carbon mobility systems, especially in cities with less progressive policy strategies and lower transport-planning capacity than London.

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