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Achieving Car Use Reduction in Scotland: A Renewed Policy Statement

A Renewed Policy Statement

Contents

Foreword

Our shared ambition to reduce car use, and the amount of kilometres travelled in Scotland by car, was motivated by our collective desire and commitment to tackle the climate emergency, and to encourage more people to travel more sustainably for short and longer journeys.

There are wider benefits too. If people choose to walk, wheel or cycle in their own neighbourhoods, that helps to make those communities safer and less polluted. Fewer cars on our roads means that buses can get to their destinations faster, helping to make public transport more attractive. HGVs and trade and delivery vehicles also benefit from less congestion.

There is a real appetite for positive changes to be made, and for meaningful engagement on this policy. The case for change is still compelling. Better and more affordable access to public transport and active travel routes will help reduce inequalities and eradicate child poverty. Reducing congestion on our roads will support growth of the economy. Reducing the 12.99% of carbon emissions generated by cars will help tackle the climate emergency. Making public transport and active travel infrastructure more efficient and effective will help to improve Scotland's public services.

While we remain wholeheartedly committed to reducing our reliance on cars in a fair way, we have also been frank in our assessment of the challenges surrounding the 20% target and the need to revise it. The UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) in its recent Scotland's Carbon Budgets Advice for the Scottish Government indicates that Scotland would now need a 6% car use reduction by 2035 in line with its proposed meeting of carbon budgets. Advice from the CCC on how we might reduce transport emissions to meet our statutory climate change targets has now been published and we have commissioned further evidence to inform the revision of our car use reduction target together with other emission reduction measures.

This shared policy statement sets out our approach and identifies opportunities to go further and apply lessons learned, to demonstrate our commitment to reaching net zero by 2045. This includes conducting a 'regulatory check' for existing local road user charging powers under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 to ensure that local authorities have all the powers they need to make change happen.

However, we are also acutely aware that Scotland is largely a rural, sparsely populated country, and that we will always need vehicles, including private cars, in some capacity to enable people, goods and services to get around, to, and from Scotland and beyond. Our policy approach will necessarily be a regional and differentiated one

which takes into account place-specific measures to enable positive change in rural and island communities.

For decades now, we have all experienced the benefits that car use can provide – now we need to agree collectively and as a nation, that there can be benefits from reducing our car use. We must work together, as national and local government, to realise them.

Fiona Hyslop MSP

Cabinet Secretary for Transport

Councillor Gail Macgregor

Environment & Economy Spokesperson

Introduction

The Scottish Government and COSLA remain fully committed to reducing our reliance on cars in a way which is fair and equitable for all of Scotland's communities. This is a key policy in helping us deliver across all of the National Transport Strategy (NTS2) priorities and outcomes.

In 2019, Scotland declared a global climate emergency. Research commissioned by Transport Scotland in 2021 concluded that it would not be possible to reach net zero emissions through a transition to electric vehicles alone, and that changes in people's behaviour to reduce overall car use will also be required. Car use remains the largest emitter within the transport sector with 39% of total transport emissions and 12.99% of Scotland's overall emissions[1], so reducing car use is deemed essential for the transport system to be de-carbonised, therefore Scotland's Climate Change Plan update included a target to reduce car distance travelled in Scotland.

In 2022, we publishedpublished a draft route map to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in car kilometres by 2030. The route map was aimed predominantly at national, regional, and local stakeholders to facilitate a collaborative approach to meeting the target, and intended to raise awareness of the need for change and empower people to swich to more sustainable travel modes in Scotland.

A key piece of feedback was that the use of kilometres (km) for the headline target was distracting from the overarching policy aim, when the majority of the general public use imperial measurement units such as miles when referring to car use. That is one of the reasons why the policy has been changed to remove reference to 'car km' and refer instead to 'car use'. This intends to separate out the policy aim and the measurement while making the language more accessible.

The development of the target was informed by the statutory emissions target of net zero by 2045 and the interim target to reduce emissions by 75% by 2030. Following the passage of the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2024, we will now set out our carbon budgets through secondary legislation taking into account the latest advice on Scotland's Carbon Budgets from the Climate Change Committee. This means that the 75% reduction in emissions by 2030 target is no longer statutory, which allows the opportunity to revise the approach to car use reduction in Scotland with a longer term lens.

Audit Scotland, in their Sustainable Transport Audit report, called for the Scottish Government to clarify its commitment to reducing transport emissions through the car km target, and to set out how this aligns with the new carbon budget approach towards its climate change policy.

The publication of this policy statement is the first step in our renewed approach to achieving sustainable car use reduction in Scotland. In this document, we reaffirm our commitment to this policy outcome, setting out the current national context, the societal benefits to pursuing this ambition, and our overarching approach to the policy. Following receipt of the necessary evidence this summer, we will develop a new, longer-term target for reducing car use and set out our approach to delivery of this target alongside key stakeholders.

Key trends and the need for change

In 2023 (the most recent year available), transport accounted for 33% of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions, and cars accounted for 39% of all transport emissions, which equates to 12.9% of total Scottish emissions[2].

The proportion of car km driven, and overall journeys made by car, was consistently growing over time until 2019. After a steep fall in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, annual car km rose sharply again and are now 4% below[3] the 2019 baseline, meaning we are off-track to achieving a 20% reduction by 2030. This is visualised in **Figure 1** below.

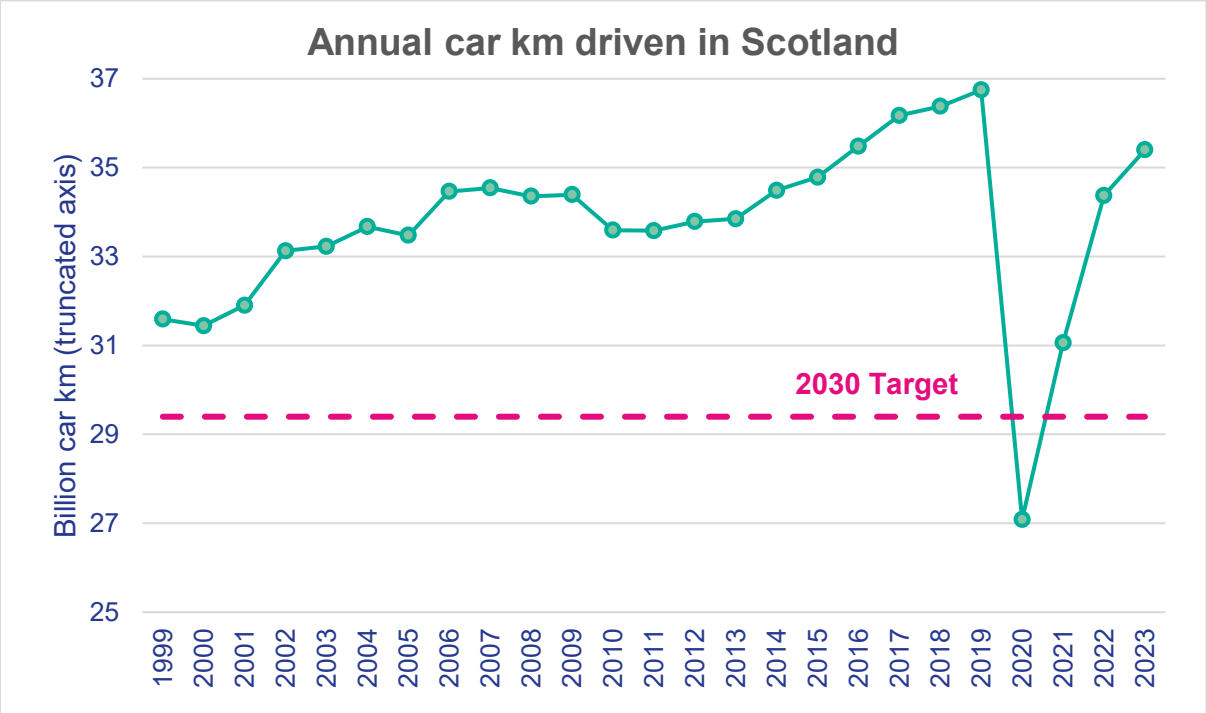

Figure 1: Car km driven in Scotland each year between 1999 and 2023

Prior to the pandemic, road traffic had been following a steadily increasing trend with total road traffic increasing by 10% in the 10 years up to 2019. There were 3.1 million motor vehicles licensed in Scotland in 2023. Having increased slightly from 2022, this is the highest level recorded. There is a demonstrable trend between 2019 and 2023 where longer journeys account for a significant proportion of total car km travelled, despite making up a much smaller portion of all trips. In 2023, shorter journeys of up to 10km accounted for 61% of all trips but only 15% of total car km driven in Scotland, while longer journeys of more than 50km accounted for just 5.5% of all trips but 38% of total car km driven[4]. The purposes of journeys have largely remained consistent over time, commuting (27%) and shopping (25%) remain the most common reasons for car or van trips[5].

Of those journeys which are made by public transport, bus is by far the most commonly used. In 2023-24, 74% of public transport journeys were made by bus, 18% by rail, 6% by air, and 2% by ferry[6].

It is clear that, at present, we live in a society which is motonormative[7] [8] and increasingly dependent on private car use[9]. The complexity of travel behaviour, the interdependencies between transport, planning, and environmental systems, and broader economic factors present challenges in achieving a shift away from car dependency[10].

Policy environment

To achieve a modal shift, we need to take action in line with the principle of Triple Access Planning[11]. This supports the key priorities set out in the National Transport Strategy (NTS2) and is complemented by the Sustainable Travel Hierarchy which promotes walking, wheeling, cycling, public transport, and shared transport above private car use.

This will support a wide range of national outcomes in Scotland's National Performance Framework, the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2), and other national plans such as the fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4), Infrastructure Investment Plan, National Strategy for Economic Transformation, and the Transport Just Transition Plan.

It is evident that additional work is needed to strengthen our approach to sustainable transport demand and develop solutions that support a just transition away from car reliance for all communities. The Scottish Government continues to call for a collaborative four-nation approach with the UK Government who have key levers of power and responsibility for motoring taxation reform, including Fuel Duty, Vehicle Excise Duty, and VAT rates, to support the just transition to net zero.

The independent Climate Emergency Response Group has called for an acceleration of the shift from cars to active, public, and shared transport[12], the Climate Change Committee highlight significant gaps in our transport policy pathway to our emissions targets[13], and Audit Scotland indicate 'minimal progress' on reducing car use has been made[14]. Behaviour change takes time and progress towards car use reduction remains challenging. It is clear now that we need to revise the level of ambition set out in the draft route map and consider the scale of the change required, alongside the transition to electric vehicles and the contribution to emissions reduction but also wider just transition and NTS outcomes.

In the 2024 Climate Change Monitoring Report the Scottish Government indicated for the first time that we are 'off track' in achieving a 20% reduction in car use by

2030. With 2030 approaching, current trends indicate car use is increasing rather than in decline. As a result, achieving the original target of a 20% reduction is highly unlikely. We will now therefore be revising this target, drawing on advice from the Climate Change Committee and other relevant evidence to establish a revised, longer-term target which is aligned with the timelines for the Climate Change Plan and supports our 2045 net zero target.

> **We will revise the existing car use reduction target, informed by the advice of the Climate Change Committee and other relevant evidence, to develop a new, longer-term target which will support our 2045 net zero target.**

The need for change

The original policy intent for car use reduction was embedded in emissions reduction pathways, and this remains at the core of our renewed commitment to this policy outcome. The Climate Change Committee's recent advice continues to demonstrate that car use reduction from mode shift can contribute to emissions reduction[15]. Whilst electrification accounts for a large majority of emissions reductions required from car use, this alone not sufficient[16] to meet our net zero targets. In addition, there are wider co-benefits to pursuing a reduction in car use in Scotland. These are set out below.

Reducing inequalities

The current transport system drives inequalities by prioritising car ownership at the expense of other transport modes. A lack of reliable transport alternatives means that some people cannot easily access key services that others with a car can. This can push people into poverty as they need to own a car they cannot afford. For example, in 2023 car access increased with household income, as did the number of cars available per household: 44% of households with an annual income up to £10,000 had access to one or more cars, compared to 96% of households with an annual income of more than £50,000 and frequency of driving also increased with household income[17]. A lower percentage of disabled people possess a driving licence (56% vs 78%), and a lower percentage have household access to a car (56% vs 80%)[18]. Lower income households, minority ethnic communities, women, older, and disabled people are less likely to own or use a car, however, the negative effects of car use – air and noise pollution, road danger, community severance, and congestion – fall disproportionately on these same groups[19 20]. We also know bus is the mode of public transport most used by lower income groups.

Reducing car use in Scotland will therefore make it possible to re-prioritise space and investment in accessible streets and public spaces to ensure inclusive and affordable access by walking, wheeling, cycling or public transport for those who do not have access to cars.

Encouraging a wellbeing economy

The efficient and reliable movement of people and goods is essential to achieve inclusive economic prosperity. However, high volumes of traffic and inefficient road space allocation leads to congestion, which can have a significant negative impact on the economy [21] [22] [23]. Reduced traffic congestion leads to smoother traffic flow for essential services such as public transport and emergency vehicles, improving overall efficiency.

Modal shift can have economic benefits at a local and regional level. Evidence suggests that businesses significantly overestimate the number of customers travelling by car [24] [25] [26] [27] [28], and that investment in public realm improvements, including those to encourage walking, wheeling, and cycling, can deliver significant benefits to businesses. For example, evidence suggests people who make a journey by walking tend to spend more than people arriving by car[29] [30] [31], and that businesses experience higher footfall after the introduction of pedestrianization[32] [33] or active travel measures[34]. Analyses carried out in the United Kingdom and in European cities have demonstrated significant economic benefits from interventions of this kind[35] [36] [37] [38] [39] [40].

Any introduction of measures to disincentivise car use, such as local or regional road user charging, or workplace parking licensing, could also bring economic benefits due to their significant revenue-raising potential which must be re-invested in measures that support delivery of the area's Local Transport Strategy[41] [42].

Improving health and wellbeing

There are widespread health and wellbeing benefits to a modal shift, these include improved air quality and reduced noise; increased physical activity; reduced negative economic and social impacts of congestion; a reduction in road casualties; and opportunities for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds to interact in improved areas of civic space.

As well as tailpipe emissions from internal combustion engine vehicles, significant air pollution also occurs from tyre and brake wear[43] [44], which will remain regardless of any shift to electric vehicles (EVs). An estimated 1,800-2,700 premature deaths are attributed to air pollution in Scotland each year[45]. Car use also contributes to

thousands of road casualties[46] and reduces opportunities for active travel, with physical inactivity leading to nearly 3,000 deaths in Scotland annually[47].

Modal shift also allows for re-allocation of road space used by private vehicles to more space-efficient modes of travel such as walking, wheeling, and cycling, which creates more green and open spaces for communities to enjoy. This contributes positively to health and wellbeing[48].

Our approach to enabling car use reduction

Changing behaviours

We are utilising behaviour change tools to inform our approach. We know that it is not enough to simply ask car users to change their behaviour. Individual behaviour change happens in the context of the social and material environments in which people live[49]. We need to provide people with the capability, opportunity, and motivation[50] to choose between positive behaviours, to change the way they access goods, services, amenities, and social connections. This will support people to adopt better ways of living by creating a social and material context where reduced car use is a normal, easy, attractive, and routine behaviour to adopt. Our approach recognises that behaviours are interlinked[51] [52] [53], that the required behaviour change will need to be part of wider co-ordinated action from both national and local government, and that a wide range of interventions are necessary to support a national behavioural shift[54] [55].

The wider societal dis-benefits of using private vehicles mean that our policy of reducing car use includes all types of private car, including electric vehicles. Switching from petrol or diesel to private ownership of zero-emission cars is likely to be the optimal solution only where more sustainable travel options are unavailable. It will be important to incentivise sustainable modes such as bus, rail, and active travel, with bus representing a particularly large share of public transport journeys. At the same time, we recognise that there is a high level of car dependency in rural areas[56] [57], and car use will remain a facet of rural life. Local authorities can further incentivise the switch to EVs where sustainable travel behaviours and alternatives to car use are not possible, while ensuring people who rely on a car as a mobility aid are not impacted.

It is the role of government, in collaboration with other key stakeholders, to create a policy landscape of both transport and non-transport policies that enable the four sustainable travel behaviours, set out in **Figure 2** below, to be adopted by people each time they plan a trip.

Figure 2: The four sustainable travel behaviours

Creating an enabling environment

Our aim is to empower people to choose a transport option that contributes to reducing emissions while also fitting their circumstances and travel needs. We recognise an enabling environment is created through cross-sectoral working and decision making, to enable people to reduce their car use via a combination of policy measures.

It will be important to ensure people are incentivised to use sustainable transport to enable a modal shift away from private cars, alongside the recognition that measures to discourage car use are also required. We know that there are many reasons that people currently choose to drive private cars, including convenience, comfort, reliability, a feeling of freedom, the car as a status symbol, and low cost. This means that on their own, policies which incentivise people to use other options are unlikely to be sufficient to meet the scale of reduction required.

We remain committed to working with key partners including regional transport partnerships (RTPs) to support measures which encourage active travel and accompany greater investment in public transport for a fairer and greener transport network. As part of our commitment, the Scottish Government will take forward a Regulatory Check of existing discretionary powers for local road user charging schemes under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, which was brought into statute by a previous Parliament. While a number of the necessary technical regulations to give effect to this power were made, initial scoping identified that further regulations must be put in place to enable local authorities and RTPs to enforce schemes.

Given the passage of time since the existing regulations were brought into statute, the Scottish Government will take the opportunity to check whether these remain fit for purpose. Once the necessary regulations and guidance are in place, it will be a decision for local authorities or RTPs whether and how to implement schemes.

> **We will undertake a regulatory check of existing Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 powers for discretionary local road user charging schemes to allow local authorities and/or regional transport partnerships the option to implement these.**

Collaborative approach

A collaborative approach will be required to achieve a modal shift. This means the Scottish Government needs to work in partnership with local authorities, RTPs, and operators to support fair measures which encourage active travel and public transport use. Considering the unique challenges and circumstances for each area and how those can be overcome is key to building a fairer and greener transport system. Local authorities and RTPs are best placed to make decisions that take account of their local needs and circumstances, and we support them in doing so. This will also require working with businesses to recognise opportunities where they can promote mode shift within their workforce.

We have formed a working group through the National Transport Strategy Delivery Board, to take forward the consideration of the approach to a delivery plan (or delivery plans), and what these should involve. Membership includes representatives from Transport Scotland, COSLA, SCOTS, RTPs, and Scottish Government climate change leads. We expect this group to report by the end of 2025. Any delivery plan(s) will be place-based and experience-specific, taking into account the varied circumstances facing people in Scotland's different regions and localities. We will ensure that delivery plans consider the importance of bus as an alternative for car use and how we can continue to prioritise bus measures.

> **This policy statement is a collaboration of national, regional and local government and we will continue this cooperation to develop place-based and experience- specific delivery plans to support reduced car use and alternative transport options.**

To support our behaviour change approach, we are committed to further public engagement to increase awareness and recognition of the need for change. This will include a new place-based and experience-specific communication and engagement campaign on car use reduction at a national and local level.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government continues to call for a collaborative four-nation approach with the UK Government who have key levers of power and responsibility for Fuel Duty and Vehicle Excise Duty reform to support the just transition to net zero.

> **Along with a broad coalition of partners, we will drive a national communication and engagement campaign and set out a positive vision around how reducing car use can deliver outcomes for public health, air quality, and the environment.**

Next Steps

This document marks the continuation of our joint commitment to car use reduction in Scotland with a renewed policy statement. The Scottish Government and COSLA will continue to work in partnership with our key local, regional, and national stakeholders to ensure a holistic approach is taken. In this document, we have made four key commitments which will guide our strategy on car use reduction as we move forward. These are set out again below.

1. **We will revise the existing car use reduction target, informed by the advice of the Climate Change Committee and other relevant evidence, to develop a new, longer-term target which will support our 2045 net zero target.**
2. **We will undertake a regulatory check of existing Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 powers for discretionary local road user charging schemes to allow local authorities and/or regional transport partnerships the option to implement these.**
3. **We will work with key stakeholders at national, regional, and local level to develop place-based and experience-specific delivery plans to support reduced car use and alternative transport options.**
4. **Along with a broad coalition of partners, we will drive a national communication and engagement campaign and set out a positive vision around how reducing car use can deliver outcomes for public health, air quality, and the environment.**

Glossary and List of Abbreviations

A number of abbreviations and technical terms are utilised throughout this document. Below, these have been set out alongside a brief definition to aid in the reading of this document for those who may not have the requisite background knowledge of these issues.

Climate Change Committee: An independent, non-departmental public body, formed under the Climate Change Act 2008 to advise the UK and devolved governments on emissions targets and to report to Parliament on progress made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

CCPu: The 2020 update to Scotland's climate change plan for the period 2018 – 2032.

Climate Emergency Response Group: A collective of like-minded climate leaders spanning Scotland's private, public and third sectors, delivery organisations and membership bodies. The group draws on its wide-ranging expertise and experience to inform and influence the Scottish Government's response to the climate emergency by providing practical, workable solutions that can be implemented – not in the future – but now.

COSLA: The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The umbrella organisation for Scotland's 32 local authorities.

Decarbonisation: refers to the process of significantly reducing or eliminating carbon dioxide (CO2) and other greenhouse gases from the earth's atmosphere. Decarbonisation is the process which countries need to go through to achieve net zero targets.

Demand Management: Traffic Demand Management (referred to in this paper as Demand Management) is the process of improving transport efficiency to reduce congestion and make better use of transport infrastructure. Policies to support this could include road user charging, for example 'congestion charging' in certain areas or the introduction of toll roads. Other examples include parking management, road space reallocation, traffic calming measures, or reduced speed limit zones.

Electric Vehicles: An electric vehicle is a vehicle that is propelled partly or fully by electricity. Unlike petrol or diesel fuelled cars, electric vehicles do not emit CO2, so they are also sometimes referred to as zero emission vehicles or ZEVs.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions: The release of gases that have a negative impact on the planet's ability to balance incoming and outgoing energy, therefore altering the climate[58]. As the most dominant greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide (CO_2), greenhouse gas emissions are sometimes referred to as "carbon emissions". However, other greenhouse gases are also contributing to climate change, particularly nitrous oxide and methane[59].

Just Transition: A just transition is both the outcome – a fairer, greener future for all – and the process that must be undertaken in partnership with those impacted by the transition to net zero. Just transition is how we get to a net zero and climate resilient economy by 2045, in a way that delivers fairness and tackles inequality and injustice.

Modal Shift: Encouraging a switch from private car travel to more sustainable modes like walking, cycling, and public transport. This shift aims to reduce transport-related emissions, improve air quality, and create more sustainable transport systems.

Net Zero (Emissions): A situation in which any greenhouse gas emissions put into the atmosphere are balanced out by the greenhouse gases removed from the atmosphere, so that the "net" effect is zero emissions. Scotland has committed to 'net zero' emissions by 2045. To achieve this, we must reduce the emissions we produce to a minimum and capture any greenhouse gases we cannot avoid emitting through initiatives like tree planting.

NTS2: The second National Transport Strategy for Scotland, which sets out an ambitious vision for Scotland's transport system for the next 20 years.

RTPs: Regional Transport Partnerships. RTPs bring together local authorities and other key regional stakeholders to take a strategic approach to transport in each region of Scotland. All local authorities in Scotland are members of a regional transport partnership. Some RTPs are also responsible for the delivery of transport services. In particular Strathclyde Partnership for Transport owns and operates the Glasgow subway and major bus stations across the west of Scotland.

STPR2: The Strategic Transport Projects Review 2. This provides an overview of transport investment, mainly infrastructure and other behavioural change recommendations, that are required to deliver the National Transport Strategy priorities and objectives of the Review. This is a key component of Scotland's journey to net zero emissions and will, in conjunction with existing commitments and other policy ambitions, enable a reduction in transport emissions as well as, addressing inequalities and improving health and wellbeing.

Triple Access Planning: A holistic approach to planning that considers accessibility through land use (spatial proximity), transport (physical mobility) and digital accessibility.

VED: Vehicle Excise Duty. Commonly referred to as road tax. An annual tax paid by owners of vehicles driven or kept on public roads. The tax applies to vehicles in the whole of the UK. How much a vehicle owner pays in VED depends on a number of factors, including the type of vehicle owned, when it was first registered, or its environmental performance. Certain vehicles are exempt from paying VED. For instance, vehicles used by someone receiving the enhanced mobility element of Personal Independence Payment (PIP). Fully electric vehicles became liable for VED from 1 April 2025.

Wellbeing Economy: An economy in which citizens' wellbeing drives economic prosperity, stability, and resilience, and vice-versa. The wellbeing of people and the planet is at the heart of policymaking, ensuring that growth is equitable and sustainable [60].

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