Institute for Public Policy Research

THE TRANSPORT CHALLENGE FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Becca Massey-Chase, Maya Singer Hobbs, Stephen Frost and **Dave Hawkey**

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> *They don't understand what it's like when there is no other option. If I've got nothing in my bank account, using my disabled person's bus pass is the only way I'm getting home. It's the only option. Taking away buses, or letting bus companies reduce routes, stops people being able to live properly. If you can't get the bus then you can't get to the doctor's, you can't go and see your kids perform in their school play, you are reliant on your kids getting to school on their own. You can't get to the big shops and so have to get less good food from the corner shops, as you can't get groceries delivered because you can't afford the minimum spend. We're talking about at every single level of people's lives: you can't do anything without travel.*
>
> 'Bonnie', Edinburgh[1]

1 'Bonnie' (pseudonym) was a participant in an IPPR workshop in partnership with Poverty Alliance in December 2024.

SUMMARY

Many people living on low incomes in the UK are limited in their ability to access the building blocks of a good life because of poor transport provision. They are also disproportionately harmed by the negative impacts of transport, including road danger, traffic-related air and noise pollution, and communities split apart by busy roads.

Transport policy can make a material difference to people's finances, especially those struggling to make ends meet. It can also help people better access the things they need – from work to education to healthcare – that mitigate some of the damaging impacts of living on a low income in the UK.

KEY FINDINGS

- Cars place a financial burden on many low-income households. Those with a car on the lowest incomes spend on average £76 a week, over £3,950 a year, on it. This is equivalent to one-quarter of their income.
- Across all incomes, average weekly transport expenditure for households who own a vehicle is £108, compared with £13 for households who do not own a vehicle.
- A national survey conducted in partnership with More in Common reveals people on low incomes find life harder because of transport, and face transport costs that put them at high risk of social exclusion.
    - 75 per cent of people on low incomes say the cost of running a car makes it difficult to afford other essentials, compared to an average of 63 per cent
    - 66 per cent say the same of the cost of public transport, compared to an average of 55 per cent
    - 20 per cent of people on low incomes strongly agree that they face life-limiting transport difficulties, compared to an average of 14 per cent.

The centricity of the car in the UK transport system means many people feel they need their own car, even when it places huge pressure on their household budget. This means that they need more income, from work or welfare, to sustain the cost of running a car whilst also paying for other essentials like food, housing and heating. As cars are the costliest form of transport for most people, reducing car dependence in the UK would make a positive difference for low-income households, as well as producing the economic, environmental, health and social benefits of reducing congestion and emissions and increasing physical activity and social connections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A call to consolidate, devolve and increase funding for local bus services
- Statutory guidance on socially necessary services, and expected service levels and standards
- A fresh approach to transport concessions, devolving decisions on this and improving funding and guidance
- National targets for increased active travel and bus passenger numbers
- Road space reallocation by local and combined authorities to support modal shift

- A social leasing scheme for electric vehicles and reducing the VAT rate on public chargers
- A Road Safety Strategy founded on the principle of the Safe System and a vision of zero fatalities and serious injuries
- A new national measure for transport-related social exclusion and target to reduce this
- A vision-led approach to transport appraisal and investment
- Public engagement in transport business planning and policymaking through a social inclusion advisory panel and the use of citizens' juries.

1. INTRODUCTION

From pavements to buses, and traffic lights to ticket machines, transport infrastructure and services connect people to anything they might need or care about once they have left their front door.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Transport is an enabler for the government's missions to deliver higher growth, clean energy, safer streets, opportunity for all and an NHS fit for the future. Without an improved transport system, government's efforts elsewhere will be held back.

Committed to the biggest reform of public transport in a generation, Labour's flagship transport policy is to bring rail services back under public ownership. The government has also shown its commitment to reinvigorating bus services through the bus services [no.2] bill. This bill commits up to £1 billion more funding for bus services across England and makes it easier for combined authorities to franchise buses, which should unlock their ability to design and deliver local transport that serves Labour's opportunity mission: supporting families to access services, education and support.

In addition to a fresh emphasis on the importance of local bus services to people's everyday needs, another key change from this government is that the Department for Transport (DfT) has shown interest in reforms to appraisal approaches that currently place higher priority on journey times than social value. Across departments, the government has also upheld their commitment to create a credible path to 'zero emission vehicles' that meets the needs of consumers and industry.

However, there is also palpable anxiety around any transport policies that risk being interpreted as interfering with people's lives. Some politicians are nervous of local opposition to low-traffic neighbourhoods, clean air zones, and reduced speed limits.

In reality, the public is united across political divides in their desire for better transport and want to see potholes filled and bus services improved (Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024a). Action on transport is a significant opportunity for the government to increase public confidence in their ability to deliver real improvements to people's lives.

THE EMISSIONS CONTEXT

Transport is the biggest source of CO_2 emissions in the UK and petrol and diesel road vehicles, which account for 89 per cent of domestic transport emissions, are a key driver (Gasperin and Narayanan 2025). As IPPR has previously found, the government's approach to transport decarbonisation does not sufficiently recognise and address the inequity baked into the current system – both in terms of who is producing the emissions and who is negatively impacted by the status quo (Frost et al 2021, Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024b).

The wealthiest 0.1 per cent of people in Great Britain emit at least 22 times more from transport than the lowest earners (Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024b). An equitable transport decarbonisation pathway would require greater emissions

reductions from those who are high earners and travelling extensively. A fairer pathway would also see transport options and mobility increase for the least mobile and least well-off members of society.

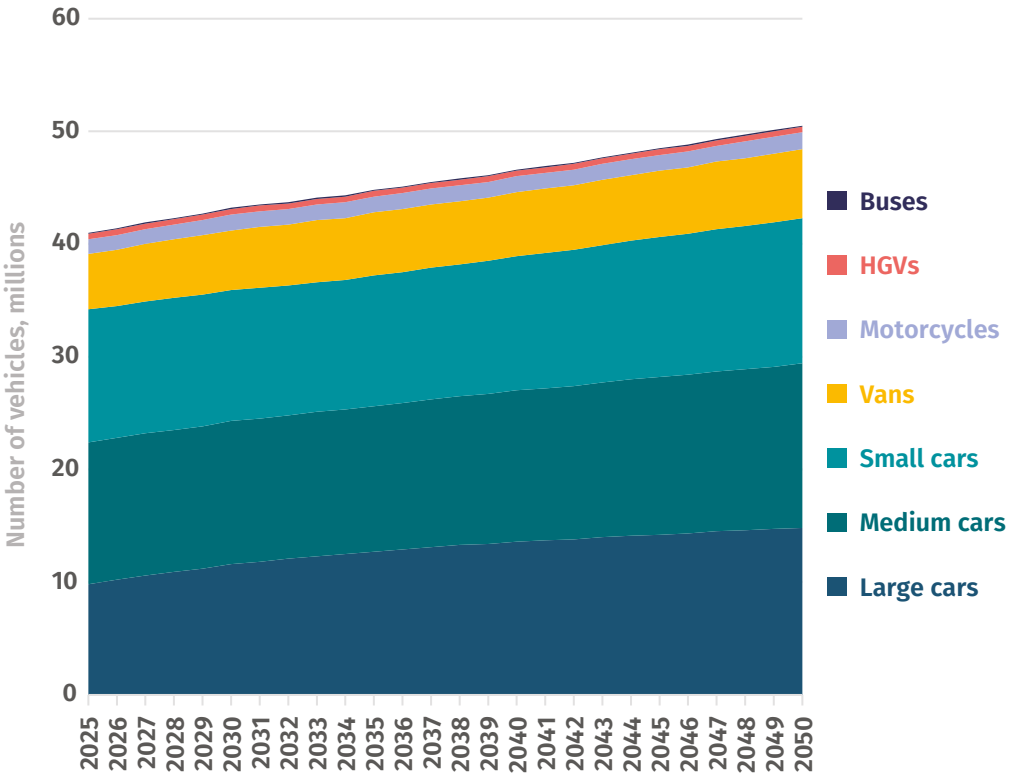
Transport accounts for up to 70 per cent of all UK emissions that are not yet covered by any policy (O'Connell 2024). Shifting to electric vehicles accounts for around 80 per cent of the domestic transport sector's confirmed decarbonisation policy up to 2032 (ibid). As has been IPPR's long-held position, a faster and fairer decarbonisation pathway would have broader scope and would:

1. target the emissions, particularly from flights, produced by those very mobile, highly wealthy individuals whose personal emissions are disproportionate, and who have the means to make a shift
2. focus on policies to support active travel and public transport, which would benefit everyone
3. provide support to shift to electric vehicles, particularly for those currently most dependent on cars and who would struggle to make the transition by their own means.

The Climate Change Committee forecasts that electrification of cars and the associated reduction in running costs will lead to up to a 51 per cent increase in traffic in England and Wales by 2050, and up to 10 million more cars on the road (CCC 2025a).

FIGURE 1.1: THE NUMBER OF VEHICLES ON UK ROADS IS PROJECTED TO INCREASE

Fleet projections up to 2050, produced by the Climate Change Committee for the 7th Carbon Budget



Source: CCC 2025a

We know from extensive public engagement that people do not want to see an increase in traffic and congestion. This is borne out by DfT's own public opinion research which finds strong support for the reduction of road traffic (DfT and Kantar 2024). There is a better, more desirable future available, with fewer cars on our roads and people making more journeys on public transport or on foot, by bike, or wheelchair. This future would be better for everyone. It would be particularly better for those on low incomes, who – as we discuss in chapter 4 – are badly served by the status quo.

THE POVERTY CONTEXT

IPPR has previously made the case that the government needs to deliver policies that lift people out of poverty and tackle the harms arising from poverty (Parkes 2024). There are three key planks to this:

1. increasing incomes
2. reducing costs
3. poverty mitigation.

As we discuss in chapter 5, transport policy can be in service of all of these:

1. transport can support access to work and training, with public transport services in particular increasing employment opportunities for people on low incomes
2. household costs can be lowered by targeted government intervention, such as bus concessions, and widening access to goods and services
3. transport can mitigate the impacts of poverty by improving access to the building blocks of good health and wellbeing, such as education, social connection, and green space.

Department for Work and Pensions data shows that in 2023/24 around one in five people were in relative poverty in the UK, after housing costs (Francis-Devine 2025). Data from the previous year, analysed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025), found that in 2022/23 3.8 million people experienced destitution in the UK – meaning that they struggled to afford to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed, let alone cover transport costs. This includes around one million children. These figures have more than doubled since 2017 (ibid).

People living on low incomes are particularly at risk of transport-related social exclusion (TRSE), which is defined by Transport for the North (TfN) as 'transport issues that limit full and meaningful participation in society' (Jarvis and Mace 2025). TfN finds that the groups at most risk of TRSE are those on low incomes and in insecure work, those with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and people with caring or childcare responsibilities. These groups face greater constraints on their transport choices, experience more impactful consequences when transport goes wrong, and have travel needs that are not well served by the system as it stands.

This report pays particular attention to the transport issues of low-income families with young children, especially single-parent families. We also draw on the experiences of households where someone has a disability or health condition, including mental ill health and neurodiversity, and the experiences of minoritised and racialised communities, including asylum seekers and refugees.

MEET RACHEL AND MAMADOU

Rachel is a single mother of three children under five. She lives in rented accommodation, around the corner from her mum's house. She works part time as a care worker at a hospital in Sheffield. Rachel's oldest child, Rory, is neurodiverse; she suspects he has autism, though this hasn't yet been diagnosed. Rachel has a car and relies on it to get to work and get her children to nursery and school. Rachel's mum, Ash, is mobility impaired and doesn't have her own car. Ash lives in a rough neighbourhood and sometimes the bus driver will refuse to drive down her road, leaving her stranded. She can't walk the remaining half mile, so she has to pay for a taxi if Rachel can't get her.

Mamadou is an asylum seeker living in Glasgow. He suffers from anxiety and depression. Mamadou mostly walks to where he needs to go because he cannot afford to travel any other way. The day bus pass in the city is £5.90, and a longer trip is £7.80. He is living off around £7 per day. Travelling to see the GP or his solicitor means he cannot afford other essentials. He finds the Scottish weather cold and challenging. He only goes out when necessary and his mental health is badly impacted by living on such a restricted budget.

Rather than capturing the stories of just two people, Rachel and Mamadou are archetypes: composites based on our qualitative research and poverty statistics (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025). Like Rachel's family, three in 10 children in the UK live in poverty and this is more likely for families with three or more children, lone-parent families and families with children under five. Around two-thirds of working-age adults in poverty live in a household where someone is in work. Self-employed and part-time workers are twice as likely to be poverty than full-time and employed workers. Like Mamadou, 31 per cent of disabled people live in poverty, rising to 38 per cent for those with a long-term, limiting mental health condition. Black and minority ethnic people in UK are twice as likely as white people to be in 'deep poverty'.

OUR RESEARCH METHODS

This report draws on evidence from a literature review and includes analysis of data from the *Living Costs and Foods Survey* (ONS 2025a) and *National Travel Survey* (DfT 2024a). It also draws on stakeholder interviews, surveys and deliberative workshops with the public. All quotations are anonymised and taken from across our interviews, workshops and survey responses. Surveys included a national survey carried out by More in Common in April 2025 and weighted to be representative of the British public, and a more qualitative survey distributed through the Single Parent Rights network with a self-selecting sample.

The report below makes reference to a combination of England-only data, GB data, and UK-wide data. Geographic region is stated where data is quoted. As transport is devolved, we specify where recommendations apply to England only. For our data analysis, we generally use the lowest income quintile, or state income bands. For our qualitative research, participants self-identified as having experienced life on a low income.

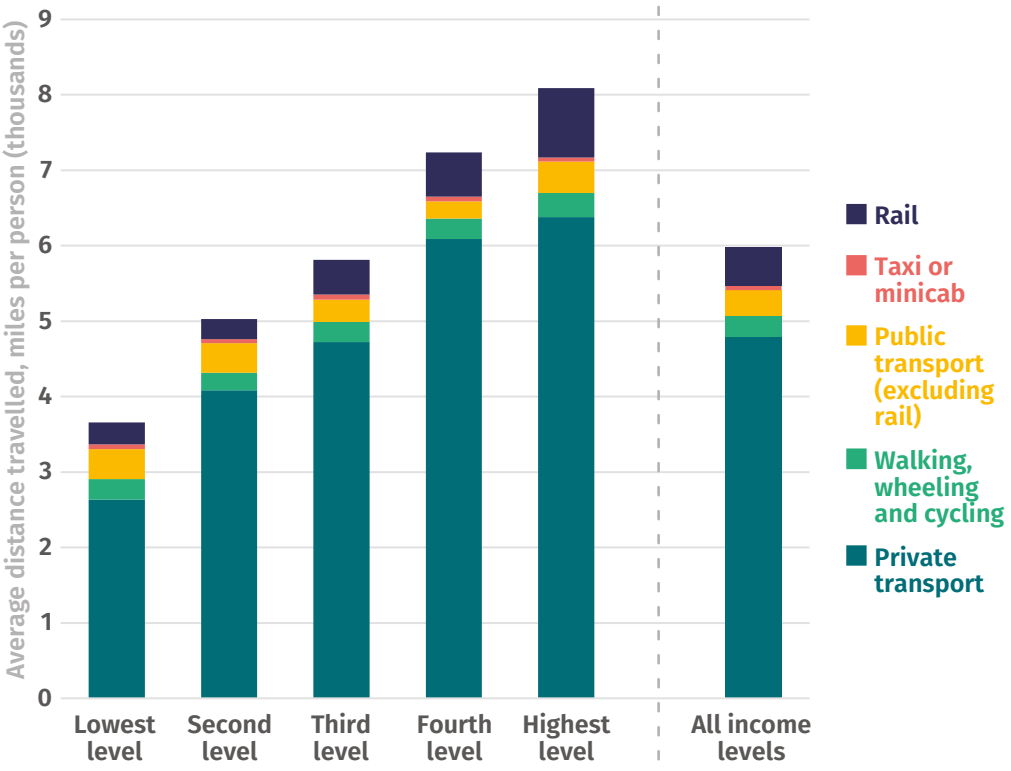
In November and December 2024, IPPR was supported by Poverty Alliance to talk with 23 people living in Scotland about how public transport should be improved to work better for people like them. From January to April 2025, we worked with Save the Children to talk with mothers with young children in a deprived neighbourhood in Sheffield. We supported a small group of these parents to create a vision for how the UK's transport system should work better for families living on low incomes.

2. TRANSPORT USAGE BY PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES

The number of trips a person makes, how they get around and the distance they travel varies by income. For domestic travel in the UK, those on the highest incomes travel more miles per year, mostly driven by car mileage. Distance by car and rail increases with income, whereas distance travelled by bus is inversely correlated to income.

FIGURE 2.1: THOSE ON THE HIGHEST INCOMES TRAVELLED OVER TWICE AS FAR AS THOSE ON THE LOWEST INCOMES IN 2023

Average miles travelled per person in 2023 by mode of surface travel,[2] England



Source: DfT 2024a

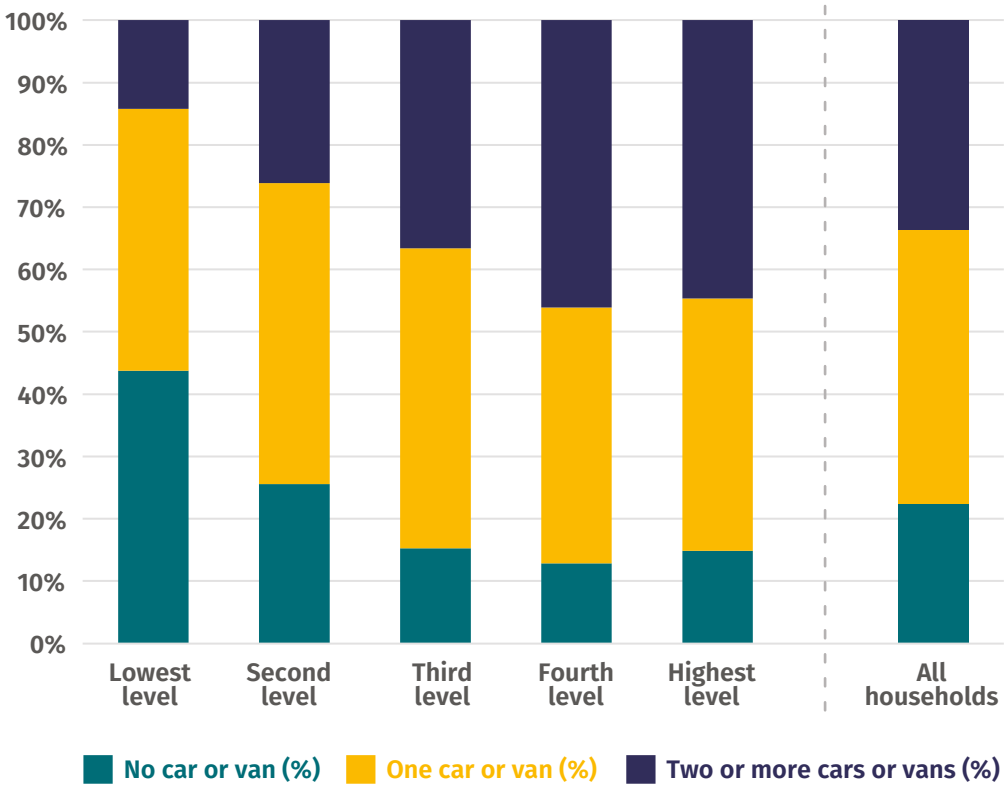
The miles travelled by car is the biggest driver in the differences in total distance travelled by people across the income quintiles. This is likely accounted for by car access, with households in England in the lowest income quintile almost three times

2 'Public transport' is the total of bus travel in London, other local buses, non-local buses, London underground, and other public transport (which includes ferries). 'Private transport' includes car and motorbike, and other private travel such as electric scooters and minibuses. 'Walking, wheeling and cycling' includes travel by foot, bike, wheelchair, with a pram or pushchair, scooters, skateboards etc.

as likely to not have access to a car than those in the highest income quintile (44 per cent compared to 15 per cent), as shown in figure 2.2. The pattern is the same in Scotland, where 60 per cent of households with a net annual income of up to £10,000 do not have access to a car, compared to 3 per cent of those with an income of over £40,000 (Transport Scotland 2020).

FIGURE 2.2: IN 2023, OVER 40 PER CENT OF PEOPLE IN THE LOWEST INCOME QUINTILE LIVED IN A HOUSEHOLD WITHOUT ACCESS TO A CAR, COMPARED TO 15 PER CENT OF THOSE IN THE HIGHEST INCOME QUINTILE

NTS data on household car availability in 2023 by income quintile, England



Source: DfT 2024a

For people on low incomes, journeys in a private vehicle still make up the highest proportion of distance travelled (see figure 2.1), as is the case across all income levels.

Like car use, rail use increases with income. Higher income groups are also more likely to cycle (DfT 2023a). Only 25 per cent of individuals in households with an income with £14,999 or less per year in England have regular access to a bicycle, compared with half of people in households with £50,000 or more in income (DfT 2024b).

In contrast, distance travelled by bus is inversely correlated to income, with those in the lowest two income quintiles travelling 50 miles further than the average by bus in England (DfT 2024a). Frequency of travel by bus is also higher. In Scotland, 51 per cent of people with incomes up to £10,000 use the bus at least once a month, compared to 27 per cent of those with incomes over £50,000 (Transport Scotland 2020).

Walking does not show significant variation across income groups in terms of distance travelled but does vary by number of trips. Walking (or using a wheelchair) accounted for 40 per cent of trips made by those living on the lowest quintile in England in 2023, compared to 27 per cent of trips by those in the highest income bracket.

FACTORS SHAPING TRAVEL BEHAVIOURS

As we discuss in later chapters, there are many factors that influence the travel behaviours of people on low incomes, including cost, reliability, accessibility and social norms. For example, cuts to bus provision between 2011 and 2023 were 10 times higher in England's most deprived areas than its least deprived areas, and this led to increased taxi and car use (Johns and Singer Hobbs 2025). Research shows that people living on the lowest incomes are more likely than those on higher incomes to reduce how much they travel or change their typical mode of transport to save money (Martiskainen et al 2023, Fountas et al 2025). The actual travel of people on low incomes is therefore unlikely to reflect their true travel needs.

3.
THE COST OF TRANSPORT

The British public worry about the cost of living, with 87 per cent considering it to be one of the most important issues facing the country (ONS 2025b). Transport costs can account for a significant proportion of household expenditure. Some of these costs are more fixed or harder to control (such as car tax), others can be influenced by how much a person travels (such as fares and fuel). Walking is the only mode of transport with no costs attached, and, subject to physical mobility, is depended on by those who cannot afford any transport services.

Our analysis of the *Living Costs and Foods Survey* (ONS 2025a) finds that average transport costs[3] for UK households are £87 a week. Whether a household owns a private vehicle has a significant impact on these costs. Average weekly costs for households owning a vehicle are £108, compared with £13 for households who do not own a vehicle.

On average, transport costs for low-incomes households are lower because they travel less (see figure 2.1), with all the disbenefits that brings. For households in the bottom income quintile,[4] average transport costs are £49 a week, equivalent to 14 per cent of all household expenditure and 18 per cent of income. These costs vary significantly depending on whether they own a car or not. For the bottom income quintile, average transport costs are as follows.

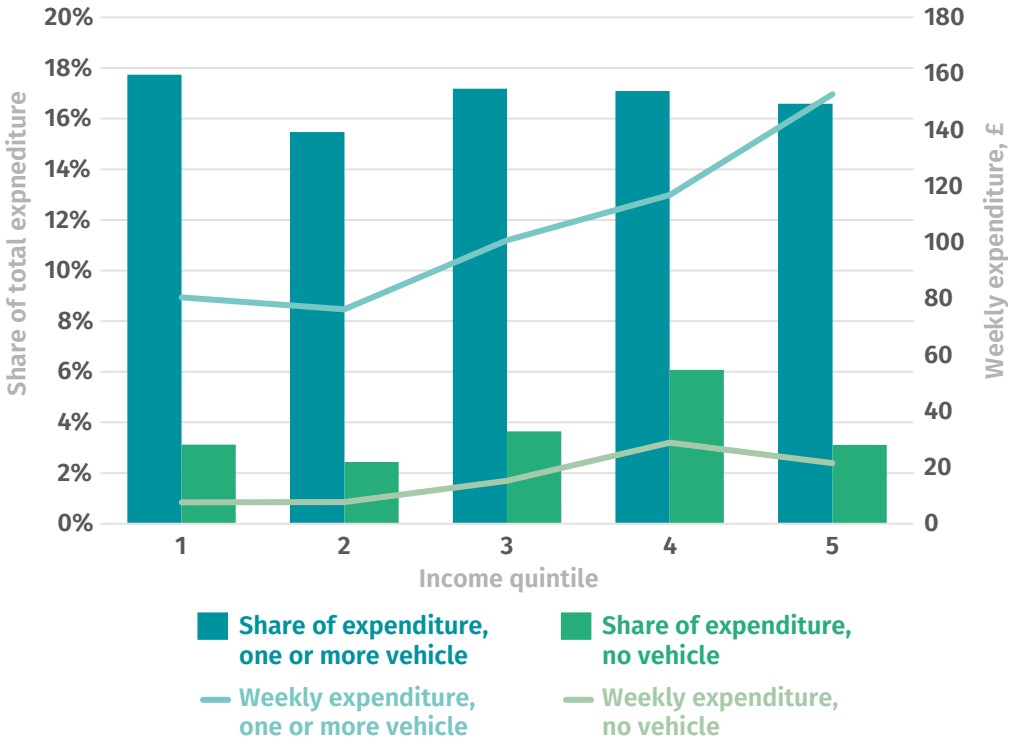
- **Vehicle owners**: £80 a week, 18 per cent of household expenditure and 26 per cent of household income.
- **No vehicle**: £8 a week, 3 per cent of household expenditure and 3 per cent of household income.

3 Our definition includes all costs related to domestic travel by surface transport modes. We use the ONS's COICOP code for total transport costs, less spending on flights, plus net vehicle tax, fines, insurance and costs of purchasing or hiring motor caravans.

4 We base our analysis on data for those in the bottom income quintile of equivalized disposable income before housing costs. This means that it is adjusted for household size and composition, to allow comparisons across different household types.

FIGURE 3.1: HOUSEHOLDS WITH ONE OR MORE PRIVATE VEHICLE SPEND AN AVERAGE OF FOUR TIMES AS MUCH ON SURFACE TRANSPORT AS THOSE WITHOUT A VEHICLE, ACROSS ALL INCOMES

Share of expenditure and weekly expenditure across income quintiles by whether the household owns a vehicle or not



Source: Authors' analysis of ONS 2025a. Share of expenditure are mean spend as a share of mean income or expenditure respectively.

As we can see from figure 3.1:

- those with a car spend significantly more on transport than those without
- those without a car spend roughly the same in real terms across all income quintiles
- expenditure is higher in real terms (not as a percentage) for those on higher incomes because they travel further (see figure 2.1).

PRIVATE VEHICLE COSTS

Priced out of owning new cars outright, low-income households are reliant on the used-car market and car financing schemes. The latter is not without risk, with cars sometimes being repossessed with little warning due to one missed payment (Haines-Doran 2024).

For those in the lowest income quintile with access to a vehicle the average cost of this is 16 per cent of their total expenditure, equal to 25 per cent of their average income. This amounts to £76 per week, which is 95 per cent of their total weekly spend on transport.

On average, across all incomes, the cost of running a private vehicle is £46 a week, or over £2,400 a year (ONS 2025a), excluding the cost of purchase. Of this £46, only around £20 goes on fuel (ibid). Fuel costs are to some extent flexible; those trying

to save money travel less to save on this cost. Maintenance costs can also be brought down by travelling less, for example meaning someone needs to replace their tyres less often. However, more than half of the average weekly costs of running a car are less flexible, such as tax and insurance. This makes it harder for households to manage these costs by changing their travel behaviours.

The RAC (2025) finds that 59 per cent of drivers say they are hit with unexpected repair costs for their main vehicle each year, with an average bill of £617. More than a third of those facing these repairs said they experienced financial difficulty in paying for them (ibid), unsurprising when a quarter of Britons have less than £100 in savings.

Multiple studies show that those living in more deprived or more ethnically diverse areas are offered car insurance premiums around 15-20 per cent higher to insure the same driver in the same car (Evans and Davies 2024). In addition to the location-specific premium, the cost of paying monthly rather than annually could add up to an additional 41 per cent to the total cost (ibid).[5] This is found to be a contributing factor to lower levels of car ownership among those in the lowest income quintiles (San et al 2024). The same study found evidence of drivers cutting back on other essentials to cover the costs of car insurance.

The high upfront costs of electric vehicles (EVs) and their relative scarcity in the second-hand market compared to ICE vehicles, mean those on lower incomes do not benefit from the cost savings of running an EV. They are also twice as likely as higher earners to rely on the public charging network, which is more expensive than at-home charging (Corlett et al 2024).

PUBLIC TRANSPORT COSTS

Whilst motoring costs are expected to fall with the transition to EVs, public transport costs are expected to rise due to inflation. This increase is calculated using the retail prices index (RPI) rather than the consumer prices index (CPI) – a higher level. There have been several calls to switch to using CPI to calculate rail fare increases (Stewart 2022).

Public transport costs vary significantly depending on who you are, where you live, and which mode you are using. As shown in figure 2.1, there is a clear relationship between rail travel and income, which is largely accounted for by the cost of rail fares. Train tickets in the UK are notoriously expensive. Regulated rail fares in England and Wales rose by 4.6 per cent in March 2025, with unregulated fares set by train operators rising by similar amounts (BBC News 2025). The nationalisation of the railways is not expected to bring fares down.

Some groups can access concessions for public transport. This varies across the UK, with all places providing some form of concession on buses for older people (either over 60 or state pension age), and for those with certain disabilities. Other concessions vary. For example. young people up to the age of 22 can travel for free on Scottish buses. In London, there are public transport discounts for veterans, students, and those claiming benefits.

The national bus fare cap for England (excluding London) – which rose from £2 to £3 in December 2024 – will run until March 2027. Some local leaders have implemented their own fare caps; for example, the mayors of London and Greater Manchester have set bus fare caps below central government's.

5 This is an average across all quotes. When looking at just the cheapest quotes, it is 10 per cent more expensive to pay monthly rather than annually, but these may not be available to everyone.

COMPARING THE COSTS OF PRIVATE CARS AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

While the average person in the lowest income quintile spends more on transport if they own a car than if they don't, this does not mean that in every scenario transport costs are lower if you don't have a car, or that comparing a like-for-like journey the bus is always cheaper.

We can see this in a worked example for a family of four, two parents with two children aged seven and 10, travelling in Bristol.

Car	Bus
The average annual cost of a private car for a low-income household is £3,950.	An annual bus pass is £924 for an adult and £462 for a child (aged five to 15 years) for Bristol travel on First bus.[6] A weekly pass is £26.50 for an adult and £13.30 for a child.
£3,950 per year	**£2,772** per year
£76 per week	**£53.31** weekly cost of annual passes or **£79.70** for weekly passes

If a family already owns a car, then more than half of the costs are sunk costs and they are more likely to conceive of the cost per journey as follows.

Car	Bus	Taxi
Fuel costs are around 21 pence per mile. Accounting for some maintenance costs, a mile journey is valued at 45 pence.[7] Bristol also has a clean air zone for which the daily charge for some vehicles is £9.	A single fare is £2.40 for an adult and £1 for a child.	Bristol City Council's table of maximum fares for hackney carriages values a two-mile trip at a minimum of £8.40.[8]
Four-mile round trip: **84p** to **£10.80,** not including parking charges	Single fares each way for the family: **£13.60**	Four-mile round trip: **£16.80**

If the combined authority introduced a new concession of free travel for children,[9] for example, then the cost of the bus could be brought down to lower than the immediate costs of the equivalent journey by car.

Car	Bus	Bus with free travel for children
Annual cost = **£3,950**	Annual passes = **£2,772**	Annual passes = **£1,848**
Weekly cost = **£76**	Weekly passes = **£79.70**	Weekly passes = **£53**
Return journey = **84p** to **£10.80**, not including parking	Return journey = **£13.60**	Return journey = **£9.60**

6 Accessed on 4 June 2025, see: https://www.firstbus.co.uk/bristol-bath-and-west/tickets/ticket-prices

7 21p per mile is HMRC's highest advisory fuel rate for a petrol car (HMRC 2025a). 45p per mile is HRMC's approved mileage allowance payment (HMRC 2025b).

8 See: https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/2015-final-agreed-tariff-card-oct-2018/file

9 West of England Mayoral Combined Authority have announced a temporary scheme for free travel for children during the 2025 school summer holidays (WECA 2025)

THE POVERTY PREMIUM

Our research points to a range of additional transport costs imposed on those who are poor. For example, paying monthly insurance rather than annually, because of not having the means to make the annual payment upfront, adds costs. Buying a cheap, secondhand car can lead to increased running and maintenance costs. Being priced out of annual and monthly passes for public transport locks people into less cost-effective individual tickets, resulting in them travelling less or paying more. Nightshift workers may have to pay two daily fares, due to shift start and end times.

The cost, unreliability and unavailability of transport services for people on low incomes can limit them to shops within walking distance that might be more expensive. The cost of having to rely on less efficient or reliable transport can also be felt in terms of time and stress. With poverty often comes instability and a lack of control or choice about key factors in your life, such as where you live.

> ***"I would have to choose between paying double for my food at a petrol station across the road or having to pay the £5 for the bus ticket."***
> 'Zayna', Glasgow[10]

> ***"I was made homeless and the temporary accommodation I've been put in doesn't have a bus for my son to get to school – I've been having to pay for a taxi to get him there and back. It's a real strain."***
> 'Noor', Sheffield

10 As noted in the Introduction, all quotations are taken from qualitative research conducted between November 2024 and April 2025. Pseudonyms have been used for workshop participants to protect their anonymity.

4. THE CURRENT TRANSPORT SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

In this chapter, we discuss below how the transport system fails low-income households in three ways.

1. **The negative externalities of the transport system disproportionately impact people on low incomes.** People living on low incomes have higher than average exposure to transport-related harms and lower activity levels.
2. **Living on a low income makes you significantly more likely to experience transport difficulties that limit everyday life**. Transport infrastructure and services are not working well enough for people living on low incomes, failing on the key metrics of availability, affordability, reliability, accessibility and safety.
3. **Those making decisions about transport, from policy makers to service providers, are not prioritising the needs of this group**. There is a lack of opportunity for people on low incomes to shape the transport decisions that affect them.

The following chapters then discuss how transport can tackle poverty and what is needed to drive change.

THE NEGATIVE EXTERNALITIES OF THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACT PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES

Table 4.1 summarises findings from our literature review of some of the ways in which the transport system causes or reinforces harms to low-income groups.

TABLE 4.1: THE WAYS IN WHICH THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM CAUSES HARM TO LOW-INCOME GROUPS

Air pollution	• Transport causes air pollution which contributes to early deaths, increases the risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, can lead to reduced lung function and impacts brain development in children (EEA 2023). • Children under five, adults under 45, and households in deprived neighbourhoods have highest levels of exposure to air pollution (AQEG 2024). Poorer residents are also more likely to have underlying health conditions that make them more vulnerable to pollution (Barnes et al 2019). • There is a strong inverse relationship between poverty and emissions generation: areas where households have the lowest levels of vehicle access have the highest pollution concentrations (Barnes et al 2019).
Noise pollution	• A 2023 study by the UK Health Security Agency found that 40 per cent of adults in England in 2018 were exposed to long-term averaged road-traffic noise levels at a level that presents a threat to public health (Jephcote et al 2023). • In 2018, around 100,000 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) were lost in England due to road traffic noise (Jephcote et al 2023). Noise pollution contributes to ill health including cardiovascular diseases, strokes, diabetes, cognitive impairment, and neurodegenerative disorders (ibid, Arregi 2024)
Road danger	• People living in deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to be killed or seriously injured on the road (Aldred and Verlinghieri 2020). • In England, DfT data shows that the relationship between casualties and deprivation is particularly pronounced for younger pedestrians and cyclists (DfT 2023b). • In Scotland, children on foot or bike are more than three times as likely to be involved in a traffic collision in the 20 per cent most deprived areas than the 20 per cent least deprived areas (Quayle 2019).
Community severance	• Community severance is the separation of people from goods, services, and each other by busy roads or other transport infrastructure. Difficulties crossing roads can lead to social isolation and exclusion, cutting people off from services, amenities and social connections (Mace and Hulse 2024).
Physical inactivity	• Car travel increases sedentary time and is a major opportunity cost in terms of the physical and mental health gains that could have been achieved by walking or cycling instead (Laverty et al 2021). • People in lower socio-economic groups are the most likely to be inactive (Sports England 2025). Widening access to the health benefits of active travel could be particularly significant for low-income groups who are disproportionately affected by type 2 diabetes and obesity.

Source: Authors' analysis

All the above contribute to an increased burden of ill health on people who are poor. Their economic circumstances also mean that they are less capable of altering their situation to reduce exposure to or mitigate the impacts of these harms.

LIVING ON A LOW INCOME MAKES YOU SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE TRANSPORT DIFFICULTIES THAT LIMITS EVERYDAY LIFE

Our research finds that the transport system is not working well enough for people on low incomes across all modes. From experiences of discrimination on public transport, to low reliability of services, to potholes making roads dangerous, the public shared how the UK's transport system is not fit for purpose.

In particular, our research shone a light on how the car-centricity of the UK transport system means that those who do not own or have regular access to a vehicle face navigating a transport system and a physical landscape in which they do not have primacy. We also heard of the challenges experienced by those who own a car because their circumstances make car ownership necessary for work or family life, but for whom this is a strain on their finances, as detailed in chapter 3.

TABLE 4.2: KEY CHALLENGES BY MODE

Private vehicle	• **Affordability**: high burden on household finances • **Reliability**: congestion, breakdowns • **Safety**: road danger
Buses and rail	• **Availability:** lack of provision in terms of routes and frequency • **Affordability:** varying burden on household finances, depending on concessions available • **Reliability**: services late or cancelled • **Accessibility:** low accessibility for disabled people, people with small children etc • **Safety**: antisocial behaviour, discrimination
Active travel	• **Affordability**: upfront costs of a bike and accessories, such as helmet, lock etc, especially adapted cycles[11] • **Accessibility**: poor-quality, inaccessible infrastructure, potholes, pavement parking etc • **Availability**: lack of secure cycle parking • **Safety**: road danger, antisocial behaviour, discrimination

Source: Authors' analysis

In April 2025 we conducted national polling of GB adults with More in Common to better understand the public's transport experiences. In designing this research, we drew on Transport for the North's work on transport-related social exclusion (TRSE) to identify and assess possible risk factors for experiencing transport difficulties that limit everyday life (figure 3.2).

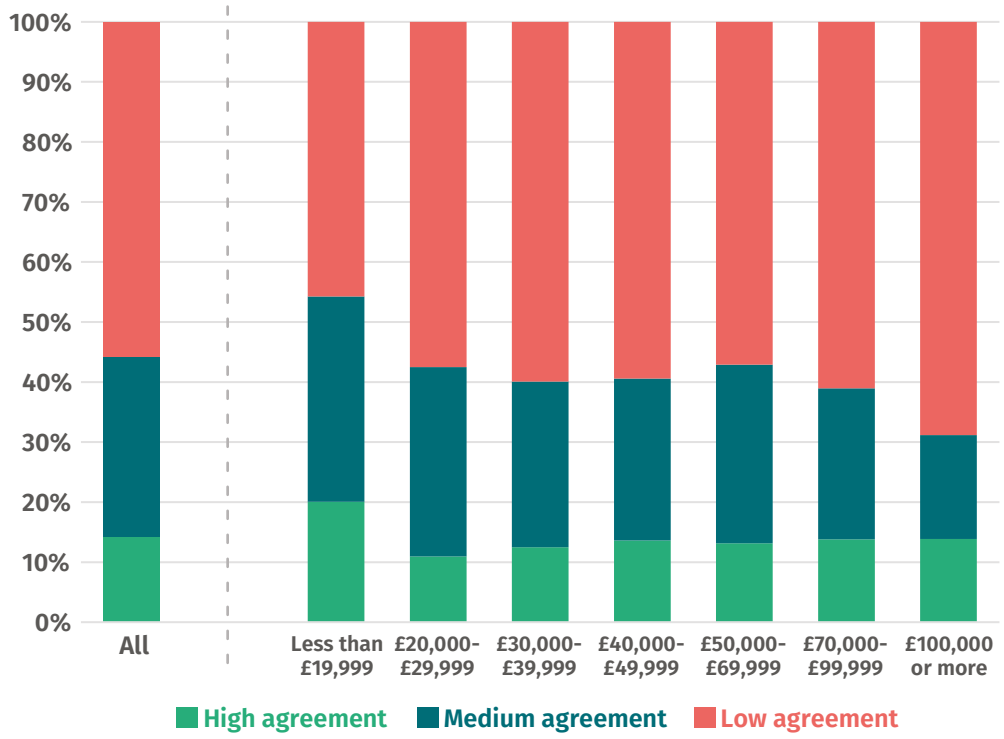
11 Sustrans (2024) has found that around 2 million people in the UK want to cycle but are priced out by the initial cost of a cycle and accessories.

Transport can contribute to social exclusion in a variety of ways. It may not be possible to access the places you need to get to, journeys may cause stress or anxiety, the cost may make it difficult to afford other essentials, the time spent travelling may limit your ability to see friends or family, and travel disruptions can make journeys unpredictable. These are considered risk factors for TRSE (TftN 2022) and can be assessed using a rating scale then assigned a high, medium or low risk ranking.

Living on a low income is a risk factor for TRSE. 20 per cent of people on the lowest incomes strongly agree that they face life-limiting transport difficulties, compared to an average of 14 per cent (figure 4.1). 66 per cent of those on the lowest incomes say that the cost of public transport makes it difficult to afford other essentials and 75 per cent say the same about the cost of running a car, in contrast to an average of 55 per cent and 63 per cent respectively (figure 4.2).

FIGURE 4.1: ONE IN FIVE (20 PER CENT) OF THOSE ON THE LOWEST INCOMES STRONGLY AGREE THAT TRANSPORT DIFFICULTIES LIMIT THEIR EVERYDAY LIFE, COMPARED TO AN AVERAGE OF AROUND ONE IN SEVEN PEOPLE (14 PER CENT)

Level of agreement to the statement 'transport difficulties limit my everyday life', split by income level, GB adults



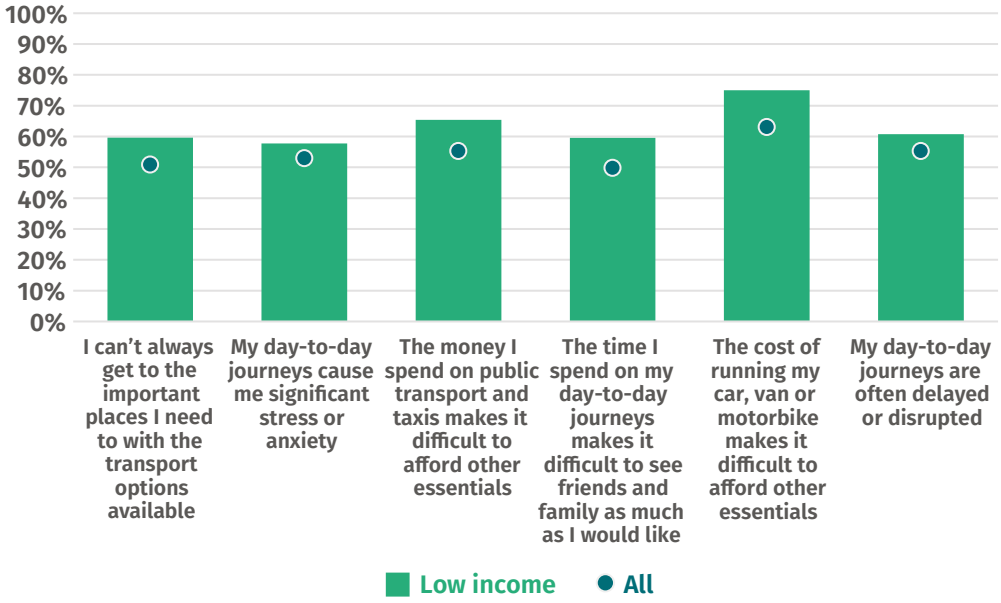
Source: Polling by More in Common commissioned by IPPR.

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on an 11-point scale, with 0 meaning 'agree completely' and 10 meaning 'disagree completely'. Responses have been grouped into high agreement (0-3), medium agreement (4-6) and low agreement (7-10). Sampe size = 2,071, weighted to be representative of GB adults, fieldwork April 2025.

After costs, the most widespread issues for those on low incomes are travel delays or disruptions (61 per cent), not being able to get to important places (60 per cent), time spent travelling making it difficult to see friends and family (60 per cent) and day-to-day journeys causing significant stress or anxiety (58 per cent) (figure 4.2).

FIGURE 4.2: TRANSPORT COSTS PUT THOSE ON LOW INCOME AT HIGH RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Responses to statements related to the risk factors of transport-related social exclusion, split by the GB-wide average and responses from those on a low income (under £19,999)



Source: Polling by More in Common commissioned by IPPR.

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on an 11-point scale, with 0 meaning 'agree completely' and 10 meaning 'disagree completely'. The graph shows the combined responses for high agreement (0-3) and medium agreement (4-6). Sample size = 2,071, weighted to be representative of GB adults, fieldwork April 2025.

Through our research with communities, we heard in detail how these issues play out on the ground. Of the important places that people needed to get to, hospitals were flagged as a particular challenge:

> *"Recently I've had to make hospital appointments and the destinations are unreachable by train. I'd have to take two buses to get there and it would take me over an hour each way. I'm reliant on family to help me out in these situations, as I can't afford the bus tickets, as its two different companies so it would cost me £12 for each appointment in travel alone, which would impact on my budget."*
>
> Anonymous, Single Parent Rights survey

> *"I'm asthmatic, I've got two toddlers and I'm pregnant, so getting two buses and then walking up the hill to get to the hospital isn't an option for me. The bus needs to take me to the door."*
>
> 'Sima', Sheffield

Poor transport availability and reliability also affected access to employment:

> *"I have opted not to apply for jobs because I am so concerned about travel and the stress it would cause me every day to rely on public transport and know that if there were delays I wouldn't be able to collect my son in time from childcare."*
>
> Anonymous, Single Parent Rights survey

CASE STUDY: DISCRIMINATION IN THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM

People in low-income groups have a high prevalence of characteristics that make them more vulnerable to exclusion, such as disabilities. Lower levels of car ownership amongst people on low incomes, people of colour and disabled people means more travel must happen in public spaces rather than the privacy of a car, increasing exposure to discrimination. All the parents with whom we spoke told us about the stress of travelling with children, particularly those with additional needs.

Racism

There were 2,800 hate crimes involving racial discrimination recorded by British Transport Police from 2019 to 2020 (Statista 2024). In our research we heard about lived experiences of discrimination, such as one woman being told by another passenger to move to the back of the bus. Another woman shared her experience of bus drivers' behaviour towards Black people:

> ***"They're good to the white people when they arrive on the bus; they talk to them... If someone is running behind the bus, the driver doesn't stop the bus if it's a Black person."***
>
> 'Samirah', Glasgow

Disability

Transport inaccessibility for disabled people is well documented. In our research, one person shared how they must begin their journey "at the start of the route and arrive 20 plus minutes early to guarantee access". They said, "far too often we miss medical appointments and time with friends because there isn't enough provision for disabled people." Another, who walks with a crutch, told us how bus drivers do not wait for her to sit down, and she has "gone flying": "I've just not got to my seat". For neurodiverse passengers and people with mental health problems, public transport can be hard to navigate, overwhelming, and overstimulating. Those with mobility impairments told us of issues around lack of step-free access at stations, competing over space for wheelchairs, discrimination, abuse and a lack of support from transport staff, and pavement parking restricting accessibility.

> ***"I am reliant on a wheelchair. Travelling even a short distance is exhausting. Pavement parking is terrible; pavements are uneven and it's difficult in places to find lower kerb levels for crossing. Some pavements are too narrow for wheelchairs. I'm unable to use the shortest route as it's not accessible."***
>
> 'Deborah', Lanarkshire

Children

In addition to the risks of road danger and a lack of accessibility for those with small children and buggies, many parents with whom we spoke felt judged by other members of the public for their children's behaviour. One mother shared how she was told by a bus driver to leave a bus because her two-year-old was crying. Many felt that neither the streets or public transport were welcoming to children.

> ***"Travelling alone as a parent with a young child is extremely difficult. Most stations have steep step-only access with no assistance, and are designed for busy rushing adults not for small kids and families."***
>
> Anonymous, Single Parent Rights survey

CASE STUDY: THE DOUBLE BLOW OF POOR CONNECTIVITY AND POOR SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Connectivity is important, so too is being able to maximise the environmental and social benefits of accessing what you need locally. Mobility can be a lifeline for people, but it is not, on its own, an appropriate proxy for opportunity: simply, you shouldn't always have to leave where you live to get by. Unfortunately, places that lack connectivity often also lack local services and social infrastructure. Through our qualitative research in Sheffield, we heard from a group of mothers about what it is like when you live most of your life within a small area, but that area does not provide you with what you need to thrive.

Until the Meadows nursery, where we met these parents, opened on Shirecliffe Road, there had been no early years' provision in the area for 10 years. Still, there remains a deficit in provision for young people, such as youth clubs or quality playgrounds. We also heard how unwelcoming and dangerous public spaces kept these mothers and their children in their homes. Fear of antisocial behaviour and road danger meant parents would not let their children out alone, at any age. Unsafe streets reduced their likelihood of walking anywhere – curbing their physical activity levels and isolating them from their communities.

Poor connectivity, low incomes, lack of services – these all combine to make it harder for people to change their material circumstances and improve their lives.

The parents with whom we worked in Sheffield told us quite simply that:

> ***"Transport would be better for low-income families if it was safer, clean, accessible, more regular and reliable, cheaper, and took you to where you want to go."***[12]

On public transport specifically, we heard across our research that reliability was one of the most important features of a public transport system that meets the needs of people who are poor. Reliability was closely linked to cost because, as we heard, if you are poor you cannot afford to pay your way out of a difficult situation. People told us that when they must wait a long time for a bus, or their bus doesn't show up or let them on, it is inconvenient, stressful and sometimes unsafe. Public transport unreliability creates an additional mental load on poorer people who must plan multiple scenarios or factor in time to manage delays, drawing on their already pressured time and mental bandwidth.

Fare rises can make people feel powerless: "We just see there's an increase; we don't have any choice other than to pay the new fare. It affects your self-confidence and self-respect." The people we heard from wanted public transport fares to be lower: "Reduce cost to a minimum, please; it's a plea from people on low incomes." We also heard that, however low the fares were, if the services were not meeting their needs they were not going to use them.

12 This was the opening sentence of a vision statement for how transport could work better for people on low incomes co-created by a small group of parents at a workshop at the Meadows nursery in Sheffield in April 2025, run in partnership with Save the Children.

THOSE MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT TRANSPORT, FROM POLICYMAKERS TO SERVICE PROVIDERS, ARE NOT PRIORITISING THE NEEDS OF THIS GROUP

The transport system is not designed with everyone in mind. Transport investment decisions favour those travelling for work and focus on reducing journey times over widening access to transport options (Goodwin 2025).

Polling commissioned by IPPR in 2024 revealed that half of adults in Great Britain strongly agree that "politicians have a bad understanding of what transport is like in areas like mine" and 63 per cent say they have a limited say over transport decisions that affect them (Frost and Singer Hobbs 2024a). IPPR research in Scotland in 2022 found that 65 per cent of those living on a low income who participated in our survey did not believe the needs of those on low incomes are considered in decisions about transport (Massey-Chase 2022). In our 2023 research into transport in rural Scotland, one interviewee told us: "There doesn't seem to be any way to get involved in the decisions that are made; it feels like no one cares" (Singer Hobbs and Frost 2023).

Transport facilitates access to decision making. One workshop participant told us that she wanted to get involved in local politics but could not get to the local meeting because there was not a bus home afterwards. She felt that she was being kept out of the rooms in which decisions are made, because of the transport system.

For many people, there is a strong sense that 'people like them' are not considered by decision makers. They feel forgotten about, misunderstood and underrepresented:

> ***"I'd like them to walk a day in my shoes before making decisions. Try navigating life as a single parent, required to work 30 hours a week by DWP, while getting your child to school on time or facing late fees from your childcare provider, when the bus is cancelled and the next one won't come for 20+ minutes."***
>
> Anonymous, Single Parent Rights survey

> ***"If buses or trains are too expensive, unreliable, or don't run when we need them, it's not just an inconvenience — it can mean missing work, kids being late to school, struggling to get to medical appointments, or being stuck in unsafe situations. So, when making decisions about fares, routes, and service hours, they should ask: 'Would this work for a parent juggling everything on their own?' If not, it's not working well enough."***
>
> Anonymous, Single Parent Rights survey

5. TRANSPORT'S ROLE IN TACKLING POVERTY

Building on what we understand about how the transport system does not meet the needs of, and even harms, those on low incomes, chapters 5 and 6 provide our recommendations for change.

This chapter focusses on how transport can tackle poverty through:

- **increased incomes** through better access to employment opportunities
- **lower costs** through access to cheaper transport and wider transport options
- **poverty mitigation** though improved access to the building blocks of good health and wellbeing and reducing the harms caused by poverty.

HOW TRANSPORT POLICY CAN REDUCE POVERTY BY PROVIDING THE OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE INCOMES

The transport sector makes significant contributions to the UK economy – connecting people to economic and social opportunities and enabling the movement of goods across the country. It is a key lever for tackling the UK's low productivity.

Transport plays a critical role in the prosperity of regional economies. It is widely recognised that inadequate public transport networks and congestion are making England's second cities less productive and holding back economic growth, with poor urban transport losing the economy an estimated £23.1 billion a year (Rodrigues and Breach 2021).

Resolution Foundation have shown that DfT's budget is "unusually regressive" compared to other government departments, with both revenue and capital spending tending to prioritise longer distance travel by road and rail, which favours those on higher incomes (Aref-Adib et al 2025 and Leather et al 2025). The most effective transport investment for inclusive economic growth would be in local public transport networks of England's second cities (ibid).

> **Recommendation: We back IPPR North's call for national government to consolidate, devolve and increase the funding local transport authorities receive for local bus services, rising to £3.1 billion per year by 2030 (Johns and Singer Hobbs 2025).**

Increased investment in bus services, combined with local knowledge of the geography of employment opportunities, would position local authorities to improve job accessibility for those on low incomes. The national guidance on transport concessions should also be amended to make it easier for local leaders to provide concessions to jobseekers (see below).

HOW TRANSPORT POLICY CAN TACKLE POVERTY THROUGH REDUCED COSTS

There are two key planks to reducing transport costs.

1. Giving people on low incomes better transport options.
2. Delivering targeted interventions to reduce transport costs.

Giving people on low incomes better transport options

When people have better – affordable, accessible, convenient, safe, reliable – transport options, it opens up the possibility of accessing a wider range of goods and services, such as cheaper, healthy food. When people have these options, it also reduces car dependency and the costs associated with this.

There are many people on low incomes who rely on cars. The dependence is caused by factors including public transport provision, the proximity of work to homes, digital connectivity, road safety, and social norms. Because car dependency is a multi-faceted problem, it needs a suite of solutions, not limited to transport policy. For example, the car dependency of new homes has increased in every region of England outside of London over the last 15 years (Kiberd 2024) and this needs to be tackled through regional level strategic planning.

Labour's commitment to bus franchising will go some way to support improvements to the cost and provision of bus services, which are vital for improving transport choice. Bus franchising positions combined authorities to tackle the issues identified above in frequency, reliability, and routes serving a wider range of people through supporting socially necessary services. As argued by IPPR North (Johns and Singer Hobbs 2025), the government should build on their commitment to safeguard 'lifeline' bus services. Combined authorities will also need to support the creation of new routes where services are missing.

> **Recommendation: Robust statutory guidance should set out 1) how transport authorities should define socially necessary local services and minimum expected service levels, and 2) urban and rural minimum public transport service standards, including both timetabled services and on-demand and community-led approaches.**

Walking and cycling are the cheapest modes of transport; supporting people to use them requires investment in infrastructure and improvements to road safety. Just 2 per cent of DfT's total transport budget is spent on infrastructure to support active travel, despite active travel schemes offering a strong return on investment (Singer Hobbs and Frost 2024). Our 2024 report on active travel in England proposes a package of recommendations, including a call for the government to commit to an equivalent of 10 per cent of the transport budget for active travel in England by 2029. In addition, in this report we propose a greater commitment to modal shift targets, for both active travel and bus use.

> **Recommendation: Maintain the targets for increased levels of active travel by 2030 as part of the Third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS3) and set a new target on expected increases in bus passengers by 2030, both in absolute terms and per capita across England's regions. As a minimum, these targets should be aligned with the expectations on modal shift set out by the Climate Change Committee in their Seventh Carbon Budget (2025b).**

Previous IPPR research with low-income households in Scotland found significant support for a wide range of policies related to the reallocation of road space and restrictions on car use (Massey-Chase et al 2022). For example, 78 per cent of those surveyed said they supported stopping polluting cars from entering areas with high pollution. As we discuss in our 2023 report on unlocking local action on clean air, local and combined authorities already have a plethora of powers available to

do this (Singer Hobbs et al 2023). They will need to use these powers to increase transport options for people on low incomes.

> **Recommendation: Local and combined authorities should carry out road space reallocation, introduce new bus priority measures and deliver measures to improve pedestrian and cyclist safety, such as school streets and bike lanes. National government should make clear that this is a political priority.**

Delivering targeted interventions to reduce transport costs

Managing the costs of local public transport for low-income households should be a priority for DfT. Cars are the most expensive form of transport (Salutin 2024) and when people can rely on the bus, it has the potential to bring down their transport costs. For many though, fares are still a significant burden. While franchising is likely to make bus fares simpler and cheaper across some regions, there continues to be a postcode lottery of costs for bus travel, in particular for children.

IPPR North have called for the consolidation of multiple funding pots, including the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), into one pot of funding for buses (Johns and Singer Hobbs 2025). This should then be devolved and spent in the way that the local transport authority sees fit. This allows local leaders to make decisions about the types of concessions or fares to offer, for example setting fare caps (as in Greater Manchester), or concessions for young people (as in Scotland) or jobseekers (as in London).

> **Recommendation: National funding for transport concessions in England should become part of a consolidated single pot of bus funding and the national guidance on transport concessions should be amended to make it easier for local leaders to provide concessions to a wider range of people, in line with local priorities.**[13]

Of course, there are many people living on low incomes who need a car. For these households, we call for more support to access an electric vehicle. This support should be prioritised for those living on low incomes in rural areas with poor public transport provision. The Social Market Foundation has called for a similar scheme and suggests this would lift up to 500,000 people out of poverty while taking between 900,000 and 1.5 million tonnes of carbon out of the atmosphere every year (Salutin 2024).

> **Recommendation: IPPR calls for a UK social leasing scheme for electric vehicles. This would enable low-income households to lease a car for a low monthly fee from a private leasing company, with the government paying the difference between this fee and the market price.**

Many people living on low incomes could not charge an electric vehicle from the electricity supply to their home, but charging on the street is more expensive than home charging.

> **Recommendation: Government should reduce the VAT rate on public chargers from 20 to 5 per cent and use competition law to ensure that the private sector passes this saving onto consumers.**

13 Currently, the Transport Act 1985 defines a list of people who can be provided with concessionary travel as part of the English national concessionary travel scheme (ENCTS) and local variations from this must be achieved through workarounds. This list could be scrapped and full discretion given to local leaders.

HOW TRANSPORT POLICY CAN MITIGATE POVERTY

As discussed in chapter 5, transport policy can mitigate poverty by providing access to the building blocks of health and wellbeing. The recommendations above are designed to improve households' material circumstances by providing opportunities to increase income and reduce costs. Many also have the potential to reduce the harms arising from being in poverty through improving access to goods and services, education, culture, social connections and green space, for example.

As noted in chapter 4, the negative externalities of our transport system disproportionately impact low-incomes households. Considering the road danger faced by people living on low incomes, and that safer roads are a precondition of modal shift, we recommend that the government priority of making our streets safer should include safety from vehicles and their drivers as well as from crime and antisocial behaviour.

According to the OECD, World Bank and World Health Organisation, 'safe systems road safety' is the best way to reduce traffic fatalities (Davis 2022). A 'safe system' is one where road systems are designed so that human error does not have a serious or fatal outcome. It is a concept which has its origins in 'vision zero': the goal of zero road deaths and life-changing injuries. A key factor that contributes to fatalities is speed; recent research shows that in Wales and London reducing speed limits to 20mph has significantly reduced fatalities.[14]

> **Recommendation: The government's upcoming road safety strategy should: adopt vision zero and the principles of the safe system; recognise and respond to the higher road safety risks faced by certain communities; include targets for reducing all casualities on the road; set 20mph as the starting point for urban speed limits.**

Reducing traffic speed also has a positive impact on noise pollution Cutting urban speed limits from 30mph to 20mph could reduce traffic noise by more than 50 per cent (Mitchell 2009).

Above, we make a recommendation on road space reallocation to support modal shift and increase transport choice. In chapter 4 we recognise the disproportionate impact of air pollution on poorer communities. Road space reallocation can and should also be delivered in such a way as to reduce air pollution in low-income neighbourhoods.

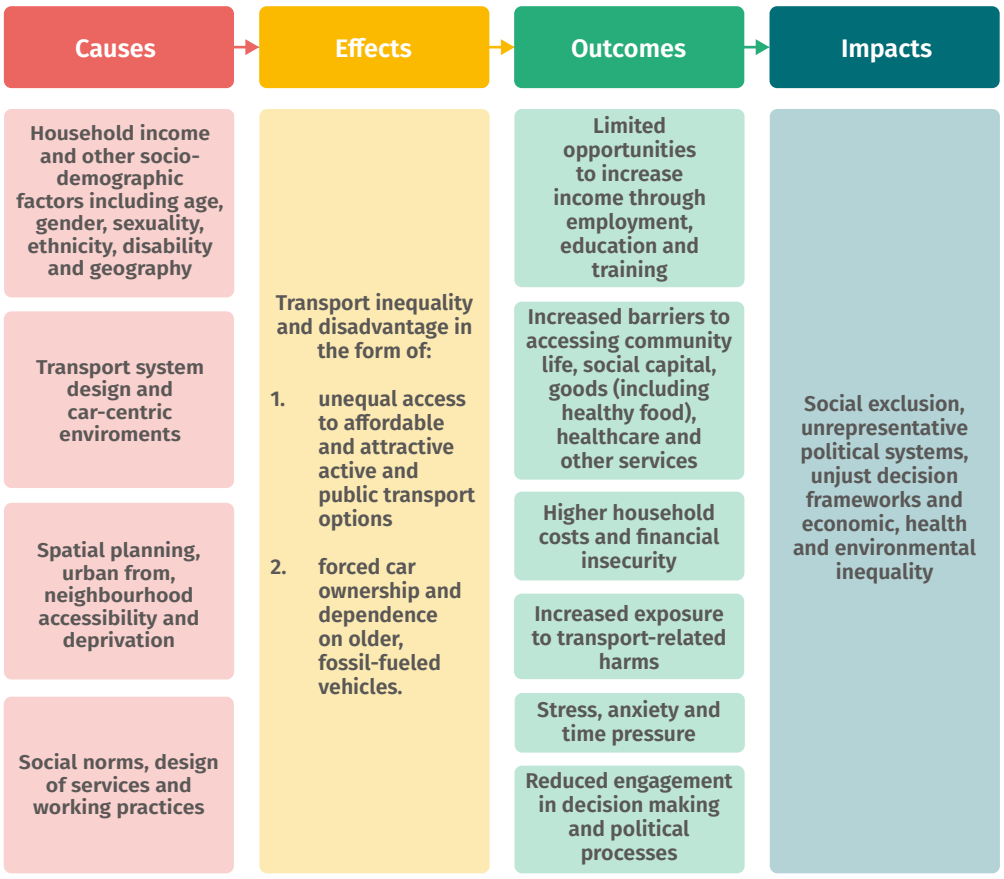
14 New research commissioned by TfL has found 35 per cent fewer collisions and 36 per cent fewer casualties on borough roads where 20mph zones had been introduced, with no evidence of increased congestion (TfL 2025). In Wales, the first year that the default urban speed limit of 20mph was introduced there were around 100 fewer people killed or seriously injured on 20 and 30mph roads (Deans 2025).

6.
HOW TO DRIVE CHANGE IN THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM

As detailed in chapter 5, transport interventions can support people to increase their income, reduce household costs and mitigate poverty. These should be underpinned by fundamental, system-wide changes to the UK's approach to transport policy.

FIGURE 6.1: THE ROOT CAUSES OF TRANSPORT-RELATED SOCIAL EXCLUSION ARE COMPLEX AND REQUIRE SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGES TO ADDRESS

Qualitative overview of the causes, effects, outcomes and impacts associated with transport-related social exclusion



Source: Authors' analysis. Drawing on Transport for the North (2022) and Lucas (2012).

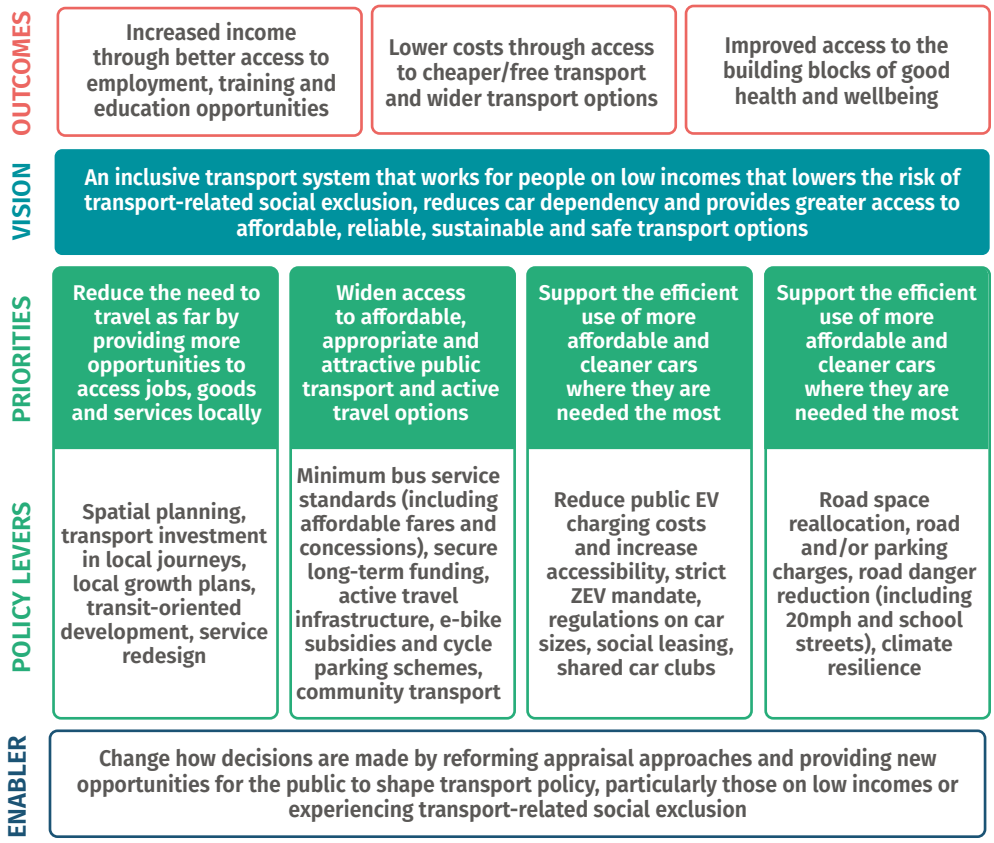
The UK government needs to be more vision-led and people-focussed in how they make transport decisions. The Integrated National Transport Strategy (INTS) provides the key opportunity within this parliament to start this rewiring of transport decision making. Changes to the planning system will also be needed. The ground for this has

been laid in changes to the National Planning Policy Framework that make explicit that transport decisions should be made with local engagement, promote walking, cycling and public transport use, deliver 'net environmental gains', and be 'vision-led' (MHCLG 2024).

Figure 6.2 provides a framework for how transport can become a better enabler, rather than a constraint, in the lives of those on low incomes. It includes the priorities the INTS should seek to deliver and some of the policy levers available to achieve these. These priorities align with the Avoid-Shift-Improve framework recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which also informs the transport strategies of the Welsh and Scottish governments and many local and regional transport bodies in England.

FIGURE 6.2: THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD SET OUT A NEW VISION FOR INCLUSIVE TRANSPORT

Indicative mapping of the goal, priorities, policy levers, enabler and outcomes of a new government approach to inclusive transport, focussed on needs of those on a low income



Source: Authors' analysis

Many of the challenges faced by people on low incomes are known to those focussed on local transport. Mayors across England increasingly recognise transport's role in tackling inequality and achieving inclusive economic growth. Regional transport bodies in England have become centres of excellence in understanding the causes of transport-related social exclusion and the interventions needed to address it. A national approach should build on Transport for the North's England-wide analysis of the communities facing barriers to opportunity and inclusion due to transport.

Recommendation: DfT should adopt a national measure for transport-related social exclusion, incorporating a metric for forced car dependency. It should then set targets to reduce this over the next five and ten years and incorporate these priorities and evidence of what works to deliver them into new local transport plan guidance. This target should be reflected in DfT funding allocations, including the Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) and the Road Investment Strategy (RIS).

As IPPR has previously argued (Frost et al 2022), a commitment to adopting a vision-led approach to transport planning should demand significant change to how decisions are made. In practice, this means transforming transport appraisal processes. Following the Welsh government's successful reforms to WelTAG,[15] the UK government should clearly lay out its vision for the future of transport and then align the 'wiring' of transport decision making behind achieving this goal.

Recommendation: The UK government must make good on their commitments to a new vision-led approach to transport in appraisal guidance and the allocation of transport investment. This should include an explicit focus on widening access to public transport and safe active travel infrastructure, rather than delivering journey time savings in already productive areas of the country, in line with government's opportunity and health missions.

As outlined in chapter 4, trust in transport decision making is low. If the UK government is to build trust and deliver improvements that reflect the needs of low-income households, it must give people more of a stake in decisions that affect them. Greater devolution can help with this. DfT is also well placed to show leadership in establishing new ways of working that increase effective, more equitable, participation in decision making. Transport policy has the potential to be polemical, and deliberation with the public provides the opportunity for improving fairness in both the process and outcome, building trust and increasing public support.

Recommendation: The Integrated National Transport Strategy should detail how DfT will better incorporate the voice of the public in its business planning and policymaking. This should include establishing a social inclusion advisory panel representing the interests of communities most disadvantaged by the current transport system, with meaningful opportunities for strategy development and scrutiny.

Recommendation: We recommend convening citizens' juries on issues such as road danger reduction, the future of motoring taxation (with HMT) and transport's role in reducing health inequalities (with DHSC).

We know that transport can either exacerbate or alleviate hardship. Affordable, reliable, accessible, safe transport supports people's ability to work, learn, participate in cultural and public life, access support networks and be physically and mentally healthy. An enabler of Labour's missions and underpinned by a strong mandate for change, the opportunity to transform transport, and therefore people's everyday lives, is there for policymakers across the UK to seize.

15 The revised WelTAG embeds the ambition set out in the Wales Transport Strategy within appraisal and decision-making processes (Welsh Government 2024). It reflects the sustainable travel hierarchy (ranking transport modes based on their environmental impact) and sets four tests to ensure roads investment is aligned with promoting modal shift, improving safety, adapting roads to the impact of climate change and providing access to economic centres.

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