

The path to net zero in transport

Yesterday the UK government published its 220 page document on how it wishes to transform the way we and our goods get about. At its heart was a contradiction. The early paragraphs promise us "it's not about stopping people doing things: it's about doing the same things differently. We will still drive on improved roads, but only in zero emission cars". The vision is of keeping the flexibility of personal road transport with that still be the dominant way of getting about. There will also be new planes to offer good value flights with carbon free fuels so no need to rein in the holidays abroad.

Whoever wrote that bit did not bother to order a rewrite of the rest of the document. A bit further on we are told the opposite. "We must make public transport, cycling and walking the natural first choice for all who can take it". We are offered a world of car sharing, car clubs and much less car use, alongside a target that "half of all journeys in towns and cities" are to be walking or cycling by 2030. The plan confirms their wish to end all new diesel and petrol van and car sales from 2030, all fossil fuel lighter HGVs from 2035 and the rest from 2040.

In some areas under direct government control the plan lacks the same crusading energy. We are only offered a net zero railway by 2050, even though it is already heavily electrified. There will still be diesel trains in 2039. We are promised a railfreight growth target which could relieve our main roads and help a great deal in many ways, but there is no agreed one in this document from the government and the railway, currently effectively nationalised. There is no date yet decided for the phase out of fossil fuel buses, with non fossil fuel fleets still at the demonstration city and project stage.

We are told that "We will continue to support demand for zero emissions vehicles through a a (sic) package of financial and non financial incentives". Given the millions of vehicles they want replaced that could prove very costly.

I am all in favour of more freight going by rail. That requires work on smaller track bypasses and extensions, new sidings and branch lines into industrial parks, and new depots. I am all in favour of new electric cars and vans once they are seen by more of the public as better than the diesel and petrol versions and are attractively priced by the market so they fly off the shelves. More work is needed on this strategy, with more reassurance about what its aims are. Transport is crucial to our lives, central to our food and goods supply, crucial to services provided to us and vital for many of our jobs. People will want to know the change planned does not make these things worse for us.