



Roads Task Force - Technical Note 13

What are the motivations for owning a car?

Introduction

This paper forms one of a series of thematic analyses, produced to contribute to the Roads Task Force Evidence Base. The focus of this paper is answering the fundamental question: why do people want to own a car and, conversely, why some people do not own a car?

Summary

- People own a car for a combination of practical and emotional reasons. These practical and emotional benefits are equally important even though drivers are less aware of the more 'emotional' reasons, as well as less prepared to admit to them either to themselves or to others.
- The practical benefits of cars are that they provide a door-to-door service with no interchanges, available 24/7 and without having to wait; they can carry your luggage, shopping, or equipment; and they are easy to pay for, with the real costs not always evident to trip-makers. These factors all contribute to the car being convenient.
- The emotional benefits of cars include providing a sense of freedom, independence, control self-worth/status, and personal safety/security. One reason young adults learn to drive and get a car in the first place is that it is seen as part of growing up and therefore a 'social norm'.
- These practical and emotional benefits mean that once someone has a car they tend to become increasingly committed to it, even building their lives around – a phenomenon known as the 'road to car reliance'.
- Nearly half of London households live without a car. The key reasons for this are that some people can't afford to own and run a car, or don't consider the costs worthwhile, whilst others don't want the hassle of owning a car and choose to live somewhere where a car isn't necessary.

Car ownership levels

In 2011/12 just over half (54 per cent) of households had at least one car, including 14 per cent with more than one car (LTDS 2011/12).

Why people wish to own a car

Car Dependence Study

Wishing to understand the attraction of car has been a long term aim and probably the seminal study in this regard was the 1995 RAC Foundation report Car Dependence. Figure 1 summarises the advantages of car identified in this report, highlighting the emotional benefits of car ownership.

The report makes the point that car dependence is a continuum of degrees of intensity, so there are a minority of trips at one extreme that have to be done by car, and a similar minority



at the other end of the spectrum for which there are perfectly good alternatives, with the bulk of trips somewhere between these extremes. In many of these cases, using car is still the rational choice because of the poor quality of the alternatives. In London the balance between trips which have to be done by car and those with good alternatives is different to the rest of the country, and even within London there is considerable variation.

It also makes the point that car dependence grows so that once a car has been bought it encourages travel behaviour for which car is a necessity.

Figure 1 Advantages of owning a car.

Advantage of car	Illustrative focus group quote
1. Spontaneity	<i>I hate not being able to feel that there's a car outside the door that I can leap into if I want to</i>
2. Psychological Economics	<i>If I wanted to go to Birmingham with my family; if I went on the bus I would have to pay for four people, whereas if I drive into Birmingham I just pay for one lot of petrol</i>
3. Privacy	<i>You buy it (a car) because it is something you want, to go driving. I hate bloody buses, somebody coughing their guts out over me.</i>
4. Desire for Control	<i>The difference between being in a bus and in the car is that in the car you're in control, so you've got a right to be impatient... When you're on the bus you're not in control of what the bus does, so being impatient doesn't do anything. You just have to sit there and say 'Oh well there's a jam'.</i>
5. Enjoyment of driving	<i>I like driving and it doesn't bore me. When I can drive fast I do it, but when there's traffic I don't complain.</i>

Source: *Car Dependence (RAC 1995)*

Overcoming Car Dependency Study

The 2005 study *Overcoming Car Dependency* (SDG on behalf of TfL) provided a summary of the evidence to-date on why people choose car. Key extracts from this are re-produced below.

Convenience

Research has shown that 'convenience' is generally the most common reason cited for using a car. Specific arguments used under the banner of 'convenience' to justify use of the car include:

- it enables *direct* door-to-door travel with no physical effort involved in, for example, walking to bus stops/stations;
- it provides an easy way of transporting luggage and equipment;
- it provides flexibility and enables plans to be changed at the last minute, offering complete personal freedom;
- it facilitates trip chaining, for example, enabling children to be dropped off at school on the way to work (it is estimated that only 3 in 10 parents go straight home after the school run);



- planning is generally easy, with no additional information such as timetables required in order to plan routes; and
- car users perceive that they have a higher degree of control when travelling by car than when travelling by public transport.

Timing

Car users often argue that public transport does not provide a service at the time they need and/or to the place they want to go; car users feel more in control of the timing of their journey than when they travel on public transport.

Comfort

Some car users consider that their car provides a more comfortable travelling environment than that offered by public transport:

- the car offers a high degree of privacy whilst public transport involves travel with strangers, often in a crowded environment with limited personal space;
- car users are put off by the possibility that a seat may not be available for their journey;
- the car user is able to control the temperature of the vehicle, listen to their radio station of choice etc;
- the car is considered cleaner than public transport;
- people may feel safer and more secure when travelling by car rather than by public transport, with the loss of conductors seen as a factor in the reduction of security on-board public transport. In particular, the car is the mode of choice for women travelling after dark;
- people dislike anti-social behaviour on buses;
- many irregular bus users perceive buses to provide a hostile environment in terms of, for example, knowing where to buy a ticket; and
- travel by car is less affected by the weather, for example, there is no need to wait in the rain at bus stops.

The Car as a Symbol

Psychological and anthropological research emphasises the importance of the car as a symbol, described in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Symbolic nature of the car in British society.

- **Cars as status** – some people perceive the car to be a symbol of status, seniority and success, which may be further reflected in a desire to drive a particular make/model of car.
- **Cars as costume** – cars have replaced clothing for many people as a way of self expression.
- **Cars as language** – cars can be used to draw attention, and as a display of aggression through certain driving behaviour such as tail-gating, hard acceleration and un-dipped headlights.
- **Cars as drugs** – cars give pleasure to some people – driving at speed can, for example, stimulate the senses, and cause adrenalin to be produced.
- **Cars as sex** – the association with sex has been exploited by advertisers, with a recurrent link between owning a car and sexual success.
- **Cars as power** – cars provide the most powerful form of physical energy that most people get to control. Some people also specifically enjoy the challenge of driving in the London environment.
- **Cars as personal statements** – the type of car a person drives makes an implicit statement about the type of person they are. This is often exploited by television programme and film makers to provide a way of labelling characters:
 - Reliant Robin – Del Boy
 - 1960's Jaguar – Inspector Morse
 - Morris 1100 – Frank Spencer
 - Aston Martin/Lotus - James Bond
 - Rolls Royce - Lady Penelope (Thunderbirds)
 - Ford Capri - Bodie and Doyle (The Professionals)
 - Mini (old style) - Mr Bean
- **Cars as security** – a car is a place where a person is safe from the outside world and where they feel in control over their own destiny.
- **Cars as talisman** – there are several contexts in which breaking the law in relation to cars is sometimes considered to be non-criminal and justifiable, including illegal parking and speeding, and is also suggested in the label 'joyriding'.
- **Cars as independence** - younger teenagers initially enjoy the independence of travel by bus but this disappears as they approach driving age when the car symbolises independence and status and, for many, these views continue through adulthood.
- **Cars as parent** – the relationship with a car starts as attachment but can become dependence - as a child is to its parent.

Source: *Overcoming Car Dependency (SDG 2005)*

Car Dependency Attitudes and Lifestyle Survey

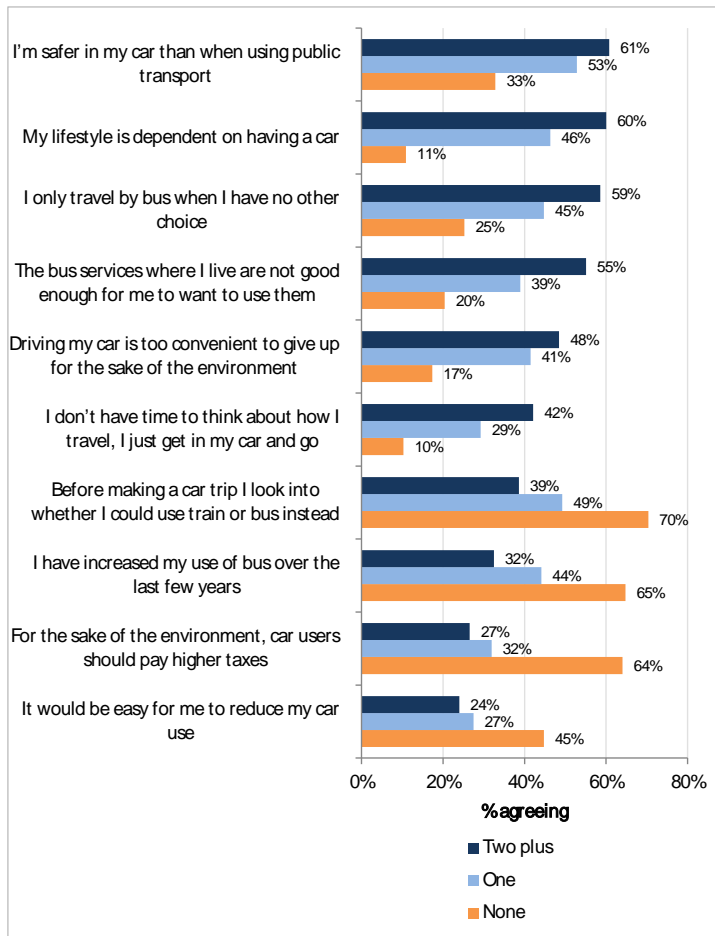
Following the Car Dependency desk research an on-line survey was undertaken to explore the attitudes and lifestyles of drivers and how they differ between driver segments. This survey included a battery of 80 questions, and Figure 3 illustrates some of these, with a focus on those which have the strongest correlation with car ownership levels. For example, it shows that:

- Car owners were much more likely than non-owners to say they feel safer in their car than when using public transport;
- 60 per cent of those in households with at least two cars agreed that “My lifestyle is dependent on having a car” (the equivalent percentage for one car households was 46 per cent);



- Car owners were much more likely than non-owners to agree that “I only travel by bus when I have no other choice” and similarly that “The bus services where I live are not good enough for me to want to use them”; and
- 48 per cent in two car and 41 per cent in one car households agreed that “Driving my car is too convenient to give up for the sake of the environment”.

Figure 3 Attitudes which differentiate between car ownership levels.



Source: Car Dependency Lifestyle survey (SDG 2005)

Car Dependency Qualitative Research

Qualitative research with car owners carried out by Synovate on behalf of TfL provides another illustration of the emotional benefits of owning a car (see Figure 4), focusing on how owning a car can help someone feel that they are able to fulfil their role within their immediate family and wider society. Thus, owning a car can facilitate being supportive, helpful, and reliable for friends, family, colleagues, and employers.



Figure 4 Benefits of car in supporting relations.

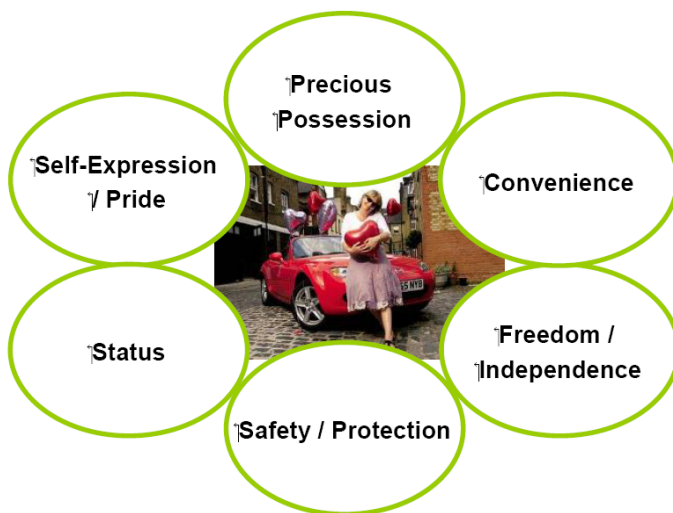


Source: *Car Dependency Qualitative Study, (Synovate 2006)*

Smarter Driving campaign development

Qualitative research by 2CV to help develop a TfL campaign to encourage smarter driving explored driver's relationships with their cars, summarised in Figure 5. This refers to practical influences (that is, convenience) and emotional influences such as status, independence, control, feeling safe. It also highlights the fact that a car can be regarded as a treasured possession and an extension of the person themselves: *"My car is like a part of me, when someone crashed into it and it got taken to be repaired I cried"*.

Figure 5 Drivers' relationship with their car.



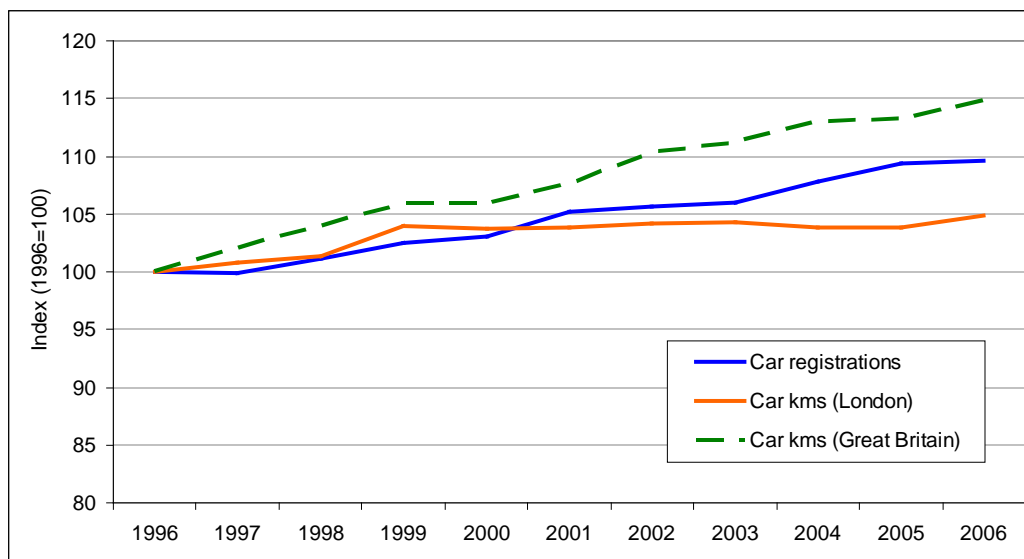
Source: *Smarter driving advertising development (2CV, 2007)*



Car Ownership and Use Exploratory Study

The Car Ownership and Use Exploratory research study was a major undertaking by TfL involving two consultancies (Steer Davies Gleave and MVA) using a variety of research and analysis techniques. It was commissioned to understand the unexpected trends in car ownership and use (with car use flattening out even though ownership was continuing to increase – see Figure 6) and explore whether these trends can be expected to continue.

Figure 6 Trends in car ownership and use 1999-2006.



Source: Car Ownership and Use Exploratory study (SDG 2008)

The reasons identified for wanting to own a car are summarised below.

Practicality and convenience

Cars offer practical benefits in that they provide a door-to-door service without the need to interchange, which is available 24/7, and without having to wait. Furthermore, it can carry your luggage, shopping, or equipment, and makes life much easier if you have young children.

All these factors are often summed up in the term “convenient”. An underlying factor here is that owning a car makes life simpler – it avoids the need to pre-plan or to rely on someone else, and facilitates a busy activity-filled lifestyle.

In fact, owning a car can then lead to changes in lifestyle which reinforce its usefulness. The result is that, over time, people start to rely on car and to believe that they cannot possibly do without it:

“Cars have changed the way we live now. You have to shop out of town, smaller local shops have all shut down now, everything’s geared to the car.”

Emotional support

Complementing the practical convenience of car, cars provide (to varying degrees depending on the individual) emotional support in the form of providing a sense of freedom, independence, control, self-worth or status, and personal safety and security. For example:



"It [having a car] just gives you so much more independence to be able to go off and do things, without have to rely on a taxi or someone to give you a lift."

"I'd be devastated if my car went. I need it for my independence."

"I fancy cars actually, so I'd like to have one"

Another influence on the emotions of drivers is the expectations of others, the "social norm": if you are surrounded by people like you who drive there is a societal pressure to conform by driving:

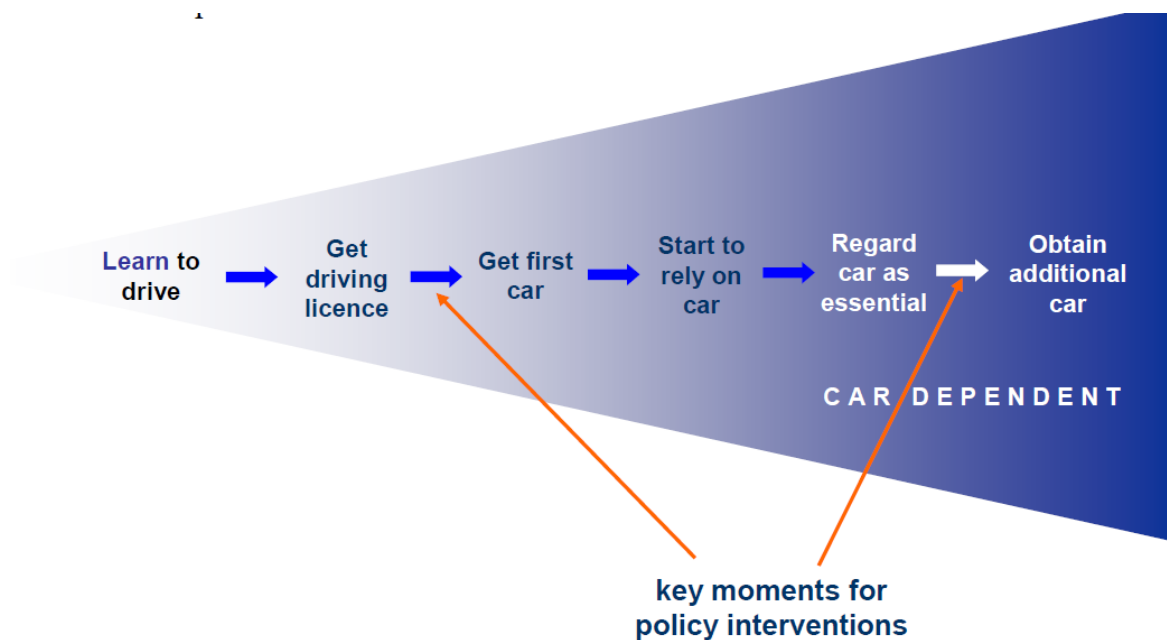
"All my friends are planning to [learn to drive] asap!"

Steps towards "car dependency"

The car ownership and use research highlighted six important steps towards someone (or a family) becoming car dependent. Note that we are defining being 'car dependent' as believing that owning a car is essential and that it would be very hard to do without a car (whether or not this is actually the case).

These steps are firstly, to learn to drive and secondly to get a licence; these steps can largely be regarded as just part of growing up. Thirdly, at some point a person will get their first car, and fourthly, as that car is used, it becomes integrated into the drivers and their family's lifestyle. This then translates into a feeling that the car is essential; at this stage there is a tendency to reject information which contradicts this. Finally, this can lead to the perceived need for a second car so that in a two adult family, both adults can have the freedom and flexibility a car provides. These six steps are illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 Six steps towards car dependency.



Source: Car Ownership and Use Exploratory study (SDG 2008)

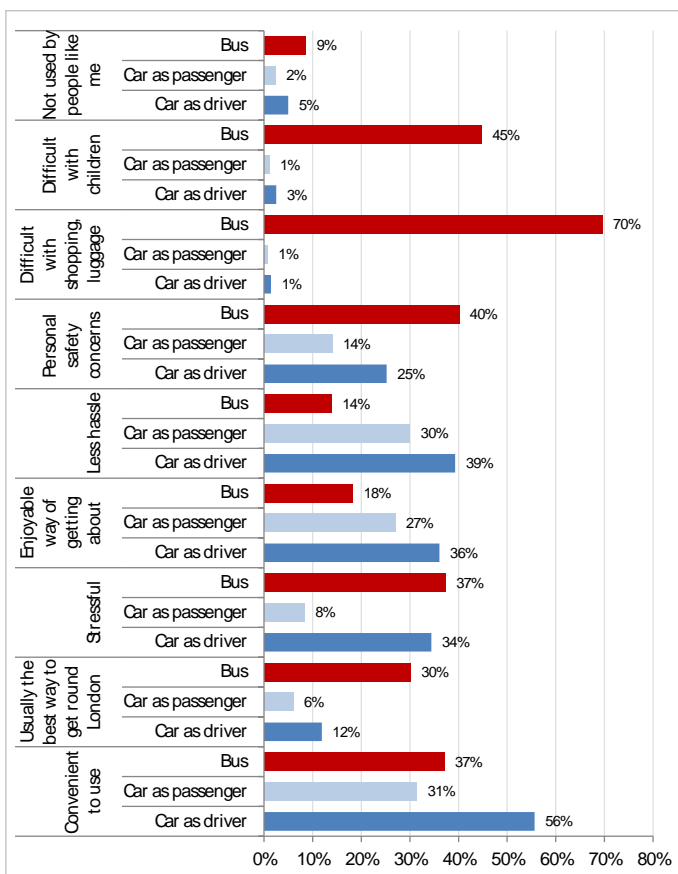


Segmentation Survey

While the primary purpose of the Segmentation Survey conducted by TNS-RI on behalf of TfL was to create a segmentation of Londoners based on their attitudes towards transport modes and their use of different modes, the survey also provides additional valuable information on how different modes are perceived, including car (as both a driver and passenger). Figure 8 provides an overview of some of these attitudes amongst car owners, with attitudes towards bus used as a point of comparison. Some of the views highlighted by this survey are:

- car is much easier than public transport if you have children or shopping/luggage (for example, 70 per cent of car owners identified bus travel as being difficult with shopping/luggage compared with just one per cent saying the same for car);
- while two-fifths had personal safety concerns about travelling by bus, just 25 per cent did with car as a driver;
- car was more likely to be seen (by car users) as an enjoyable way of getting about than the bus;
- car is a very convenient mode, but more people said that bus is usually the best way of getting round London than chose the car (30 per cent versus 12 per cent); but
- the percentage saying that driving is stressful was the same as that saying that bus travel is stressful (34 per cent versus 37 per cent respectively).

Figure 8 Attitudes towards car and bus.



Source: Segmentation Survey (TNS-RI 2009)



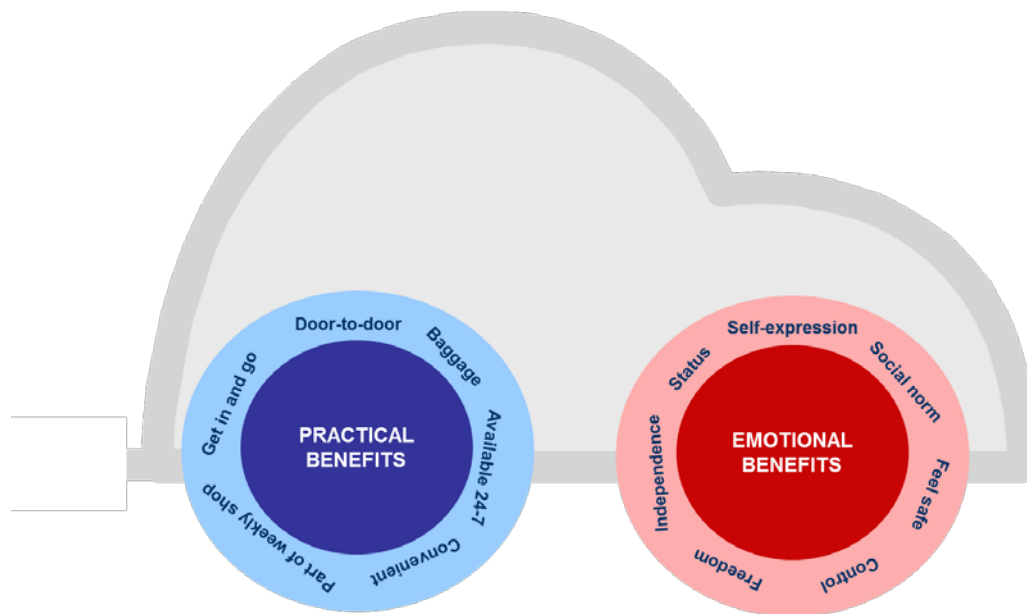
Why people want to own a car: key points

In summary then we know from these studies that people own a car for a combination of practical and more emotional reasons, as summarised in Figure 9. These practical and emotional benefits are both important, although drivers are typically less aware of the more ‘emotional’ reasons, and less prepared to admit to them, so will tend to fall back on ‘rational’ reasons when asked.

The practical benefits of cars are that they provide a door-to-door service with no interchanges, available 24/7 and without having to wait; they can carry your luggage, shopping, or equipment; and they are easy to pay for, with the real costs not always evident to trip-makers (much of the cost of running a car is divorced from the journey – purchase costs, insurance and tax for example). These factors all contribute to the car being convenient.

The emotional benefits of cars include providing a sense of freedom, independence, control self-worth/status, and personal safety/security. One reason young adults learn to drive and get a car in the first place is that it is seen as part of growing up and therefore a ‘social norm’.

Figure 9 Summary of the benefits of car ownership and use.



Why people do not own a car

Car Ownership and Use Exploratory Study

TfL’s Car Ownership and Use Exploratory research study (2008) found that living in London means that, for many, learning to drive and owning a car is not essential because of the availability of alternatives:

“So many of mine have passed, not many left that are learning...And others have decided that living in London they don’t plan on learning to drive at all.”

“I [learnt to drive because I] was also living in an area where it wasn’t like London. I think depending where you live in London, I don’t think it’s always necessary to have a car. However, in other parts of the country I think it is more important to have a car.”



Analysis of the London Travel Demand Survey shows that car ownership is higher in parts of London with less access to public transport, and lower where public transport options are very good. So, there is a clear link between the necessity of owning a car and levels of car ownership. This is a somewhat cyclical relationship: in some locations, the options available make car ownership more or less appealing, and for some people, locations will be more or less appealing as a place to live based upon the transport choices available. So, for some, the ability to live without a car will be an appealing aspect of an area, whilst for others, the availability of car parking and low congestion is attractive when choosing somewhere to live.

For those living in areas well served by public transport, the cost of owning a car can be hard to justify, especially in light of the cost of public transport:

“I enjoy driving but it’s the cost of having a car which you don’t really need for most of the time.”

“As soon as I got a job in London I sold the car straight away because I knew I couldn’t have both – car and pay for public transport every day.”

Furthermore, although for some London residents car travel is a way of avoiding stress, for others driving can be a source of stress and owning a car is considered a hassle. Both car owners and non-car owners typically say that they don’t enjoy driving in London and find it stressful. The introduction of the Congestion Charge, increased parking restrictions, costs and enforcement, and congestion all contribute to a feeling amongst many non-car owners that owning a car would be an unnecessary cause of stress.

“Can’t be bothered [to own a car], too expensive and rather pointless in London. Congestion Charge, parking, insurance, cost of fuel, gridlock, need I go on?”

Influence of Cost on Car Ownership Survey

Cost is a key barrier to car ownership and around 25 per cent of those without a car say they would buy a car but for the cost. However, cost is less of a disincentive than it perhaps should be because of the tendency for car owners to substantially under-estimate the cost of owning and running a car. In fact, TfL’s Cost of Car Use research (SDG 2010) found that the annual costs of owning and running a car are under-estimated by a factor of three for a typical mid-sized car.

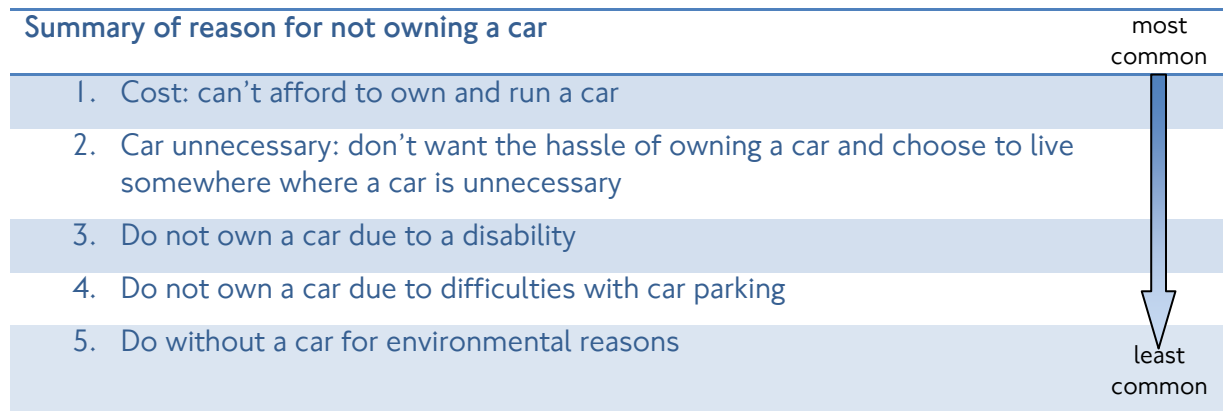
Nevertheless, while there is a tendency to forget or ignore some important costs such as maintenance, depreciation and even car parking, one of the costs that is commonly recognised and does appear to be a significant deterrent to purchasing a car is insurance. This is likely to be one of the factors behind the trend for people to delay learning to drive and getting their first car.

London Travel Demand Survey – Follow up Survey

46 per cent of London households do not own a car. TfL’s LTDS Follow-up Survey (2012) found that the main reason households do not own a car is that they can’t afford to. However, there are also many people who prefer not to own a car, and to accommodate this choose to live in a location with good public transport and good local facilities. The reasons for not owning a car are summarised in Figure 10.



Figure 10 Primary reasons for not owning a car.



Source: LTDS Follow-up Survey (SDG 2012)

Residential Parking in New Developments Study

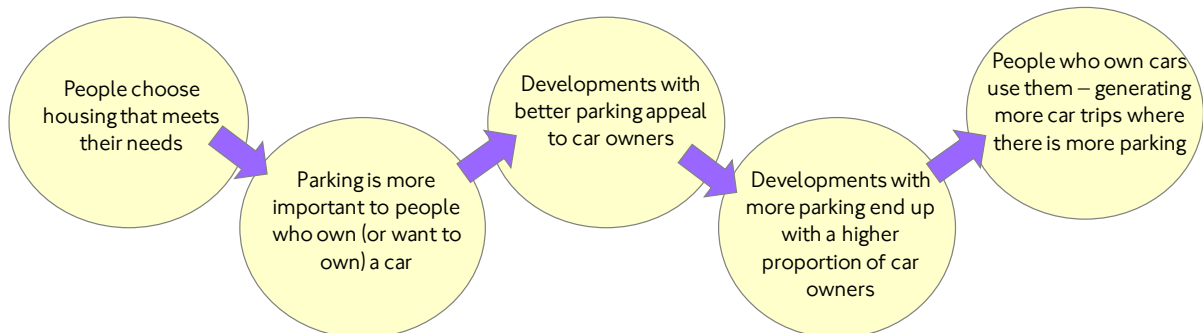
TfL's 2012 study Residential Parking in New Developments concluded that there was a clear relationship between the provision of parking and the level of car ownership and use in a development. It is likely that this is also the case for the general housing stock. The study concluded that:

- There is a strong relationship between public transport accessibility and household car ownership – as public transport accessibility increases, car ownership in new developments falls.
- The more parking provided by a new development, the more attractive it becomes to car owning households: people choose housing that meets their needs.
- The more parking provided by a new development, the higher the household car ownership level. Where there is more parking, there are more cars. This was true for all groups and in all areas studied.
- Developments with more parking produce more car travel. People who own cars use them: people drive their cars frequently at all times of day, including during the busiest peak periods.

Figure 11 shows a visualisation of how parking provision leads to car ownership and use in a local area. What is not clear is how the provision of residential parking London-wide affects or could affect car ownership: it is clear that in a given area, car ownership (and use) will be higher if there is more residential parking available, but would an increase in parking availability lead to higher levels of car ownership across the region? And to what extent has parking supply contributed to the decline in car ownership in London? Currently, there is no evidence available to answer these questions.



Figure 11 How parking provision leads to car ownership and use.



Source: Residential Parking in New Developments (TfL 2012)

Why people don't want to own a car: key points

In summary, the key reasons London households choose not to own a car are cost; the stress of owning and driving a car in London; and that a car is unnecessary given the proximity of local services and the availability of public transport. The evidence suggests that the more convenient other modes are, and the more inconvenient the car (for example, because of parking policy, Congestion Charging or the level of congestion on the roads), the more likely London residents are to choose to live without a car.

References & relevant publications

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