

What the decision to curtail high speed rail and embrace cars means for the UK's cities

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If you consider the [decision](#) by the UK prime minister, Rishi Sunak, to cancel phase two of the high-speed rail project, HS2 in the context of the government's growing pro-car stance, the potential ramifications for

the country are profound.

Steve Tuckwell's single-issue campaign against the [Ultra Low Emission Zone \(Ulez\)](#) in London won him the Uxbridge and South Ruislip vote in the three [byelections](#) held in July 2023. This saw the Conservatives narrowly avoid what would have otherwise been a crippling 3-0 defeat.

The transport secretary, Mark Harper, has since [derided](#) the long-standing 15-minute city urban planning concept as a ["sinister" and "overzealous"](#) misuse of traffic management measures to police people's lives.

Sunak, meanwhile, [has vowed](#) to "slam the brakes on the war on motorists". He has characterized low-traffic neighborhoods and 20mph speed limits as "hare-brained schemes being forced on local communities".

Further, the government has delayed a ban on the sale of [new petrol and diesel cars until 2035](#). This appears to undermine the [prime minister's](#) commitment to net zero, despite [56%](#) of the British public still supporting the net zero by 2050 target.

Rail has long been hailed as the cleanest means of public transport. The decision to scrap the northern leg of HS2 doesn't only undermine the UK's ability to improve its rail infrastructure. The government's broader approach to transport will also potentially lead to greater inequality between those who drive and those who do not.

Improving rail capacity

The northern leg from Birmingham to Manchester was central to HS2's entire business case. The rail project's initial purpose was to improve rail capacity for inter-city passenger travel, intra-regional commuting and

freight. HS2 alone would not have been enough but was expected to vastly improve things for both passengers and freight. Of the latter, the business case [explicitly said](#) that it was "vital to the UK economy and its targets for decarbonization".

In cancelling phase two of HS2, Sunak claimed that it was "[the ultimate example of the old consensus](#)" that infrastructure projects for economic regeneration at national level be driven by "cities at the exclusion of everywhere else."

Instead, he said, he would be reinvesting the money he said this would save—£36 billion—into "hundreds" of new transport projects.

This poses serious challenges to the government's credibility and reliability. The Department of Transport's [Integrated Rail Plan](#), published in 2021 after the first year of the pandemic, confirmed that rail capacity in the north remained a serious issue. Cancelling HS2 does nothing to resolve this.

Further, this will cripple [Northern Powerhouse Rail](#). This network was devised, crucially, to improve travel between the big cities in the north-east and the north-west—Leeds, Warrington, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Hull. In terms of budget and infrastructure, it depended entirely on HS2 being built in full.

Sunak's decision shows he lacks a holistic vision for England's future cities. In an interview he gave a week before the announcement to [BBC Radio Manchester](#), he referred to most journeys being "made by car", thereby presaging the Department for Transport's [Plan for Drivers](#). This policy paper, published on October 2 2023, can only be described as a manifesto for promoting [car travel](#).

An increasingly pro-car stance

The paper states that "cars are the most popular mode of personal travel". Research suggests, however, that the high volumes of car use cited in the paper—58% of trips in 2022; 78% of distance traveled—are not indicative of popularity as much as insufficient alternatives or what sustainable transport scholars term "[mobility injustice](#)". People often use cars because public transport is unreliable, cycle paths are inadequate and roads are largely not designed with pedestrians in mind.

In his foreword to the paper, Harper argues that drivers will soon no longer be responsible for the [environmental impact](#) of their chosen mode of transport: "Cars' environmental impacts are often held up as a reason for anti-driver measures, but the shift to cleaner vehicles makes this increasingly unjustified." "We can decarbonize," he continues, "and maintain our freedoms."

Research however warns that [electric cars](#) need to be considered from a [life-cycle perspective](#). They do have the potential to reduce global warming, relative to conventional fuel vehicles, but the supply chain needed to produce them can also increase harmful impacts on the environment. They pose a host of [recycling challenges](#).

Electric cars also do not automatically address road space distribution challenges for multiple uses including walking, cycling, driving, parking, and essential utilities. The more space for cars the less space available to ensure walkability and safety for people.

And besides, 50 million registered drivers is not equivalent to 50 million car owners. In fact, in 2021, 25.6 million people in Britain lived in a household that owned one car. By contrast, 17 million people—a quarter of the population—lived without cars. So a plan which favors drivers tends to exclude that very large number of people who don't drive.

There is [wide consensus](#) that reducing car dependency could not only

relieve traffic congestion effectively but also promote public health. It could improve air quality. By encouraging active travel and public transport, it could improve people's physical and mental well-being. And in terms of equality in access to the city, it would be fairer.

What is most critically lacking in both the Department for Transport's paper and the government's broader decision-making around transport is a vision for the country's future cities. People, whether they own cars or not, need access to high-quality dependable services in order to be able to choose the best mode of transport at the time they need it. To achieve this, fundamentally improving infrastructure for public [transport](#) and active travel is essential.

Replacing HS2 with an as-yet ill-defined [Network North](#) is a risky political gamble. It is not the coherent long-term infrastructure vision that the country—the public and the environment—urgently needs.

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