

Zero carbon and zero road deaths - does less traffic mean safer traffic?

PACTS conference, Thursday 21 October 2021, 10.00-13.00, online

Conference summary

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Climate change is arguably the biggest challenge facing governments across the world. At COP26 transport will inevitably form a significant part of the agenda as it contributes around one third of global emissions. In their Autumn 2021 conference PACTS demonstrated that safety is relevant to this agenda.

Matthew Lugg (WSP) opened the event, presenting the UK Government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan (TDP). A key theme of the TDP is accelerating modal shift. It proposes that 50% of urban trips should be walked or cycled with much of the remainder made by public transport. High quality active travel infrastructure is to be provided. Over 50% of the Net Zero target is to be delivered through societal or behavioural change. Traffic restraint or pricing incentives to effect this change are not specified.

Todd Litman (VITP) showed how traffic reduction policies and safer transport systems reduce casualties per capita (more relevant than per distance travelled). This requires strategies which incentivise people out of motor vehicles. The benefits are also much broader than covering safety alone, encompassing reduced traffic congestion, improved mobility for non-drivers and better public health and fitness. He advocated pay per mile car insurance policies.

As a test case, Richard Owen (Agilysis) looked at a period of substantial traffic reduction; the mid-2020 coronavirus pandemic lockdown. On these quieter roads driving speeds and casualty rates for motor vehicle users in UK increased. For them less traffic meant less safe roads. The exception was cyclists, for whom casualty rates fell. Overall, total casualties reduced substantially from 2019.

Dr Anthony Laverty's (Imperial College) presentation on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) suggests the casualty reduction may have been the result of fewer vehicles on the roads. In LTNs in London, where through traffic is restricted, more people walk and cycle but absolute number of injuries halve when compared to the rest of the capital.

Returning to modal shift, Professor @Fred Wegman (University of Delft) considered micro-mobility. Cargo bikes and e-scooters offer new options for reducing transport carbon dioxide emissions but, citing worrying accident rates measured in Europe, their use must be regulated to ensure their safety.

Conclusion: The Government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan proposes a dramatic switch to new technologies, particularly electric vehicles, and to active travel and public transport. The plans and targets are very challenging. Safety will be a critical factor in delivering these changes. PACTS will do all it can to encourage safe and sustainable systems.

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