

# URBAN CONGESTION: DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENTS

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The Second National Infrastructure  
Assessment: Baseline Report

NATIONAL  
INFRASTRUCTURE  
COMMISSION

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Better infrastructure for all

November 2021

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# Executive summary

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The National Infrastructure Commission has used deliberative engagements in three cities across England to explore public attitudes to urban congestion. This research was conducted in January and February 2020, before the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic was known. As outlined in the [Baseline Report](#) for the Second National Infrastructure Assessment, congestion had already returned to high levels on urban roads by the time of the latest data in February 2021 while lockdown restrictions were still in force. It is likely to have increased further as motor traffic has more recently reached close to pre pandemic levels. The findings of the deliberative engagements therefore provide useful insights into a problem which, at least in the short term, is recurring.

Deliberative engagement is an approach to engaging with the public which gives participants more time and background evidence to consider and deliberate on the trade-offs than other forms of engagement. The Commission chose to use deliberative engagements in order to build understanding of public attitudes to congestion and what principles and value judgements underpin people's views. Deliberative engagements are designed to provide this level of qualitative insight, however they are not intended to be a substitute for a large scale survey or gauging national opinion.

As a social research methodology not previously used by the Commission, the project also served to test the value of deliberative engagements as a potential tool for infrastructure policy making in the Commission's wider work programme.

The engagements were carried out in Manchester, Nottingham and Bristol to cover a geographical spread of the country as well as a variety of experiences of congestion policy. They took the form of two full day workshops at each location, the first providing background information, while at the second, participants were asked to make judgements on different policy solutions. There was a month's space between the two sessions for deliberation.

Shorter form half day focus groups were conducted in parallel in the same locations to build understanding of what added value deliberative engagements provided.

The deliberative engagements provided insight into participants' views on urban road congestion and the policy approaches to addressing it. In particular, they identified:

- the **principles** by which participants made judgements on policy measures. These were based on whether policy measures were intuitive, effective, fair or punitive, and the extent they impacted on freedom of choice
- how **views changed** over the course of the engagements. These showed a progression from gut reactions which were often cynical of motivations, towards more considered judgements based on understanding of the likely impacts on society and on their own individual choices.
- the **policy preferences** which showed a strong support for more investment in public transport, a development of support for congestion charging following receiving information about its efficacy, and a lack of support for accepting congestion.

The focus groups found similar high-level reactions from participants in terms of support for public transport and lack of support for accepting congestion. However, the focus groups provided limited insight into the principles underpinning judgements made, and there was insufficient time to discuss the trade-offs of different approaches in any detail.

The project helped to demonstrate the added value that deliberative engagements can bring beyond other forms of qualitative social research such as focus groups. The additional insight is likely to be particularly useful when the aim of social research is understanding the underlying principles and value judgements behind policy preferences and what might cause people to change views. However, where only an understanding of surface level opinion is required, focus groups are likely to be a more appropriate approach.

# Introduction

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The National Infrastructure Commission, with the social researcher Britain Thinks, carried out a series of deliberative engagements over January and February of 2020 in three cities in England. The engagements tested public attitudes to urban road congestion and policy approaches to tackling it.

The two major objectives of the project were to:

1. provide more information on public attitudes to congestion, including how people consider the impacts of congestion, how they engage with trade-offs and what drives opinions and judgements; and
2. test the value of deliberative engagement techniques as a potential tool, by understanding how effective the engagements were for understanding attitudes, what lessons could be learnt from the process and how useful the methodology could be for other parts of the Commission's work.

The Commission also procured an independent evaluator, 3KQ, to offer an independent perspective on the effectiveness of the project and the engagements, both in terms of meeting best practices for deliberative public engagements and in terms of meeting the aims set out for the project:

- the detailed findings of the deliberative engagements can be found in the [social research report](#)
- the findings from the independent evaluation of the engagements and their effectiveness can be found [in the independent evaluator's report](#).

This paper sets out the Commission's experience of going through the process of the deliberative engagements, and the key conclusions and takeaways from the project.

## Background

### Congestion

In the first *National Infrastructure Assessment*, the Commission set out the importance of integrated strategies for transport, housing and employment to allow cities to grow and enable people to live and work where they want.

The benefits of urban density are well known. Large populations and business density enable people to interact rapidly, efficiently and constantly, sharing knowledge and resources and supporting innovation. Overall, a higher concentration of employment leads to higher productivity and wages.<sup>1</sup> Cities' other benefits include a diverse offering of sports, leisure and cultural activities; a diverse job market and better access to services such as long distance train journeys.

Urban road congestion is both a cost associated with, and a constraining factor on, the benefits of cities. Road congestion is much more of a problem in large cities than in less densely populated areas<sup>2</sup>, meaning that travelling takes longer and journey times are less predictable.

This has a direct impact on those using the roads, reducing their leisure time and increasing stress. In addition to the direct costs of lost time and increased fuel costs, congestion can constrain job opportunities, or limit leisure time due to increased travel times. Delays caused by congestion make travel in cities less attractive and reduce the number of people who can work in a city centre, where they would be more productive.<sup>3</sup>

Road pricing schemes have long been proposed by experts, but the perceived lack of public acceptability on the basis of fairness or practicality has been a barrier to previous attempts at reform.<sup>4</sup> The Commission said therefore, in the National Infrastructure Assessment, that instead of seeking to develop a new technocratic solution it would explore new ways of engaging stakeholders and the public on the topic.

The Commission chose to focus engagements on the topic of urban congestion, including road pricing as one potential approach, rather than exclusively on road pricing. This was because:

- more general questions of revenue-raising and taxation are topics for HM Treasury rather than the Commission
- urban congestion is likely to become more pressing as population increases and road travel becomes cheaper
- urban congestion is a key cost of driving which, unlike air quality and carbon impacts, will not be addressed or mitigated by the transition to electric vehicles
- urban congestion and the approaches to addressing it provides a useful framework to engage the public on road use policy.

## Deliberative engagements

Deliberative public engagement is not a new idea but has recently seen increased levels of interest and momentum, with the most high profile recent example the Climate Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Deliberative engagements differ from focus groups in that participants are presented with evidence, expert opinions, and time to reflect before coming to their conclusions. The suggested benefits of deliberative engagements are that they:

- connect available evidence for the effectiveness of policies with citizens' concerns and priorities<sup>6</sup>
- provide a more in-depth understanding of public opinion than 'gut reactions' obtained from focus groups, allowing policy makers to understand levels of support for compromise options in areas where complex trade-offs are required<sup>7</sup>
- enable more sustainable policy making, because the policies arrived at are more likely to be acceptable to the public.<sup>8</sup>

It is important that the Commission considers a diverse range of perspectives in its policy development and decision making. In its work, the Commission makes extensive use of social research to inform its recommendations; however, to date deliberative techniques have not been employed by the Commission.

Deliberative engagements, with their longer format, increased provision of information to participants, expert support, and time for consideration and deliberation provide more scope for participants to engage with complex trade-offs than other forms of social research.

It is equally important to consider what deliberative engagements do not do. Given they use relatively small population samples, they cannot provide a clear or definitive view of national opinion. Similarly, through going through the process of education and deliberation, the participants are made atypical and so do not necessarily represent a snapshot view of surface level opinions.

The Commission wanted to go beyond understanding the public's surface level opinion on congestion and its solutions, which could be found via surveys for quantitative data and focus groups for more qualitative insights. Instead, it wanted to understand the underlying principles behind participants' judgements, what leads people to make their value judgements on congestion, how the impacts and costs are considered and how the issue of 'fairness' is considered. In addition, the format, spread over two days with time in between, allows an understanding of how opinions change and develop as participants are provided with educational material and hold in depth discussions.

The last detailed national deliberative research on public attitudes to congestion and road pricing in the UK was commissioned by the Department for Transport in 2006.<sup>9</sup>

The Commission therefore chose to trial deliberative approaches as a way of engaging the public on the topic of congestion and to gain insight on the value of deliberative engagement for infrastructure policy.

## **Project structure**

### **Advisory Group**

The Commission established an Advisory Group with a range of relevant expertise and perspectives on road congestion and deliberative engagements to provide input and challenge. The membership of the Advisory Group is at annex 1.

The Advisory Group supported the development of educational materials for the engagements, advising on their accuracy and ensuring all evidence provided was fair and balanced, and provided advice to inform decisions about the engagement process.

### **Social Research Provider**

The Commission procured a social research provider, Britain Thinks, with expertise in deliberative social research, to design and run the engagements. Britain Thinks recruited participants, ran the delivery of the engagements, facilitated the discussions at the workshops and gathered data.

The Commission worked with Britain Thinks to develop the structure and format of the engagements such that the objectives of the research could be achieved and the key findings from participants drawn out.

## Independent evaluator

The Commission also procured an independent evaluator to provide an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the deliberations, and the impact of the findings. The evaluator attended the engagements and was present throughout project discussions to provide both arms length assessment and ongoing feedback and input throughout the process.

### Engagements

Participants were presented with four broad policy options for tackling congestion:

- 1. Making more effective use of road space:** Investing to encourage more travel through public transport, walking and cycling
- 2. Charging drivers:** Using a form of congestion charging to discourage drivers from driving in the most congested places at the busiest times
- 3. Disincentivising driving:** Making driving less convenient or appealing through restricting road space or parking spaces to disincentivise driving
- 4. No additional measures:** Accepting increased congestion by continuing to give drivers freedom to choose to travel in congested areas at busy times.

These scenarios were developed to draw out the trade-offs involved in different approaches and to uncover the key principles underlying participants' judgements.

Educational materials and expert witnesses were used to build participants' knowledge of congestion and its impacts, as well as the different policy approaches for tackling congestion including their rationale, evidence of their efficacy and the trade-offs involved. Different experts were invited to present each approach to provide participants with a range of perspectives.

The engagements were carried out in three cities across England, all with high levels of congestion and were chosen for their geographical spread and separate experiences of congestion management:

| Location          | Area     | Congestion management/ road pricing          |
|-------------------|----------|--|
| <b>Manchester</b> | North    | Congestion charge ruled out by elected mayor |
| <b>Nottingham</b> | Midlands | Workplace parking levy in place              |
| <b>Bristol</b>    | South    | Clean air zone under consideration           |

The format of the engagements was two full day workshops with time in between for participants to deliberate. The day 1 workshops were used for building knowledge and educating participants on congestion and its impacts and introducing potential policy solutions; and at the day 2 workshop participants were asked to make decisions on policy preferences.

In order to further build understanding of what additional value deliberative engagement provides when compared with more traditional focus groups, the same congestion solution scenarios were presented at two 90 minute focus groups in each of the same three locations, with a recruitment methodology consistent with that for the deliberative engagements.



# Findings

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The detailed findings from the social research can be found in the report from Britain Thinks, but below are some key takeaways from the engagements on the participants' attitudes to congestion and its solutions.

## Principles underlying judgements

The major benefit of the deliberative process was that alongside high level responses, the process provided insight into the values underpinning participant views.

As is set out in the social research report, a set of principles emerged across the workshops on how participants judged the different approaches. These were:

- how intuitive and practical a policy measure felt
- the perceived efficacy of the measure
- the fairness of the measure: in particular for disadvantaged groups, and whether the measure felt 'punitive' for drivers
- whether there was an infringement of freedom of choice.

Participants were more sceptical of options which appeared to be less transparent or were considered open to gaming. The framing of solutions shaped whether an approach was considered punitive, although this impact was lessened throughout the engagements when further information on the aims of the solutions were provided.

Another important finding was participants' reactions to measures, and the way in which they made judgements, changed throughout the engagements as more information and evidence was provided. Some of the key changes were:

- a 'gut instinct' reaction to measures being replaced by a more considered approach taking into account wider societal benefits.
- a cynicism, in particular towards the motives underpinning fees and charging, being reduced through the provision of information on their efficacy and rationale.
- more consideration by participants of whether their own behaviours might change as a result of a policy, rather than hypothetical assumptions about others.

These insights help add additional context to the judgements made by participants at the engagements and can help build understanding for policy makers on some of the key issues that should be considered when designing, implementing and communicating congestion management policies.

## Focus group findings

The focus groups did not provide sufficient time to build any detailed picture of the underlying principles leading to participant judgements, though some themes did emerge.

Focus group participants expressed a preference for ‘carrot’ over ‘stick’ approaches, which was also found in the deliberative engagements, although participants at the deliberative workshops acknowledged the need for disincentives to reduce congestion – seeking a more nuanced balance of benefits against costs.

Focus group participants also emphasised the need for fairness and to consider access to alternatives and ability to pay, although this principle was not explored in detail.

## Policy preferences

The following preferences emerged from participants at the deliberative engagements on the policy approaches to congestion:

- 1.** there was strong support for investment in public transport in each city, however recognition grew through the engagements that to resolve congestion this needed to be in combination with further measures;
- 2.** doing nothing and accepting further congestion, favouring freedom of choice for drivers over addressing congestion was the least acceptable approach for the vast majority of participants
- 3.** congestion charging emerged, following a starting point of scepticism as an acceptable, and even preferable, policy approach to tackling congestion when delivered alongside public transport investment.

Support for public transport, and lack of support for accepting congestion, was consistent across both the shorter form focus groups and the longer deliberative engagements. Support for public transport investment remained high even when participants were given an indicative cost, in terms of increased taxation per household, to fund these investments. The societal value of investment was considered important by both regular users and participants who did not regularly use public transport.

Support also remained high upon learning of the limitations of public transport alone to tackle congestion, though public transport remained an important part of any solutions package for participants including other measures such as congestion charging.

The participants’ negative reaction to accepting congestion remained throughout the workshops, even where trade-offs such as the benefits of freedom of choice and comfort and convenience of car travel were explored. Care was taken to ensure the approaches were presented in a fair and unbiased manner. This perception remained throughout the engagements, both as an initial reaction and on further consideration of wider societal impacts, including the benefit of offering more freedom of choice for individuals.

Of all the policy options considered, participants’ responses to congestion charging changed the most across the workshops. Initial reactions were largely negative, with the measure considered punitive to drivers and congestion charging regarded as a means to make money rather than to deliver societal benefits.

Having gone through the process of deliberation however, reactions became significantly more positive as participants recognised the efficacy of the approach and its role as a deterrent rather than a revenue generating scheme. Discussion of congestion charging also revealed that the simplicity of the approach and the predictability and transparency of the charges were important.

When participants were asked to design their own policy solution package allowing for a combination of approaches, solutions combining investing in public transport with congestion charging were chosen by most participants in all locations.

These findings show some shift compared with the last major UK-wide deliberative study on road pricing, commissioned by the Department for Transport in 2006, which found that participants' attitudes to road pricing, including congestion charging, reduced in hostility but remained negative throughout the engagement.<sup>10</sup>

However other recent studies also suggest potential increasing support for congestion charging. A Citizens' Assembly run by the Greater Cambridgeshire Partnership in autumn 2019, focused on policy solutions to Cambridge's congestion and air quality problems, found that various forms of charging would be acceptable as long as public transport improvements came first.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a community panel run by Infrastructure Victoria in Australia in 2019 determined that any road network pricing in the state should be delivered alongside public transport network improvements and that pricing must be transparent and simple.<sup>12</sup>

## Focus group findings

At a top level, the judgements at the focus groups were broadly similar to those at the deliberative engagements:

1. encouraging greater use of public transport was considered the best method, though participants had little sense of the costs
2. accepting congestion was considered the least acceptable method due to the negative impacts of congestion

However, compared with the deliberative engagements, congestion charging was considered less favourably and consistently ranked as the worst of the options for addressing congestion other than the 'do nothing' approach of accepting congestion.

Participants also said they did not feel they had sufficient information to make an informed decision on ranking approaches to congestion, in particular on the costs and efficacy of the policy approaches.

# Conclusions

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## Interpreting the results

The findings from the participants at the deliberative engagements cannot be taken as any definitive public view on policy approaches to congestion and the findings should not be used as an equivalent to large-scale pieces of social research or national surveys.

The sample size of the engagements was relatively small, and, by going through the process of education and deliberation on congestion, the participants are made to be atypical to a 'cold' sample of the public.

However, the insights the engagements provided on the underlying principles of participants, as well as into how education and deliberation influenced views, provides a rich resource for policy makers which can form a valuable part of the evidence base when considering congestion management or related policies. It also helps to highlight avenues of further investigation depending on the specifics of the issue being considered.

## Congestion policy

This project is the first major in depth deliberative study of attitudes to congestion for 15 years and provides some valuable new findings, and an insight into how public attitudes may have shifted. In particular:

- public transport was found to be a key priority, and the societal value of investing was considered important including by those who are not regular users.
- accepting congestion was not considered to be an acceptable approach, both in immediate personal reactions, and on consideration of wider societal impacts.
- participants considered congestion charging alongside investment in public transport as the preferred option when provided information on the efficacy and rationale for charging.

Both the high-level findings on participant preferences and the nuanced information about how participants arrived at their conclusions could be used to help identify further areas of targeted social research and to aid policy design, implementation and communication. In particular:

- congestion charging was much more acceptable when participants learned of its efficacy, from a starting point of cynicism about the objectives and outcomes of charging.
- solutions which appeared intuitive and practical were favoured, with more scepticism about options which appeared less transparent or open to gaming.
- framing of solutions, and whether an approach appeared 'punitive' had a strong impact on participants' reactions, particularly initial reactions.

**These findings, both in terms of participants’ judgements and the principles which led to them, could be of value for authorities considering which policies on road space and addressing congestion in their areas may command support.**

## **Deliberative engagements**

The Commission found the deliberative engagements provided significant value through identifying the principles and judgements behind public preferences. The deliberative engagements provided added value to focus groups by uncovering how decisions and judgements were made by the participants, including what led participants to change their minds or reach final decisions on different policies.

While focus groups alone would have provided a high-level pulse check of participants’ reactions to congestion and its solutions, they were not capable of providing this additional level of insight.

This project demonstrated that deliberative engagement can be a valuable tool to build an understanding of attitudes. The deliberative approach added nuance and richness of understanding beyond that provided by focus groups, through showing how participants reached conclusions and which pieces of information were key to forming or changing views.

A striking example of the differences between focus groups and deliberative engagements was how views to congestion charging developed in the deliberative workshops. As participants received additional evidence of charging’s efficacy, initial gut reactions opposing the policy lessened. The additional discussion and deliberation also revealed the driving principles underlying how participants ultimately judged approaches.

These insights could be a beneficial aid to policy design and decision making, as well as for the implementation and communication of policies.

However, the design and delivery of the engagements was resource intensive, both in terms of financial resources to employ social researchers, and time commitment to develop the policy framing and the information for participants required for the deliberative process.

While this process can in itself be useful, organisations considering public engagements should consider whether they are willing to commit resource before testing public views or if a shorter form of engagement such as focus groups could achieve their requirements. For instance, if all that is required is surface level public opinion, then a focus group, with lower resource requirements, is likely to be the preferred option.

The Commission will carefully consider where deliberative engagements could provide valuable insight for our own forward work programme. This is likely to be where complex trade-offs are required which go beyond available evidence and involve individual values and preferences.

**Deliberative engagements are a valuable tool for providing in-depth insight into public attitudes. They are likely to be effective where the aim of public engagements are understanding how people might make value judgements and engage with policy trade-offs. However, where the aim is only to understand surface level public opinion, focus groups are likely to be sufficient.**

## Annex A: Advisory Group membership

| Organisation                  | Name   | Expertise   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Cardiff University            | Nick Pigeon, Professor of Environmental Psychology           | Deliberation, public engagement   |
| University of Cambridge       | David Newbery, Professor of Applied Economics                | Congestion, road charging   |
| Deliberate Thinking/Involve   | Diane Beddoes  | Public deliberation   |
| Transport for London          | Christina Calderato, Head of Transport Strategy and Planning | London roads and congestion, congestion charging  |
| Department for Transport      | James Hooson, Strategic Roads Policy Manager                 | Roads, congestion, road charging  |
| Transport for West Midlands   | Laura Shoaf, Managing Director                               | Local roads and congestion outside of London  |
| University of Sheffield       | Professor Matthew Flinders                                   | Led on the Democracy Matters citizens assembly on English devolution                          |
| Dr John Walker                | Road pricing expert and campaigner                           | Road pricing  |
| RAC Foundation                | Steve Gooding, Director                                      | Roads and road user charging, sat on the board of DfT's 2003-4 Road Pricing Feasibility Study |
| Campaign for Better Transport | Darren Shirley, Chief Executive Officer                      | Congestion, public and active transport, road charging  |

### National Infrastructure Commission attendees

| Name            | Role                              |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Andy Green      | Commissioner – Chair of the Board |
| Tim Besley      | Commissioner                      |
| Julia Prescott  | Commissioner                      |
| Victor Frebault | Young Professionals Panel         |

## Endnotes

- 1 National Infrastructure Commission (2016), **Economic growth and demand for infrastructure services**; Duranton G and Puga D (2004), Microfoundations of urban agglomeration economies in Henderson, V and Thisse, Handbook of Regional and Urban Economics Vol. 4
- 2 National Infrastructure Commission (2018), **National Infrastructure Assessment**
- 3 National Infrastructure Commission (2017), **Congestion, capacity, carbon - priorities for national infrastructure**
- 4 RAC Foundation (2011), **The acceptability of road pricing**
- 5 Climate Assembly (2020), **website**
- 6 Alliance for Useful Evidence (2019), **Evidence vs democracy**: How ‘mini-publics’ can traverse the gap between citizens, experts, and evidence
- 7 Involve and Ipsos Mori (2017), **Meta-analysis and scoping exercise into public participation in regulated industries**
- 8 Involve and Ipsos Mori (2017), **Meta-analysis and scoping exercise into public participation in regulated industries**
- 9 Department for Transport (2008), **Public acceptability of road pricing**
- 10 Department for Transport (2008), **Public acceptability of road pricing**
- 11 Greater Cambridge Partnership, Involve (2019), **Greater Cambridge Citizens’ Assembly on Congestion, Air Quality and Public Transport**
- 12 Infrastructure Victoria (2019), **Transport Network Pricing Community Panel**

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Better infrastructure for all

Finlaison House  
15-17 Funnival Street  
London EC4A 1AB



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**November 2021**