

Road pricing at the crossroads

A paper reviewing new and existing public opinion research on road pricing schemes

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Transport issues have been on the minds and lips of many people this year. There has been plenty of commentary about the future of transport from the Eddington Report, to the extension of the Congestion Charging Zone in London, the announcement of 1,000 extra train carriages on hard-pushed commuter routes and discussion about the future of air transport leading to high profile environmental protests at Heathrow. One policy issue has tended to stand out though. Road pricing, road user charging, congestion charging, call it what you will, the idea of charging motorists to use certain stretches of roads is a controversial one.

Road pricing is likely to exercise the minds of many politicians, local authorities and pressure groups across Britain for years to come. Inevitably, critics point to the 1.8 million signatories of a Downing Street petition earlier this year as proof positive that there is no public appetite for such a policy. Here in London, opposition to the Western Extension of the Congestion Charging Zone earlier this year was as vocal as it was well mobilised and in 2005 there was a large no vote in the Edinburgh referendum about introducing a congestion charging scheme (74% voted against on a 62% turnout). Opponents are cleverly calling the policy the "Toll Tax", evoking memories of the very unpopular and short-lived Poll Tax.

All this would seemingly suggest a policy fraught with pitfalls and not one for the faint-hearted or risk-averse politician. Opinion poll evidence certainly suggests that proponents have their work cut out but this has not stopped the Greater Manchester authorities and several other cities/areas seeking and securing Government funding to advance plans for road pricing schemes. Moreover, new Ipsos MORI evidence – including recent public opinion polling as well as insights derived from our annual study of transport journalists – suggests a much more complex picture than would appear at first sight. Our data shows that road pricing can be made acceptable to the public.

This paper sets out what we already know about public attitudes towards road pricing schemes placed in the context of attitudes towards public and private transport. We go on to present our new survey data (set out in full in Appendix 1) and show how it indicates that clear communication of the benefits of road pricing and the revenues it raises can go a long way to winning support for a policy which is initially greeted with much disapproval.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The statistics come thick and fast. There are now over 30 million vehicles and 59 airports in the UK. One million rail passenger journeys are made every year and there was a trebling of the miles traveled by the public within the UK between 1952 and 1999.² Estimates by the Department for Transport place the cost of congestion at £10-£20 billion per year³ and, looking ahead, Professor Stephen Glaister's work on behalf of the RAC Foundation suggests that demand on the road network will increase by 40% in many areas by 2041.⁴

These and other trends all add to the strain on the UK transport infrastructure which will also need to cope with a number of additional trends and counter-trends. These include globalization spreading business and consumer networks, house-building programmes, population shifts away from cities to the suburbs, growing environmental concerns as well as changing lifestyles and expectations including consumer affluence relative to the price of cars leading to increasing ownership (and this list is by no means exhaustive).⁵ Capacity looks set to remain a key issue and while a number of train and tube projects are set to start soon, including much-needed Crossrail and the East London line extension, British business continues to lobby for airport expansion and road building. So, looking ahead, the future transport debate looks set to be about both supply and demand-management issues.

These are, of course, big issues locally, nationally and globally. Typically though our polls show that public transport does not feature among those issues the British consider to be the most important ones facing the country today and, crucially for politicians at least, it does not feature among those issues people say are important in shaping the way they vote. Thus, our latest Political Monitor shows 2% of Britons rating transport as an important issue – well behind race relations/immigration (43%), crime/law and order anti-social behaviour (41%) and the NHS (36%).⁶

These figures tend to mask some important regional differences and in the lead-up to the 2005 general election our poll for the Evening Standard found 40% of Londoners identifying public transport as an issue which would help them decide which party to vote for (it ranked fourth overall in the capital).⁷ And, of course, such surveys tend to canvass opinion about public transport and it is private transport which often has a greater impact on the daily lives of many people: the car now accounts for more than 85% of all passenger kilometers traveled.⁸

According to Stephen Glaister's retrospective on transport during the Blair era, it was private as well as public transport (PPP for London Underground, the collapse of Railtrack) which drew the then Prime Minister into transport issues. Perhaps most notably, the fuel price protests in 2000 temporarily put the government in crisis mode and "...could not have been a clearer demonstration that outside London the country now depends on roads, not railways." For Glaister, "This was a major national crisis demanding the immediate attention of the Prime Minister" and he points to a subsequent sensitivity to the power of the motoring electorate. Despite this, however, there were "...the beginnings of the unavoidable debate about how best to address the insatiable wish of the electorate to move around in their own private vehicles" in the form of Alistair Darling's Transport White Paper of 2004.⁹

The 2007 petition intensified that debate. In his official response to the petition, Tony Blair made clear that there is an imperative need to tackle congestion rather than simply "building our way out of [it]." At the same time, he stressed that no decisions had been made:

*"...let me be clear straight away: we have not made any decision about national road pricing. Indeed, we are simply not yet in a position to do so. We are, for now, working with some local authorities...Pricing is not being forced on any area, but any schemes would teach us more about how road pricing would work and inform decisions on a national scheme."*¹⁰

A few years earlier, Blair's Foreword to the White Paper identified a number of key trends facing future governments when delivering transport policies and strategies. These included balancing the need to deliver what makes economic sense with the need to secure environmental sustainability.¹¹ Governments will also have to deal with a number of different, often opposing, worldviews and identities present in contemporary culture and society.¹² Two of these – being a consumer and being a citizen – are inherent in the outlook of Britain's people and are often at the centre of contemporary debates. This opposition is centrally important to the future of public and private transport. On the one hand, the car is an icon for individual freedom and choice, on the other, our surveys point to growing public concern about the environment and our individual and collective 'footprints'.

To illustrate this further, over half of British adults tell us that they experience congestion on local roads and motorways on a regular basis and aggregation of the Best Value Performance Indicator surveys across England shows that transport issues in their broadest sense – whether in the form of road/pavement repairs, traffic or public transport – figure highly in terms of what people think is most in need of improvement in their local area. Our qualitative research for the Department for Transport in 2003 found people identifying motorists' unwillingness to use alternative modes of transport as part of the root cause of congestion but, at the same time, there was an acknowledgement that people will not give up the personal space and convenience of their car easily.

That same piece of research also showed that the public recognises that a long-term strategy is required and that this might involve unpalatable consequences for some, probably prompting some backlash along the way. This was anticipated in the following illustrative views expressed by participants:

"Over the last 30 years there hasn't been a consistent, cohesive transport policy for the future. We need a long-term strategy that doesn't change with every change in government."

"It's going to be a brave government to try to sort this out. Because whatever government is in, there is going to be a big backlash against them. It's a big major issue and I don't know how they are going to solve it."

These themes are also apparent in the following illustrative verbatim comments collected via this year's Ipsos MORI survey of transport journalists:

"Lack of long-term investment and decisions on the roads, we still have a situation where they are neither coming out or against congestion charging so that means we are sitting here getting into a worse traffic jam and not much is happening."

"There is a lack of long-term or medium-term vision, in the way transport is managed, and a lack of coordination with government policies on the environment ... They should be tying all the transport agenda together, rather than looking at each one in a separate little compartment. You need to look at the cost of motoring and try to bring that into line more with bus and rail to make it more attractive."

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION AND TRANSPORT

The evidence we have looked at so far suggests some recognition among the public that governments face significant challenges when it comes to transport and also that there are unlikely to be quick-fixes. Instead, there is a perceived need for considered, consistent, long-term thinking and policy. Our research also points to a number of other important aspects of public opinion and behaviour, summarised below (and presented in further detail in our report *Frontiers of Transport*):¹³

- **We remain a car-dependent society.** The car continued to dominate transport systems and travel behaviour in Britain: our survey in August 2007 found 42% of British adults reporting driving a car or van every day or nearly every day and even among non-car owners there is reliance on the car.
- **People say they would switch to public transport...** In 2003 half of Britons said they would travel by car less if their local bus services were better and around four in ten said the same for rail (however, surveys often highlight a mismatch between what people say they would do and what they actually do do with studies showing the difficulties in engineering modal shift, although this has been achieved in London).
- **...provided that it is up-to-it.** The main issues to be addressed if greater use of public transport is to be encouraged are cost, frequency, punctuality and reliability.
- **Improving public transport is seen as key.** People place greater emphasis on this than anything else as a way of reducing congestion (followed by more dedicated school buses, park and ride schemes, encouraging more walking, cycling and car sharing). Two-thirds see it as the most effective solution to congestion while only 14% think the same of road charging although, of course, research rarely finds people choosing taxes or financial penalties over other measures especially without knowing the details of what they might entail.
- **Buses still have something of an image problem...** Previous research has revealed that obtaining modal shift is not easy, especially to buses, and our research suggests that, apart from the inconvenience factor levelled against all public transport, buses carry a stigma of being 'lower class' (outside of London).
- **...but users are satisfied with services.** Data from the 2007 Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) surveys show that, overall, bus users are positive about the quality of local buses with two-thirds satisfied with services across England.
- **Bicycling and walking have potential.** Experience plays a vital role in people's likelihood to take up either activity. Our work for the Ramblers' Association and Transport for London (TfL) shows that this can either come in the form of positive experiences in childhood or experimental experiences later in life. Either way, this first or second hand knowledge often clouds people's perceptions of walking and cycling, and ultimately the likelihood of them participating.
- **People instinctively prefer 'carrots' to 'sticks'.** We have found that measures penalising drivers and hitting them in their pockets, e.g. road charging, are met with greater opposition than support.
- **There are some important local variations in terms of transport priorities...** Taking Nottinghamshire as an example, the BVPI surveys show that while three in ten Nottinghamshire residents feel that public transport is important in making an area a good place to live (31%), approaching half (46%) do so in Broxtowe compared to one in five in Mansfield (19%) and in Ashfield (20%)
- **...and satisfaction.** The same dataset shows us that none of the 34 English county authorities have a higher rating in terms of satisfaction with bus services than Nottinghamshire (68% compared to an English county average of 54%). However, while just 16% of residents across Nottinghamshire are dissatisfied with local buses, this rises to 26% in Mansfield.

These themes underline the challenge facing Government and others who will need to work with, but in some cases possibly against, the grain of public opinion and behaviour. Additionally, the environmental agenda and environmental concerns are important dimensions of the socio-cultural and policy contexts. Our monthly Political Monitor has shown growing public concern about the environment, which has moved up the public's list of concerns over the past twelve months. Such trends reflect, and have no doubt prompted, the consideration and air-time given by Government and opposition parties to such issues. And just as politicians and public authorities are increasingly responding to congestion and climate change, so too is business with some suggestions that "watt-com" start-ups are taking over from dot-coms as the next 'big thing'.¹⁴

Both the environmental and business cases for addressing road congestion are, no doubt, at the heart of the many strategies being advanced by political parties in central and local politics in relation to transport in general and road pricing in particular. While former Transport Minister Douglas Alexander acknowledged in May that "...the public are sceptical about the role of road pricing", he asserted "...doing nothing is not an option" and that "it is our collective responsibility to try and find workable solutions to our shared congestion challenge."¹⁵ Subsequently, several cities/areas of England have been granted a combined total of £7m from the Transport Innovation Fund to consider road pricing/congestion charging schemes (see Appendix 2).

The Liberal Democrats have warned that it would be irresponsible not to consider all possible remedies but argue that road pricing should only be considered as a replacement for car tax, rather than as an additional charge. More recently, John Redwood's 'Competitiveness Commission' considered transport issues for the Conservative Party and emphasised supply-side solutions including enhancing road capacity and improving traffic management. Previously, Chris Grayling (shadow before Theresa Villiers) criticised an out-of-touch Government on the issue but stopped short of ruling out road pricing, explaining that his party was not opposed to a road pricing scheme in principle. His party's preference is that road pricing is not imposed on motorists at a national level and that schemes are locally-driven, used to target specific congestion problems.¹⁶

Last month the Quality of Life Policy Group submitted *A blueprint for a green economy* to the Shadow Cabinet. The report asserted the need to "challenge the ascendancy of the motor car", providing opportunities "for choice and modal shift" in transport and recommending that road building should be the exception rather than the norm. When discussing road charging, the emphasis was on reducing carbon emissions rather than reducing congestion:

*"We would...replace the concept of national road user charging with simpler adjustments to the price signal designed specifically to reduce transport emissions...Local authorities should have the freedom to pursue congestion charging schemes where they see fit, after due consideration of other means of alleviating acute congestion."*¹⁷

STRONG OPPOSITION IN PRINCIPLE BUT OPINION SHIFTS

Road pricing is neither the only potential solution to demand-management on Britain's roads nor an especially new one; the 1964 Smeed Report recommended a pricing system to tackle congestion.¹⁸ But it does seem to be an emblematic transport policy issue (especially in the media) and hit the headlines earlier this year when 1,811,379 people signed the No. 10 petition on the subject (by far the most popular e-petition since they were launched in November 2006).¹⁹ Since then, the Local Transport Bill has been included as one of 23 in the 2007-8 legislative programme and updates existing legal powers so that "where local areas wish to develop proposals for local road pricing schemes, they have the freedom and flexibility to do so in a way that best meets local needs."²⁰

The e-petition represents the largest scale canvass of opinion albeit one which was entirely self-selecting. It has also been argued, of course, that the petition distorted the Government's proposal and presented road pricing schemes as sinister, wrong and unfair to poorer people (in fact, the then Transport Secretary Douglas Alexander insisted at the time that if such claims were true, he too would have joined the list!). Moreover, we know that signatories to online petitions are rarely representative of the broader population. For example, our surveys show that there are strong links between economic and social status and more proactive types of political participation beyond voting. We also know that many responses to the issue in its broadest terms are not based on a well-informed understanding of the issues.

The petition:

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy.

Further details (provided by the petition creator Mr. Peter Roberts):

The idea of tracking every vehicle at all times is sinister and wrong. Road pricing is already here with the high level of taxation on fuel. The more you travel – the more tax you pay. It will be an unfair tax on those who live apart from families and poorer people who will not be able to afford the high monthly costs. Please Mr Blair – forget about road pricing and concentrate on improving our roads to reduce congestion.

We don't know how many people viewed the further details but, still, the petition was signed by 1.8 million people who voiced an opinion at odds with the Government's position that there is at least merit in looking at such schemes in some areas as a potential precursor to a national scheme. Our representative national surveys similarly point to significant opposition to the idea. In 2002, an Ipsos MORI survey of British adults on behalf of the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT), asked specifically about a road pricing scheme involving motorists having to pay to drive on congested roads at peak times (with no charge for driving off-peak). Then, just over half, 54%, responded negatively, saying that they would oppose such a policy with a third, 34%, saying they were strongly opposed.²¹

Our latest polling on the subject undertaken between 23 and 29 August 2007 (see Appendix 1 for full details), shows 33% of British adults saying they support the following proposition in principle. Just under half, 48%, are opposed:

Our question:

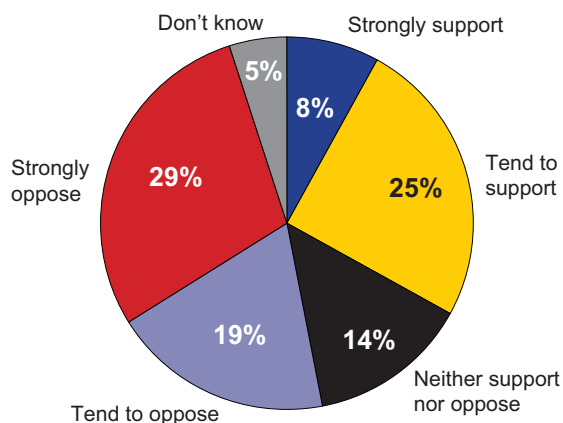
"As you may know, several schemes exist across the world, including in central London, that charge road users fees to drive in and around certain towns and city centres. The schemes are designed to reduce traffic congestion and improve the local environment e.g. by reducing emissions. How strongly do you support or oppose the principle of road charging?"

Only 5% answer don't know to this question although a further 14% say they are neither supportive nor opposed. And echoing the 2002 survey, 29% say they are strongly opposed, underlining the strength of opinion on the issue.

While there has been a marginal, but still statistically significant, fall in the proportion of people opposed, opposition far outweighs support and, anyway, comparisons between the surveys are at best indicative given the differences in definition of road pricing/charging. (These changes were made for good reason given the evolution of the policy from being largely congestion-orientated to one encompassing a more environmental justification. We also asked about road charging because asking about road pricing in a meaningful way would have required us to provide hypothetical details of charges and times with the risk that the resulting responses would simply be a commentary on these).

ROAD CHARGING SUPPORT/OPPOSITION IN PRINCIPLE

Q1 As you may know, several schemes exist across the world, including in central London, that charge road users fees to drive in and around certain towns and city centres. The schemes are designed to reduce traffic congestion and improve the local environment e.g. by reducing emissions.
How strongly do you support or oppose the principle of road charging?



Base: 1,994 British adults aged 16+, interviewed face-to-face, 23-29 August 2007 Source: Ipsos MORI

As in our survey for CfIT in 2002, these aggregate-level findings mask some interesting differences in levels of in-principle support and opposition among key groups. These are summarised below with Table 1 profiling supporters and opponents:

- Car owners²² are more likely to be opinionated on the issue than non-owners: 34% support the idea and 51% oppose it, while levels of support and opposition among non-owners are 29% and 37% respectively.
- Those who personally drive²³ are similarly more opinionated than non-drivers with 35% in support (against 29%) and 53% opposed (against 38%).
- Those driving four or more times a week or more are more opposed to road charging in principle than are less frequent drivers: 55% compared with 45%.
- Men are more supportive and more opposed than women who are more likely to give a neither/nor or don't know response (although this reflects car usage: men are more likely to be drivers and to drive frequently).
- Support falls and opposition increases with age but both fall among 75+ year olds who are much more likely to say they don't know (again reflecting car use).
- Higher socio-economic groups are more likely to have a car and to use it regularly than other groups but are relatively more supportive and less opposed to road charging in principle.
- Related to this, higher income groups are more supportive, as are quality newspaper readers.

There is also a regional dimension to our data and the large 1,994 sample size of our August survey affords us the opportunity to draw some broad conclusions about opinion in different parts of England. This is important because, road pricing will, at first, be introduced locally with the Government waiting on the outcomes to decide on the merits of a national scheme (in his Foreword to the 2004 White Paper, Tony Blair referred to doing “the work necessary to allow the hard decisions to be taken nearer the time”).²⁴ Just as the schemes will differ in scope and detail, so too will the backdrop shaped, in part, by perceptions of the ‘problem’ and attitudes towards its resolution.

TABLE 1: PROFILING SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS

	% of all adults	Supporters in principle	Opponents in principle	Strongly opposed
(Sample size)	(1,994)	(659)	(955)	(580)
% of sample	100	33	48	29
of which...				
% male	48	52	51	55
% female	52	48	49	45
% 16-34	31	32	28	27
% 35-54	35	36	37	38
% 55+	34	32	35	35
% ABC1 ²⁵	55	65	50	48
% C2DE	45	35	50	52
% motorist	68	71	75	76
% non-motorist	31	27	25	24
% regular driver ²⁶	52	53	59	60
23-29 August 2007, 1,994 adults aged 16+			Source: Ipsos MORI	

Our poll shows that in-principle support for road charging is highest in the South East of England (excluding London) and it is the only region where more people support than oppose road charging: 43% against 37%. As Table 2 shows, opposition to road charging is lower than average in the South East and also in London (both 37%) but highest in Yorkshire and Humberside (60%) and the East Midlands (57%). There are few differences in the opinions of residents in urban, rural or mixed areas – 33%, 32% and 33% support charging respectively – but those living in mixed areas show a greater inclination towards opposition, as Table 2 shows.

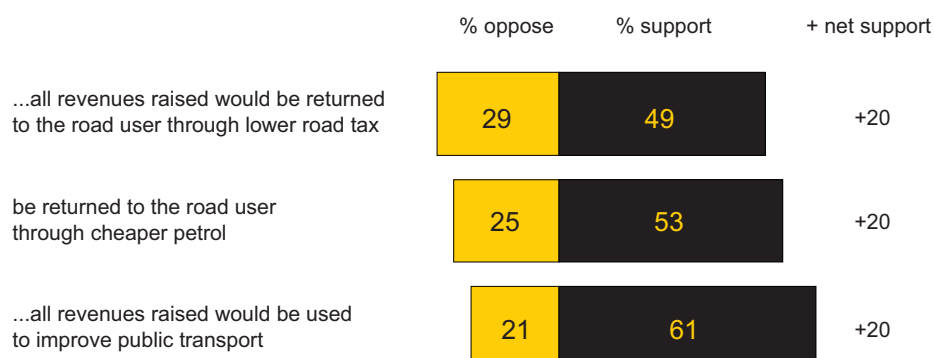
TABLE 2: REGIONAL SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION IN PRINCIPLE TO ROAD CHARGING

(ranked on % support)	% support	% oppose	% strongly oppose	+ net support
South East (264) ²⁷	43	37	18	+6
South West (193)	36	43	27	-7
Eastern (172)	36	50	35	-14
London (259)	35	37	22	-2
Wales (120)	35	51	29	-16
England (1,674)	33	47	29	-14
North West (231)	32	51	31	-19
West Midlands (181)	31	50	31	-19
East Midlands (117)	29	57	31	-28
Scotland (200)	28	53	32	-25
Yorkshire & H'side (145)	24	60	44	-34
North East (112)	23	54	33	-31
23-29 August 2007, 1,994 adults aged 1+			Source: Ipsos MORI	

As in our previous survey for CfIT, in-principle opposition fades once people are informed about how the revenues raised will be used. In fact, opinion swings in support of road charging. There is majority support if the charges are channelled back into investment in public transport or returned to road users through lower road tax or cheaper petrol – shown in the chart below. So, around half (49%) say they would support road charging if the revenues raised were returned to the road user through cheaper petrol. Just over half (53%) say the same if they were returned to the road user through lower road tax and support rises to six in ten (61%) if revenue is invested in improving public transport.

SWING IN OPINION WITH CLARITY ABOUT USE OF REVENUE

Q2 How strongly do you support or oppose road charging if...?



Base: 1,994 British adults aged 16+, interviewed face-to-face, 23-29 August 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

In each case, around a fifth or more strongly support road charging: 18% if revenues were returned to the road user through cheaper petrol, the same proportion if it led to lower road tax, and 24%, a quarter, if the revenues were used to improve public transport. This underlines that policies impacting on drivers' pockets, such as road charging and pricing, are met with greater opposition than support especially if there are not compensatory measures. This and other research suggests that people are concerned about being taxed twice²⁸ and are much more likely to support revenue-neutral policies (or, at least, more revenue-balanced ones). Further, as Table 3 shows, the swing in support is uniform among key groups.

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF % SUPPORT FOR ROAD CHARGING IN PRINCIPLE AND % SUPPORT FOR CHARGING IF ALL REVENUES RAISED USED TO IMPROVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

	% of all adults	% support at Q1	% support at Q2_3	Swing
Male	48	35	62	+27
Female	52	31	60	+29
16-34	31	34	60	+26
35-54	35	34	63	+29
55+	34	31	59	+28
ABC1	55	40	64	+24
C2DE	45	25	56	+31
Motorist	68	35	63	+28
Non-motorist	31	29	57	+28
Regular driver	52	33	61	+28
Q1 supporters	33	100	88	-12
Q1 opponents	48	0	47	+47
23-29 August 2007, 1,994 adults aged 16+				Source: Ipsos MORI

One in ten, 12%, oppose each of the three propositions. While a fifth, 22%, of in-principle opponents oppose all three propositions **68% support at least one** and three in ten, 28%, support all three. This demonstrates that a good degree of the softer opposition can 'swing' in favour when the benefits of charging are made clear. These patterns chime with findings from a survey for the RAC which found two-thirds (67%) support for road pricing if there was a permanent reduction in road tax or fuel duty.²⁹

In terms of the specific propositions:

Revenues returned to the road user through cheaper petrol (among all adults: 49% support, 29% oppose)

- Motorists are more opinionated than non-motorists.
- Nearly half of those opposing road charging in principle (48%) support this proposition although a quarter, 26%, of in-principle supporters oppose it.
- Higher income groups are relatively less supportive than lower income groups.

Revenues returned to the road user through lower road tax (among all adults: 53% support, 25% oppose)

- Motorists are more opinionated than non-motorists.
- Half of those opposing road charging in principle (50%) support this proposition although one in five, 19%, of in-principle supporters oppose it.
- Higher income groups are relatively less supportive than lower income groups.

Revenues used to improve public transport (among all adults: 61% support, 21% oppose)

- Again, motorists are more opinionated than non-motorists.
- Just under half of those opposing road charging in principle (47%) support this proposition with only 5% of in-principle supporters opposing it.
- Higher income groups are relatively more supportive than lower income groups.

LEARNING LESSONS FROM LONDON...AND EDINBURGH

Manchester, Durham, Shrewsbury and the rest have the advantage of drawing on the precedent set by London where congestion charging was introduced in February 2003. London is, however, by no means alone among British cities in charging motorists to use its roads – for example, since October 2002, drivers in Durham have been charged £2 to enter a small part of the city between 10am and 4pm Monday to Saturday – but the capital's scheme has certainly been the most high profile and politically charged to date.

According to our regular tracking polling for TfL, public attitudes in the capital towards the Congestion Charging Scheme became more favourable when people actually began to experience the scheme for themselves and saw the difference it made to congestion. Subsequently, our polling for TfL has found support and opposition moving up and down. Having been equivocal prior to the scheme's launch, public opinion became much more positive and then more negative again as planning for the western extension intensified.

We found that the rise in support for London's scheme also related to fewer people actually being affected by it than what was originally anticipated. A month before its introduction, around seven in ten Londoners (across the whole of London not just the 2% who live in the central zone), expected to be personally affected by the scheme. When it was introduced, this fell to around half, and nowadays it is around a third.

Effective communication and public information are necessary preconditions of public acceptability. Findings from our tracking surveys for TfL show near universal understanding of the Central London scheme around the time of its launch and a rise in awareness of specific aspects (e.g. start/end time, penalty charge, revenue to be invested in transport improvements) shortly before its introduction. Even today, it continues to be important to understand more about those who are less aware or misinformed in order to evaluate how communication is received and to inform the ongoing campaign.

The portents were less favourable in Edinburgh where the city council proposed a charging scheme involving two cordons in operation at different times – an inner and outer cordon. There was a proposed charge of £2 per day, with the council claiming the revenues from the charge were to be re-invested in public transport improvements and reducing gridlock. In the referendum in February 2005 a quarter voted for the scheme, dwarfed by the three-quarters who voted no. Just as one of our early polls showed that a majority of the city's residents opposed the scheme in principle, so a majority voted against in the referendum several weeks later - the campaign failed to move them.

Opposition was more implacable prior to the referendum meaning that proponents of the scheme already had their work cut out and a number of factors meant less receptivity to the scheme compared to the situation in London. Our research for the Scottish Executive³⁰ showed that residents tended to blame the levels of congestion on the city's roads on 'external' factors such as cars coming into the city, rather than their own behaviour, and reported relying much more on their cars for making journeys out of the city than within it. Further, reducing air pollution and improving bus services were seen as being greater priorities than reducing congestion.

Although congestion was acknowledged in Edinburgh, it probably was not considered as unbearable and as pressing an issue as it was in London prior to 2003. While residents recognised the need to tackle traffic congestion, they prioritised public transport improvements above all else as preferred solutions. And even supporters weren't convinced after the referendum: 15% of residents said that they supported the scheme in principle but opposed the details. In fact, there was no majority support among any section of the community – even non-car drivers – and support only reached 13% among those who drove to work and 20% among car owners.

In contrast to London where communications made an effective contribution to building public acceptability, our research in Edinburgh highlighted widespread confusion on a number of aspects including the location of the scheme, the time that it was going to operate, the charges involved and, crucially, how the revenue was going to be used. This suggests that many people made the decision based on first principles rather than actual details – and as we've seen from our recent nationwide poll, this can make quite a difference.

Analysis of our surveys in Edinburgh also showed that trust was an underlying driver of opposition, particularly trust in the reasons for introducing the scheme and whether or not the money raised would actually go to improve public transport. Four in ten, 39%, felt that the council was anti-car and a minority, 23%, thought that the money raised would be used to improve public transport.

POLITICIANS AND THE MEDIA

Stephen Glaister suggests that the idea of charging road users (however it is done) to reduce congestion and raise revenues is long-established, but “had always been thought to be too politically difficult to implement” (until London). As evidenced by our polling in Edinburgh, acknowledgement of congestion doesn't always lead to support for a road charging policy. It is also important to bear in mind that people do not like to consider change which may penalise their lifestyle decisions – and it is very difficult for many people to envisage how they will adjust their lifestyle without a car. We also know that people often blame external factors for congestion, rather than their own individual behaviour. So it is not surprising that rather than vote for a tax, a majority of the public would prefer incentives to change their behaviour.

As we have already seen, there is plenty of background noise to debates about road pricing. Antipathy towards tax and scepticism about motives loom large. We found that among the key drivers of opposition to the scheme in Edinburgh, low levels of trust in the City Council were prominent and the city lacked a visible champion of the scheme with the same clout as Ken Livingstone.

The Government is operating under some favourable conditions. Compared to some other key public services, public opinion is relatively optimistic with regard to public transport. Our latest Delivery Index (31 August – 2 September 2007) shows 30% of British adults are confident that it will get better over the next few years, a figure marginally higher than the 26% who think it will get worse.³¹ Equivalent figures for the NHS are 23% better and 42% worse, and there has been a discernable upward trend in optimism about public transport over the past five years (in summer 2003, 39% were pessimistic). Labour is still seen as the best party for transport – 23% versus 9% for the Conservatives and 11% for the Lib Dems – but a plurality say they don't know or think none of the three main parties is best (49%).³²

Turning to the media, our annual survey among Transport Journalists this year found majority support for congestion charging at a local level but also on motorways. Six in ten, 60%, back the “provision of local congestion charging schemes” – nearly double the proportion who are opposed (32%)³³ – and the following illustrate the views of some transport journalists:

“There needs to be far more management of demand of the roads, through price. Road pricing is a much more sophisticated model than the London congestion charge.”

“The congestion charge seems to have worked in London, there has been investment in buses, there has been more investment in bus lanes. They have brought the rail industry back into the public domain, there is more investment going into the infrastructure of the rail industry and there seems to be far fewer accidents and disasters than there were.”

“I agree with the government looking at road congestion charges and toll roads. The government is trying to get private capital in to help get the upgrades on the rail network.”

The obvious questions in relation to these findings is does media opinion matter, and why are some journalists apparently waging a war on road charging when there is such strong ‘off the record’ support among their peers? Our 2005 research *You are what you read?* found that media and editorial stance tends to matter most on issues for which people have limited personal experience of their own to draw on and, for the most part, that is the case with road pricing. The experience of Edinburgh in 2005 also shows that where supportive campaigns do not reach people, this can have an impact on people’s grasp of a scheme and what it is trying to achieve. And if journalists don’t feel they know the details or the policy objectives themselves then they do, perhaps, tend to pick up larger negative cues from the public and the most vocal parts of their readership.

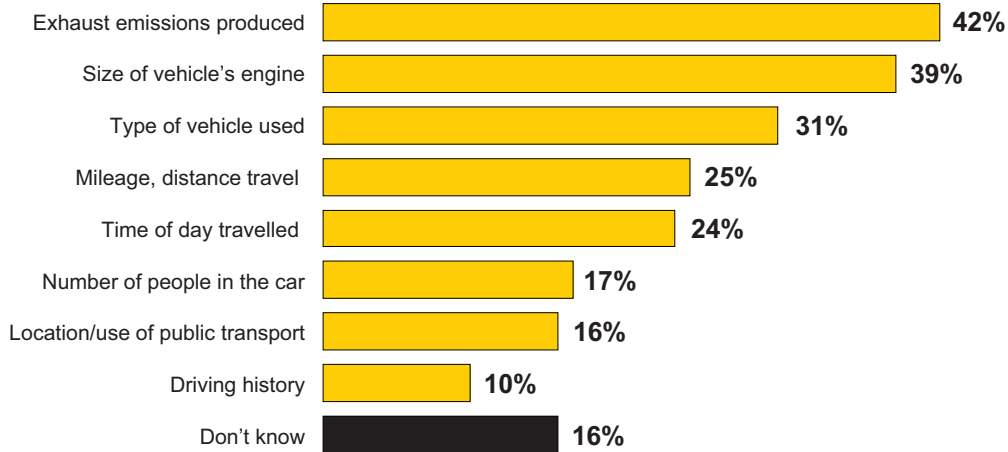
BUILDING PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY: EIGHT KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Drawing on our research at both a national and local level plus the polling we have done in London and in Edinburgh, we see at least eight ways in which road charging/pricing might become more acceptable to the public (of course, conversely, road charging/pricing might become less acceptable if opponents are able to block or counter the following):

- **Introducing schemes in a fiscally neutral way, returning the proceeds to road and transport users and explaining this clearly and persuasively.** As we have already shown, there is more in-principle opposition than support to road charging, but opinion ‘swings’ once more is known about the way revenues are re-invested. It is also striking that support is stronger than opposition regardless of whether the benefits are to motorists themselves – for example, in the form of lower road tax or cheaper petrol – or to the transport infrastructure in general.
- **Linking schemes to an acknowledged problem.** This is likely to be congestion – a problem our surveys usually find to be acknowledged - but could alternatively, or additionally, be the quality of the local environment.
- **Varying charges so that they are linked to actual levels of congestion and the types of vehicle driven.** Our August survey found exhaust emissions (42%) and engine size (39%) to be the most popular criteria for charging road users, as shown in Table 4 below, and our survey for the Greater London Authority (GLA) at the end of 2006 found majority support for discouraging use of SUVs/4x4s (65% against 24%).

PREFERENCES: CRITERIA FOR CHARGING

Q3 If there were a road charging scheme for using some British roads, which of the criteria on this card do you think should be used to work out how much road users are charged?



Base: 1,994 British adults aged 16+, interviewed face-to-face, 23-29 August 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

TABLE 4: Q. IF THERE WAS A ROAD CHARGING SCHEME FOR USING SOME BRITISH ROADS, WHICH OF THE CRITERIA ON THIS CARD DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE USED TO WORK OUT HOW MUCH ROAD USERS ARE CHARGED?

	All adults %	(Change since 2002) ³⁴	In-principle supporters %	In-principle opponents %
Exhaust emissions their vehicle produces	42	+13	56	37
Size of vehicle's engine	39	+6	48	39
Type of vehicle used	31	+4	40	28
Mileage, the distance travelled	25	-1	29	25
Time of day travelled	24	+1	30	24
Number of people in the car	17	0	25	13
Location/use public transport*	16	0	21	14
Driving history such as speeding fines/insurance claim records	10	-3	11	10
Don't know	16	+3	7	15
1 mention	25	n/a	19	29
2+ mentions	59	n/a	74	56

* Full wording: 'Location and use of public transport i.e. those living near mainline railway stations or with good local bus services, pay more to use the roads.'

23-29 August 2007, 1,994 adults aged 16+

Source: Ipsos MORI

- **Providing adequate reassurances about tracking vehicles, data collection and privacy.** Past research has found people expressing concern about, for example, the prospect of having tracking devices fitted in vehicles. A survey for Detica in May 2005 found 20% refusing to have a black box fitted in their car to allow for the introduction of a national scheme (although the majority would be content for this to happen).³⁵ Communicating benefits would again help here – in this case, how they would help emergency services find drivers if needed, save them the hassle of repeat payment, and so on.
- **Underpinning schemes with viable, attractive public transport alternatives.** The 'carrot and stick' approach is something of a cliché but for good reason. Our research has found support for it and this is something recognised by previous Secretary of State Alistair Darling who talked about the need for Manchester to come forward with "a bold, integrated package to tackle congestion". At the same time, there are variations in public satisfaction with local services such as buses meaning that some areas have further to go in providing acceptable alternatives to the car. Usage differs widely too – in areas such as Cambridge, Leeds, London and York, bus patronage has increased in recent years although usage has fallen in other areas.³⁶
- **Strong and effective political leadership building trust.** We have already underlined the importance of political leadership on this issue while acknowledging that there is likely to be an element of push and pull. Support for, and trust in, Ken Livingstone is likely to have engendered some support for the charging scheme. At the same time, support for the scheme is likely to have benefited Livingstone personally – Ipsos MORI surveys regularly show more Londoners satisfied than dissatisfied with his performance, rare for a politician so long in power.
- **Monitoring public opinion and being responsive to it.** TfL has regularly measured public perspectives (as well as behaviour) before, during and after the introduction of the central and western schemes. They have responded to these measurements by, for example, introducing Pay Next Day over a year ago which gives motorists in central London an extra day to pay the congestion charge to avoid receiving a penalty notice. Surveys have consistently shown that this feature is welcomed and reduces the hassle factor of the scheme. TfL has also announced plans for emissions-related charging next year (to vary the charge based upon CO2 emissions of vehicles) and we are currently analysing the responses from the public consultation.
- **Involving an independent, non-political body.** In addition to effective political leadership, schemes can also benefit from promotion by 'official' bodies who are also involved in policing schemes. The TIF scheme areas will be under pressure to demonstrate success and independent evaluations of these could add credibility against a backdrop of public scepticism about statistics and their use.

WHERE NEXT FOR ROAD PRICING?

In the 1990s Labour MP Keith Speed described the Conservative government's privatisation of the railways as being akin to the "Poll Tax on wheels", the idea being that the Government would get the blame anytime someone felt aggrieved about train delays or conditions. Not far off twenty years on, road pricing – with the potential to affect millions of road users – looks set to become one of the most controversial and politically charged policy decisions facing central and local government.

Road pricing is considered by some to be a key element of wider strategies to change motoring behaviour, reduce congestion and improve local environments while, for others, it clobbers the motorist. Abroad, Stockholm is set to introduce congestion charging and there are "active policy debates now underway from Milan to Auckland, and the United States..."³⁷ Earlier this month New York's Mayor visited London on a fact-finding visit to find out more about the Congestion Charging Scheme.³⁸

Here, the policy is at something of a crossroads in terms of public opinion. Our polling shows that, on the one hand, more people currently oppose than support road charging in principle with 29% currently strongly opposed (hardly surprising perhaps given the punitive nature of the proposal put to them). Another way of looking at this is that a third, 33%, support the policy despite the absence so far of any 'hard sell'. This suggests that proponents and politicians do, at least, have something to build on and while 1.8 million people signed the No.10 petition, there seems to be a softer underbelly of opposition than is often portrayed.

When considering public opinion it is also important to remember that the policy does remain a fairly abstract concept for most people in most parts of the country and the evidence we have of how public opinion has evolved in London shows that attitudes are far from being fixed and immovable. Furthermore, the survey data presented in this paper demonstrates that when people are presented with the potential uses of the revenues raised, many swing in favour of the idea.

Public opinion swings most when improvements to public transport are mentioned and our qualitative research similarly underlines the public's preference for more choice – we're often told in focus groups and surveys that if something like London's congestion charging is to be introduced, then the 'carrot' should be alongside the 'stick'. People tell us they want to see better public transport options which are more reliable and more efficient. And quite apart from the reality, large sections of the public are undoubtedly pessimistic about public and private transport in Britain and want to see real improvements to these.

Road charging can be made acceptable to the public. The number of petition signatories is certainly daunting and so too are survey findings currently showing plurality opposition. But by digging underneath the surface we have found a more complex picture. Attitudes become more favourable when people understand and experience the schemes. This is by no means a given though and places a premium on political leadership allied to effective communication and implementation strategies.

Finally, it seems that where there's a political will, there might just be a way and this is something Ken Livingstone, Ruth Kelly and many other others will be well aware of. Road pricing seems to be a classic case of an issue ripe for leading public opinion, rather than simply following it. The media will also play a role here and we will be monitoring transport journalists' opinions via our annual survey.

A NATIONAL DEBATE?

Whatever happens, a careful reading of the runes allied to well-informed policy plans and communication strategies which reflect and shape public opinion will be must-haves. These will be important not just for those keen to see road pricing work successfully, but also for those minded to stop it in its tracks.

Ruth Kelly's predecessor Douglas Alexander previously called for a national debate on the subject and Tony Blair's official response to the petition referred to the complexity of an issue "...which cannot be resolved without a thorough investigation of all the options, combined with a full and frank debate about the choices we face..." Blair also stressed that "no firm decision has been taken" about a national scheme and that "the public will, of course, have their say, as will Parliament."³⁹

Consultation, like the policy itself, will need thinking through carefully. As this paper shows, policy-makers, commentators and the media need to move beyond 'snapshot' support/oppose polls and collect greater insight via well-rounded surveys. It will also be important to utilise other techniques such as qualitative research, deliberative forums, citizens juries and the like to get under the skin of opinion while also providing people with the space, the information and the opportunity to get to grips with the issues and to have a say in a meaningful way.

APPENDIX 1 – SURVEY TOPLINE FINDINGS

- Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative quota sample of 1,994 adults aged 16+ at 199 sampling points across Great Britain.
- Fieldwork was conducted face-to-face in-home between 23 and 29 August 2007.
- Data are weighted to match the profile of the population.
- Where results do not sum to 100, this may be due to multiple responses, computer rounding or the exclusion of don't knows/not stated.
- Results are based on all respondents unless otherwise stated.
- An asterisk (*) represents a value of less than one half or one percent, but not zero.

QT1 SHOWCARD As you may know, several schemes exist across the world, including in central London, that charge road users fees to drive in and around certain towns and city centres. The schemes are designed to reduce traffic congestion and improve the local environment e.g. by reducing emissions. How strongly do you support or oppose the principle of road charging?	
	%
Strongly support	8
Tend to support	25
Neither support nor oppose	14
Tend to oppose	19
Strongly oppose	29
Don't know	5

QT2 SHOWCARD I now want you to tell me how strongly you would support or oppose road charging if ...		Strongly support	Tend to support	Neither support nor oppose	Tend to oppose	Strongly oppose	Don't know
ORDER OF A-C RANDOMISED		%	%	%	%	%	%
A	All revenues raised would be returned to the road user through cheaper petrol	18	31	17	15	14	6
B	All revenues raised would be returned to the road user through lower road tax	18	35	17	13	12	5
C	All revenues raised would be used to improve public transport	24	36	13	11	10	5

QT3 SHOWCARD If there were a road charging scheme for using some British roads, which of the criteria on this card do you think should be used to work out how much road users are charged?	
	%
Size of their vehicle's engine	39
Exhaust emissions their vehicle produces	42
Type of vehicle they used	31
Mileage, the distance they travel	25
Time of day travelled	24
Number of people in the car	17
Location and use of public transport i.e. those living near mainline railway stations or with good local bus services, pay more to use the roads	16
Driving history, such as speeding fines or insurance claim records	10
Don't know	16

QT4 SHOWCARD How often do you personally drive a car or light van?	
	%
Every day or nearly every day	42
4-5 days a week	10
2-3 days a week	10
Once a week	3
Less often than once a week but at least once a month	1
Less often than once a month	2
Never – don't drive/don't have a car	31
Don't know	1

APPENDIX 2⁴⁰

In October 2005 it was reported that 44 cities and counties had applied to the Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) for special funding to begin to set up transport improvement schemes involving congestion charging/road pricing. The areas that applied for funding were:

Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall & Wolverhampton, Bristol, Bath & North East Somerset, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Cambridgeshire, Cumbria, Derby City, Derbyshire, Devon, Durham, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton, Kent, Lancashire, London Borough of Greenwich, Lincolnshire, Medway, Northants, Bedfordshire, Luton, Bucks, Nottingham, Reading, Shropshire, Southend on Sea, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire, Surrey, Telford and Wrekin, Torbay, Tyne and Wear, Warrington, West Sussex and West Yorkshire.

In November 2005, the Department for Transport announced that local authorities in a number of areas across the country would receive funding from the TIF totalling £7m:

- Bristol and Bath;
- Cambridgeshire;
- Durham;
- Greater Manchester;
- Shrewsbury;
- Tyne and Wear; and
- the West Midlands.

Several other cities have also been associated with plans to introduce road pricing or congestion charging schemes in recent years:

- Nottingham;
- Derbyshire;
- Edinburgh;
- Cardiff;
- York; and
- Leeds.

ENDNOTES

¹ This paper builds on 'The Toll Tax and the public' written by the same authors in the Ipsos MORI Transport newsletter *Understanding transport* published in May 2007 and a speech made by Rebecca Klahr 'Gaining public acceptability for road user charging' at the conference 'How the Eddington Report Will Transform Transport Policy' on 18 April 2007.

² See Joe Ballantyne, 'Transport: What next?' in *Understanding transport*, May 2007.

³ Quoted in Jeegar Kakkad and Ann Rositer *Road User Charging: A Road Map*, The Social Market Foundation, 2007.

⁴ Nick Mathiason 'Why Britain's still stuck in a traffic jam', *The Observer*, 9.9.07

⁵ See Joe Ballantyne, 'Transport: What next?' in *Understanding transport*, May 2007.

⁶ Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative quota sample of 1,964 adults aged 18+ at 187 sampling points across Great Britain. Fieldwork was conducted face-to-face between 20-26 September 2007.

⁷ Part of the explanation for the difference between the proportions seeing transport as a vote-determining issue and an important issue facing the country is likely to be the way the questions are asked (the former is a prompted question, giving respondents a showcard listing of a whole range of topics to choose from). Once you remind people of the issue, transport starts to move up the agenda.

⁸ Stephen Glaister 'Transport' in *The Blair Effect: 2001-5*, Anthony Seldon and Dennis Kavanagh (ed.s) (2005).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Prime Minister's response to Downing Street website petition, 21 February 2007. Source: <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>.

¹¹ Department for Transport, *The Future of Transport*, White Paper, 2004, Cmnd. 6234.

¹² See pp. 60-65 in Ipsos MORI *Blair's Britain: the social and cultural legacy*, 2007. We identified six themes relating to the way Britons conceive of themselves, the way they interpret their activities, the roles they assign to their government, the role they perceive they themselves play in society, Britain's role in the world and the public agenda on the issues of the day.

¹³ Ipsos MORI *Frontiers of Transport*, 2006.

¹⁴ 'Start-Up Fervor Shifts to Energy in Silicon Valley', *New York Times*, 13.3.07.

¹⁵ <http://www.politics.co.uk>, 'Road pricing: A workable transport solution?', 16.5.07.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *A blueprint for a green economy*, Quality of Life Policy Group, submission to Shadow Cabinet, September 2007.

¹⁸ *Road Pricing, The Economic and Technical Possibilities*, Ministry of Transport, 1964, quoted in Jeegar Kakkad and Ann Rositer *Road User Charging: A Road Map*, The Social Market Foundation, 2007

¹⁹ <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/traveltax/#detail>

²⁰ Office of the Leader of the House of Commons *The Governance of Britain – the Government's Draft Legislative Programme*, July 2007.

²¹ Results are from the 'Public Attitudes to Transport in England' survey conducted by MORI on behalf of the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT). Results are based on 1,725 interviews with the general public in England, conducted face-to-face in home between 27th February and April 7th 2002.

²² By car owners we mean those living in households which own a car.

²³ Derived from the following question: Q. How often do you personally drive a car or light van? Drivers (1,317) are defined as those answering every day or nearly every day/4-5 days a week/2-3 days a week/once a week/less often than once a week but at least once a month Non-drivers (658) are those who answered never/don't drive.

²⁴ Department for Transport, *The Future of Transport*, White Paper, 2004, Cmnd. 6234.

²⁵ Market and social researchers classify people according to the household's chief income earner's occupation, qualifications etc. "ABC1" refers to managers, administrators and professionals. "C2DE" refers to skilled and unskilled manual workers and those on long-term state benefit.

²⁶ Regular driver = drives 4 or more times a week.

²⁷ All survey samples, and sub-samples, are subject to sampling tolerances. At the 95% confidence level, when making comparisons between samples sizes of 100 and 100, differences would need to be between 7 and 14 percentage points (depending on the percentages) for us to be confident that they were statistically significant; between 7 and 12 for sample sizes of 100 and 200; between 6 and 10 for sample sizes of 200 and 200.

²⁸ Research by BMRB suggests that motorists often view paying a road user charge on top of the road tax as double taxation. Quoted in Jeegar Kakkad and Ann Rositer *Road User Charging: A Road Map*, The Social Market Foundation, 2007.

²⁹ Quoted in Jeegar Kakkad and Ann Rositer *Road User Charging: A Road Map*, The Social Market Foundation, 2007.

³⁰ On behalf of the Scottish Executive we ran a series of focus groups and a representative survey of around 1,000 Edinburgh residents.

³¹ Ipsos MORI British Confidence Index, 952 British adults, 31 August-2 September 2007.

³² Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative quota sample of 1,964 adults aged 18+ at 187 sampling points across Great Britain. Fieldwork was conducted face-to-face between 20-26 September 2007.

³³ 61 interviews with transport journalists (part of Ipsos MORI's programme of regular multi-sponsored studies among key audiences) between 15 May and 22 June.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ipsos MORI survey for Detica involving interviews with 1,075 British adults, 19-23 May 2005.

³⁶ *On the Move* (2006), Confederation of Passenger Transport, quoted in *A blueprint for a green economy*, Quality of Life Policy Group, submission to Shadow Cabinet, September 2007.

³⁷ Ian Simpson in Jeegar Kakkad and Ann Rositer *Road User Charging: A Road Map*, The Social Market Foundation, 2007.

³⁸ BBC London news report, 1.10.07.

³⁹ Prime Minister's response to Downing Street website petition, 21 February 2007. Source: <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>.

⁴⁰ Information from a number of sources especially <http://www.cfit.gov.uk/ruc/calendar/index.htm>.

ABOUT US

The Transport Research team at Ipsos MORI work in partnership with clients, designing research to enable them to better understand public, customer and stakeholder perspectives and behaviour. We specialise in using research to support the development of evidence-based policies and planning for the future. We do:

- Research to inform policy development
- Research to inform policy evaluation
- Customer satisfaction research
- Travel behaviour and attitudes studies
- Road pricing/congestion charging research
- Local Transport Plans
- Deliberative and diagnostic qualitative research
- Research among stakeholders

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