

Tackling the climate emergency through the budget

Parliamentary Briefing

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Friends of the Earth Scotland

Summary

The world is in the middle of a climate crisis, with devastating impacts already being seen - from Cyclone Idai to the Australian bushfires. The Scottish Parliament has responded by setting new, stronger, emission reduction targets, but this must be matched with a shift in focus in the budget.

The Government and opposition parties should use this year's budget to tackle the dual challenges of climate change and air pollution, unlocking the huge health and social benefits of sustainable transport, by reducing the money being spent on major roads and investing instead in:

- Extending free bus travel
- Supporting councils to run bus services
- Increasing investment in active travel

The need for budget change

Transport is Scotland's highest emitting sector, currently accounting for over a third of our domestic greenhouse gas emissions. Road transport is a particular problem, being cited as "the largest source of emissions in Scotland" in the 2017 Greenhouse Gas Emissions statistics, with emissions increasing 11.1% since 1990.¹

If we want to tackle the climate emergency, and achieve the targets in the Climate Act, we must change how we travel. Government spending must be used to make sustainable transport more accessible and more attractive than high polluting alternatives like private car use.

This has been backed up by the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland, whose recent report called for investment to be used to deliver a "substantial increase in the proportion of journeys made by active travel" and "a much greater role for public transport."²

Last year's Cleaner Air for Scotland Strategy review also emphasised that to tackle air

pollution we must focus transport policy on "reducing personal private vehicle use as a priority."³

At the same time, recent analysis has shown that pollution levels, largely caused by fossil fuel vehicles, continue to break legal limits in parts of Scotland.⁴

It's clear that to tackle the dual challenges of climate emissions and the devastating health impacts of air pollution, we need to change our transport system.

Spending hypocrisy

Despite commitments to reducing emissions, our imbalanced transport spend maintains the polluting status quo.

Direct spending on major roads accounted for £833.1 million last year alone, and over £2.5 billion in the last 3 years. This is almost 10 times the active travel spend, at £87 million, and overshadows the 'Concessionary Fares and Bus Services' budget, which supports greener buses

¹ [Greenhouse Gas Emission statistics 2017](#)

² [Infrastructure Commission for Scotland. A Blueprint for Scotland](#)

³ [Cleaner Air for Scotland Strategy – An Independent Review Final Report](#)

⁴ [Scotland's most polluted streets 2019](#)

and concessions for older, disabled and young people.

Meanwhile, air pollution is estimated to cost the NHS in Scotland £1.1 billion every year⁵, without factoring in the impact of conditions associated with sedentary lifestyles. The cost of the damage and disruption caused by extreme weather, as a result of climate change, is incalculable. We also know busy roads lead to stress and social isolation,⁶ while investing in active travel infrastructure benefits people's health, happiness and local economies.⁷

Greener spending options

Extending free bus travel

If we want to help people out of high polluting, private modes of transport and into sustainable transport, we must remove the barriers that people see - both perceived and actual.

Reducing public transport costs has been proven to increase patronage - with those eligible for free bus travel currently more likely to use it. This is well illustrated by the steep jump between the 35% of 50-59 year olds who use buses once a month, compared to 48% of 60-69 year olds and 50% of 70-79 year olds, with access to free bus travel.⁸

If we want to promote bus use more broadly, this budget should commit to expanding free bus travel through the Concessionary Fare Scheme, underpinned by a longer-term goal of universal free bus travel.

Supporting councils to run bus services

The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 gave local authorities the power to run bus services. Public ownership of buses has proven to deliver high standards of transport, with publicly owned services in Edinburgh and Nottingham reporting high levels of passenger satisfaction - and profits reinvested into the local network.

However, legislation on its own will not deliver change, and start up costs are a barrier to creating a wider publicly-owned bus network. This budget should include support for local authorities wanting to run bus services. This will particularly help those rural communities who've been abandoned by private providers who view some lifeline routes as less commercially attractive.

The Scottish Government already spends upwards of £300 million per year on subsidising mainly private bus companies through the concessionary travel fund, the Green Bus Fund, and the BEAR scheme. Financial assistance to help councils launch their own bus services will ensure communities ignored by private operators can access opportunities, stimulating growth and reducing loneliness.

Increased investment in active travel

The 'Support for Sustainable and Active Travel' budget currently stands at £79 million, just 3% of the transport budget, is available for active travel each year. However, at £14.77 per capita, this remains significantly less than comparable countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, who spend as much as £30 per capita on active travel nationally⁹.

If we want to encourage more people to unlock the climate and health benefits of active travel, this budget should commit to spending £30 per capita on active travel, in line with neighbouring countries, matched by an ambition to spend 10% of the transport budget on active travel.

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⁵ [UK Government Guidance for air quality appraisals](#)

⁶ [What is community severance and why is it important?](#)

⁷ [Walking & Cycling: the economic benefits](#)

⁸ [Transport and Travel in Scotland Results from the Scottish Household Survey](#)

⁹ [Active Travel Task Force report, June 2018](#)