There is no official recognition of ‘transport poverty’ yet it is a daily reality for millions of people across England.

For decades transport and planning policy has focused on the needs of motorists and high-traffic cities have been planned on the assumption that everyone has access to a car. But nearly half of all households in England could already be struggling with the costs of car ownership – and the lack of practical alternatives – including inadequate and expensive public transport and hostile walking and cycling environments – is forcing millions of people to choose between debt and social exclusion.

Transport poverty is a complex issue but its impact is clear. Our transport planning system penalises people who cannot afford a car, who struggle to cover rising public transport fares and who lack access to public or private transport because of age, disability or where they live.

Schools, hospitals, job opportunities, leisure facilities and shops have become inaccessible to many. In rural areas, where activities and services are more widely dispersed, high transport costs, inadequate information and non-existent, inefficient or impractical transport services are major concerns. People and transport networks often serve peripheral housing and employment areas badly, with travel times and costs creating a barrier to opportunity, particularly for lower income households.

Poor walking and cycling environments can leave areas even more isolated, damaging community cohesion.

One in four households in England is already running a car. For the poorest households, who cannot afford a car, the cost of running a car can be high as 25 per cent (whether or not they own it) – a figure that is likely to rise as the costs of petrol and diesel. This might be attractive in the short term, but is clearly an unsustainable long-term solution - placing an additional strain on government budgets and would further enforce car dependency, ignoring the needs of those without access to a car.

The impact of transport poverty on people’s lives is real and far-reaching.

Restricting individual opportunity

Access to jobs: For millions of people access to reliable and affordable transport can make the difference between being able to work and being locked into welfare dependency.

Access to education: School choice is directly affected by transport provision and a lack of transport options limits young people’s educational opportunities. Activities such as breakfast clubs, homework and study clubs, and outdoor activities can make a significant difference to pupil attainment, attitude at school and attendance, but often fail outside of regular school transport services.

Denying access to frontline care

Hospitals are among the most difficult locations to reach without a car. Poor access to health facilities can mean that people miss health appointments or suffer delays in being discharged from hospital – both of which incur significant costs to the NHS and can deepen health inequalities.

Disconnecting communities

Participation in social, cultural and leisure activities is very important to people’s quality of life and can play a major part in meeting wider goals like reducing crime and building cohesive communities. However, people without cars are twice as likely to miss out on these opportunities.

Slowing our recovery

Over-reliance on cars is stunting our economic recovery, preventing access to jobs and choking essential routes to supply chains and markets further afield.

Minimising the need for ‘forced car ownership’ would address growing social and environmental concerns, and would strengthen our economy.

Greater and more efficient investment in affordable alternatives to car use is one of the most cost-effective ways of helping the country’s general transport capacity, stimulating investment interest, facilitating future expansion and creating new employment opportunities.

However, too often the proposed solution to support people who are struggling to reduce tax and subsidise the costs of petrol and diesel. This might be attractive in the short term, but is clearly an unsustainable long-term solution placing an additional strain on government budgets and would further enforce car dependency, ignoring the needs of those without access to a car.

Instead the government should reinvest a significant proportion of the £1.5bn additional fuel duty revenues, expected from the recent fuel price increases locally, into a fund to improve travel choices for all - a move supported by more than 70% of drivers in Britain.

Addressing the challenge of transport poverty and developing a transport strategy to stimulate economic growth in a constrained public spending environment will require innovative thinking, collaboration and an understanding of how existing resources can be best invested.

The cost of running two cars means we’ve no chance of saving up to get a mortgage on a house. We just have to continue to rent, giving us no security for our future.

The lack of transport options is impacting on our social life too - the public transport links to Southam are so bad that there’d be no chance of getting home after a night out.

We can get by, but I’m really concerned that soon it won’t be worth going to work at all. If we could just cut back to owning one car it would make a big difference, but with the worsening state of public transport in our area I just can’t see how this will be possible.

David, 39, lives with his wife in Southam, Warwickshire - both of them have to own a car to get to work each day.

Despite it taking up a huge proportion of our income, we both have to have our own car. Using public transport would take me two hours each way and I’d need to leave the house before 6am to get to work on time. I’ve tried to find another job, closer to home, but nothing has come up.

My wife has a much shorter commute and would love to ride her bike to work, but there’s only a busy A-road and she doesn’t feel safe. The only option is for her to drive.

We’ve recently settled in Southam. It’s close to my wife’s job (near Coventry Airport) but it’s nearly 60 miles to Rutland where I work.

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Tackling transport poverty in England

**Freedom.**

Everyone should have the freedom to access opportunities in their wider community.

Promoting alternatives to full car ownership, extending the introduction of car clubs and developing and incentivising systems to enable flexible car sharing offers car use without the burden of ownership.

Making public transport available to all: in densely populated urban areas buses are a cost effective way to increase transport capacity. In rural and peripheral urban areas, community and Demand Responsive Transport schemes introduce flexible routes into the network where demand is more dispersed.

Increasing awareness of existing alternatives: Locally-driven programmes offering maps and travel advice introduce people travelling with cars to cost less costly alternatives and enable people without a car to access the services and opportunities they need.

Making walking and cycling safer: Developing high quality local walking and cycling networks based on analysis of existing travel patterns would give access on foot and by bike to everyday destinations. And instating 20mph as the default national speed limit in UK residential areas would make our streets safer and more attractive, preventing more than 500 children from being killed or seriously injured on our roads each year.

Making best use of existing resources:

The efficiency of our public transport systems could be significantly improved. In developing Local Transport Plans, Transport Authorities should undertake a strategic analysis of public transport demand in their area and work with providers to integrate services for passengers travelling by rail, bus, bike or on foot to make more complicated journeys easier.

In addition, pooling local authority vehicles across social, health, education and public transport departments would prevent vehicle fleets sitting unused in large chunks of the day whilst travel needs go unmet.

Refocusing existing public transport subsidies, such as the Bus Services Operators Grant, on socially-necessary and non-commercial services and targeting affordable fare schemes to meet the needs of jobseekers and those in full-time education would ensure existing subsidies are spent to maximum effect.

Fairness.

A fair public transport system must be affordable to all.

Bus fares have more than tripled since deregulation in 1986-87, hitting low-income households hard. Releasing the issue of high fares is the complexity and range of factors on offer, making it difficult to find the best value products.

Young people: A simple, affordable and convenient fare offer for children can dramatically increase their use of public transport, enabling them to see friends, access further education, participate in sports and art attainment-boosting after-school activities.

Older people: The national bus concession enables older people to maintain an active and independent life, essential for both physical and mental health, and reducing premature entry into full time care.

Jobseekers: Making public transport affordable for jobseekers will be key in ensuring access to work for those in areas with slack labour demand.

In more urban areas, smart ticketing (similar to London's Oyster card scheme) can make transport more affordable; ensuring people get the best value fares without the upfront costs involved in season ticket purchase and allowing low income groups to access discounts without stigma. In more rural areas, or where the start-up costs of such schemes may prove prohibitive, greater cross-provider cooperation can address these issues.

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Responsibility.

Responsibility for tackling transport poverty must be integrated into all levels of government, across transport, planning and welfare programmes.

The recognition by key sectors of the importance of transport policy in the context of their own delivery agendas, will be crucial to tackling this complex issue and could result in significant efficiency benefits. As there is for fuel poverty, there must be a cross-departmental commitment to tackling transport poverty and full liaison initiatives implemented to address it.

There should be a review of ‘accessibility planning’ as a valuable mechanism at tackling social exclusion, Guidance should be issued on behalf of the Department for Transport, Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health to better support local authorities in using accessibility planning tools, focusing particularly on access to the opportunities that have the most impact on life chances (such as work, training and healthcare).

Making best use of existing budgets:

It is clear that a ring-fenced fund for investment in increasing people’s travel opportunities is needed. And it will be more cost effective to deliver than most other interventions.

In addition, the division of transport budgets into capital and revenue funding streams, dictated by Whitehall and heavily weighted in favour of capital projects, constrains investment in increasing people’s travel opportunities that have the most impact on life chances (such as work, training and healthcare).

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Mind the gap: Transport poverty in London

Many of the transport poverty measures suggested are already in place in London, such as a concessionary fares scheme that offers reduced tariffs to vulnerable groups including jobseekers and an unpiloted transport network. However, access to affordable housing will reshape the demographic make-up of the capital and will require a renewed focus on the role of transport in tackling social exclusion.

- Transport for London should commit to expanding the bus network in London typically the preferred mode of transport for low income groups, focussed on effectively improving transport provision in areas of highest need.
- Ring-fenced funding for walking and cycling through the Local Implementation Plans process should be provided to better meet people’s local travel needs.
- Transport for London should revise its ticketing policy (especially with regard to rail and underground) to access social exclusion concerns.

Nearly 1.5 million people are at high risk of suffering from ‘transport poverty’

Half of all local authorities in England have at least one high risk area.

This map combines three indicators of transport poverty: areas of low income (where the costs of running a car or using public transport would place a significant strain on household budgets); areas where a significant proportion of residents live further than a mile from their nearest bus or railway station; and areas where it would take longer than an hour to access essential goods and services by walking, cycling and public transport. Using these indicators, communities have been identified as facing a ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ risk of transport poverty.

For more information and further details on the methodology used please visit sustrans.org.uk/lockedout