

SPEAKER'S CORNER

Dr Steve Melia, who lectures in transport and planning at the University of the West of England, says traffic congestion is going to get worse so we need to spend more on public transport



How do we let our city grow without traffic strangling us all?

BRISTOL has the most congested roads of any British city apart from London. It also has the most successful economy and a rapidly growing population, so on current trends congestion is likely to get worse. Many people imagine that politicians or transport planners could fix the problem, so why don't they fix it?

A recent American study found the most economically successful cities were also the most congested ones. London is the most congested city in Britain, and also the one with the most successful economy. So congestion may be a price we pay for living in a successful city where people want to live and work. But could it be fixed? Let's look at some possible solutions.

Positive measures, like better public transport, can solve many problems – but congestion is not one of them. The main effect of expanding public transport is to generate more travel. That may be desirable or essential where employment is growing in a city centre, for example. But every person who takes a bus or a train instead of driving frees up space on the roads for someone else to take their place. This effect has been observed in many cities and across many countries.

The 1970s solution – building new roads through cities – was abandoned for three reasons: cost, public opposition, but also because planners gradually came to realise that it doesn't work. At the end of every road lies a destination. The worst congestion appears in those places which attract most trips. City centres are one example, but there are others: places like Cribbs Causeway or Aztec West. It doesn't matter how

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much you expand the roads or the junctions leading to those places, if most people choose to drive there will always be congestion at the end of the journey. To solve congestion through road improvements, you would also need to disperse those 'trip attractors' over a wider area. If we demolished large parts of our city, and spread our employment, our shops and our population over a wider area, we could build more roads and wider roads and turn Bristol into somewhere like Milton Keynes. That strategy would make a real difference to congestion. But would you vote for it?

Some people believe that switching off traffic lights can solve congestion. That suffers from the same problem as urban road building. If the flow of traffic through a junction is increased, by switching off traffic lights or any other means, that traffic is heading somewhere else. It will reach that 'somewhere else' more quickly, making congestion slightly worse in lots of other places. So across the city as a whole, improving junctions is no more effective than building new roads. It will only work if you 'knock down and spread out' the trip attractors, and also the trip generators, i.e. people's homes. In Bristol, over the next couple of decades we are more likely to see the opposite trend: more people and more jobs in the same area of land.

If we don't want to turn our city into Milton Keynes, the only other ways of tackling congestion involve some form of traffic restraint. Road pricing could solve the problem but only if the prices were high enough to persuade enough people not to drive. How high would that have to be? A charge of £11.50 a day has been just enough to stabilise congestion

in central London, but not enough to reduce it. Can you imagine the people of Bristol voting for a scheme expensive enough to solve the problem of congestion here?

Parking controls can help to reduce traffic and congestion in a more specific area, like a city centre – and they can be just as unpopular. In all the furore over residents' parking zones, few people seem to have realised that every parking space enables someone to drive there – on roads which are already congested. Imagine for a moment that Bristol's population grows by 22 per cent (as forecast by 2037) and jobs in the city centre grow at a similar rate. Imagine that half of those people drive to work, as Bristolians do today. How would all those extra cars get in and out on roads that are already congested?

A dictator could use road pricing or (much more draconian) parking measures to abolish congestion, but in a democratic growing city, where people want to drive, I am afraid congestion will always be with us. The real challenge for our leaders is how to let the city grow without traffic strangling us all. We need better buses, rail improvements, new routes that separate cyclists from pedestrians and above all we need more traffic-free public space for all those extra people to live, work and breathe in and around the city centre.

Dr Steve Melia's book Urban Transport Without the Hot Air will be published in May 2015.

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SUE'S NEWS

Sue Mountstevens



Confidence in the police is a fragile thing

CONFIDENCE in the police is a fragile thing which can be easily swayed by so many different factors; your own direct experience of dealing with the police or what you hear from others, how they behave in your community or what you read about them in the media. However, being able to have confidence in the police is vital as it affects how safe you feel in your neighbourhood.

Today I'll touch on two of the many aspects which affect that confidence – a rigorous scrutiny process to make sure the police service performs at its best (and is held to account when it doesn't) and the ease of contacting them by phone.

Avon and Somerset Police has a professional standards department which can deal with complaints from members of the public but sometimes independent scrutiny is needed. Often this is done through inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary but sometimes you'll see the Independent Police Complaints Commission become involved.

Last week the Constabulary received the IPCC's report into the police treatment of Bijan Ebrahimi in the days before his death. While I'm not yet able to talk about the case in detail, it was clear soon after Mr Ebrahimi's murder that the police failed in their duty to protect him and this was supported in the IPCC's report. I'm pleased the report has been completed and Mr Ebrahimi's family will finally get some of the answers they're looking for.

Meetings have already begun happening to reflect on the report's findings and I'll be seeking reassurance from the police that they are clear in the areas that need to be addressed and are working quickly to fix them. After all, as well as other oversight bodies, a key role of a Police and Crime Commissioner is to represent the local community and make sure that local people are receiving the best policing possible.

In my last column, I mentioned frustrations I had that 101 calls weren't being answered as quickly as they should have been. Well, what a difference a fortnight makes; the police are now beginning to see the results of their hard work to turn the situation around. The proportion of calls answered within 60 seconds has increased substantially to 76 per cent and continues to improve, while less than 5 per cent of 101 calls were abandoned – far fewer than in previous weeks.

Sometimes it's easy to get too focused on statistics and forget that behind each statistic is a person wanting to tell us or ask us something or in need the police's assistance. I was reminded of that this week when I received a letter from someone who called 101 to report aggressive cold-callers in Clevedon. He was immediately put through to the control room and seven minutes later officers were at his house and had located the man causing concern.

It's always encouraging to hear from people who value the service provided and have confidence that problems will be addressed by the police. There is still work to do with the 101 performance, but things are moving in the right direction and the service is one people can have confidence in.

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