

Delivering Regional Renewal

Public support for bold change in
North East transport policy

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from conjoint and narrative survey data on transport policy from 577 adults with postcodes within the North East Combined Authority between 5th-19th February 2024 in the run up to the inaugural 2024 Mayoral Election.

Conjoint experiments ask participants repeatedly to choose between randomly designed versions of the same policies. This enables identification of both citizen priorities between different attributes of policy design (reduction in avoidable deaths, improvement in reliability, etc.) and preferences on the attributes (cost, funding source, impact, etc.).

As might be expected, we found that cheaper, quicker, more reliable journeys were always preferred to slower, more expensive or less reliable journeys. This was true of journeys to London as well as those within the North East.

There was a preference to reduce congestion and a strong preference to reduce deaths caused by pollution. There was a mild preference for decreasing car use, but preferences over the proportion of journeys by bike were not strong.

Most importantly, for ownership, private ownership of public transport was strongly opposed compared to all other options (not-for-profit, UK government, NECA).

For funding, increases in council tax and income tax had negative utilities, as might be expected, but taxes on wealth, carbon production and businesses were rated favourably.

The ownership, control and funding findings are consistent with overwhelming evidence that citizens view public ownership and control as being essential to improvements in infrastructure, service and outcomes and that there are high levels of support for tax increases on those who can afford it.

This report also provides key means of tying together aspects of transport policy, such as active travel, with those elements that voters prioritise, such as avoiding deaths from the consequences of car usage: put simply, the shift to enhanced clean public transport, cycling and walking can be justified by reference to its impact on reducing avoidable deaths.

MAKE TRANSPORT EASY AND GREEN



Introduction

After various attempts to increase devolution in the region,¹ the North East Combined Authority came into being on 7th May 2024. The Directly Elected Mayor, Kim McGuinness, oversees seven constituent authorities: Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland. It represents almost two million residents in the region, which has an economy of £40 billion consisting of 5,500 businesses providing 820,000 jobs.² The creation of a combined authority comes 20 years after voters in the region rejected a devolved assembly and seven years after a devolution deal stalled over concern regarding replacement of EU funding.³ The authority has control over a directly allocated budget of £4.2bn from a combination of Government Levelling Up and other funds.⁴

There is, therefore, significant potential for NECA to address the social, economic and cultural challenges that affect the region. However, little is currently known about how members of the public understand NECA and its role in dealing with myriad social, economic and cultural challenges in our region. This is a critical knowledge deficit for public administration, given the crucial role that the Authority will play in administering a series of crises that have accumulated over several decades. With disengagement and alienation from national politics high among groups disproportionately represented within our region, there is need for understanding citizens' views of what they believe the NECA can and, importantly, should do. This is essential to ensuring legitimacy of the Authority and enabling it to work with communities to manage resources effectively.

One of the key policy areas over which the authority will hold control is transport, with a number of previous QUANGOS and bodies absorbed:⁵

The North East Transport Plan is our core strategy for transport and sets out our region's transport aspirations up to 2035. It includes a programme of around 240 schemes which equal at least £6.8 billion of transport investment – a figure which will grow over the lifespan of the plan. The plan and its programme of activity will help to make a big difference to the lives of people in the North East – our health, our environment and our economy. For years, our region has seen dramatically lower levels of transport investment than other areas of the country. Our plan will address this imbalance and boost spending on schemes which will be 'game-changing' for the North East and how we travel each day. Projects in the plan include major improvements to regional walking, wheeling and cycle routes, new train stations, extensions to Metro, increased bus operations and a variety of major road and rail investments.⁶

The Government's Levelling Up⁷ report demonstrates the need for such a plan, recognising significant inequalities of investment in transport between the regions of the UK, with the North East receiving far fewer resources than the South East. This has a critical impact on both the economic and social activity of the region, placing extreme demographic and service pressure on some communities. How, though, do residents believe that transport ought to be owned, managed and focused and what are their priorities therein?

In this report, we examine public preferences via the results of a conjoint experimental survey of 577 NECA residents conducted between 5th-19th February 2024, three months prior to the establishment of the authority. A conjoint survey establishes participants preferences between various discrete options about the features of a policy, the trade-offs people are willing to make and an optimal version of a policy. While the findings presented in this report need to be understood in the context of over-representation of younger participants and those intending to vote Labour, the conclusions point toward priorities and effective formulation of policy.

We show that NECA can play an important role in meeting residents' preferences for transport policy that reduces avoidable deaths by pollution as well as transport policy by owning and controlling an integrated transport system that is funded by forms of taxation that protect low-middle income disposable resources. We begin by setting out existing research on the topic.

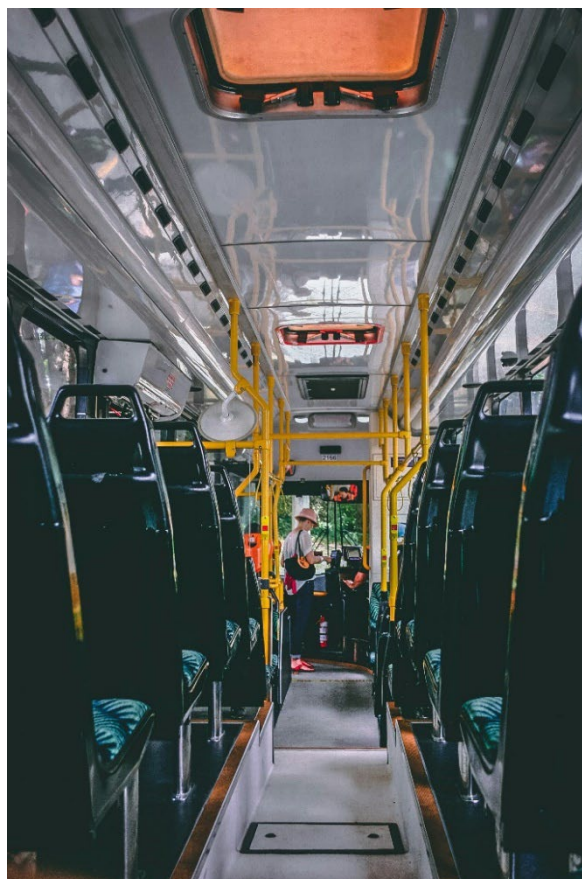
Transport reform and public preferences

Once relatively prosperous in the wake of post-1945 reforms, many areas of the North East have suffered disproportionately from the loss of industry and the lack of investment in infrastructure and public transport. It has long been recognised that the region's transport challenges are marked by isolation from London and the Westminster Government, competition between cities and communities and a relatively sparse population.⁸ The consequence, in many parts of the region, is young people forced to move away in search of work and opportunity and an ageing population confronted by increasing antisocial behaviour and chronic pressure on policing and health and care services.

Thus far, measures to address the slide have been *ad hoc*, with communities continuing to see their interests suffer across Conservative, New Labour, Coalition and Conservative Governments. Those measures have focused on the symptoms, not the causes, of the decline. The Government's Levelling Up agenda recognises the need for substantive consideration of causes and transport is often one of the most fundamental of those.

3.3 million people in the North of England suffer from transport related social exclusion.⁹ Securing affordable, effective and reliable transport is essential to economic activity, particularly for those on low incomes¹⁰ and, with it, a number of outcomes in health, education, crime and culture. Spending on public transport in the North East is significantly lower than in London and other parts of the country. If there is to be Levelling Up, spending on transport is key. The impacts of transport reform are diffuse. The cost-of-living crisis has highlighted the role of fuel poverty on poverty and inequality overall as well as health. The increased cost of energy affects personal finances so dramatically as a result of 'double energy vulnerability (DEV)', which 'is the increased likelihood of negative impacts upon well-being, owing to the intersection of domestic energy poverty (DEP) and transport energy poverty (TEP)'.¹¹ Increasing concern over costs and reliability of privatised public transport mean that people may elect to rely on cars which, themselves, are highly expensive to run. In 2021, owning and running a car cost on average per year £3,407 without finance and £5,744 with finance.¹² There is real reason to believe, given that poverty is a recognised determinant of a range of outcomes, that reform to transport can produce improvements across the region.

One such outcome is public health. There has been increased recognition in recent years that individualised approaches to public health have failed. Recent research has suggested that there is little evidence, after controlling for publishing bias, for the efficacy of 'nudging' behavioural change.¹ Such approaches are intended to improve outcomes by providing psychological cues, such as increasing difficulty of accessing harmful goods. The former Director of Public Health, Newcastle, Eugene Milne, has emphasised the impossibility of addressing large public health crises through individualised approaches. He highlights public health crises averted in Ancient Rome from banning carts and 20th Century Britain from replacing horses with cars, before highlighting the ongoing crisis of pollution and climate change caused by cars.



He cites three aspects of public health policy advanced in recent years with regard to transport: health protection has been improved via legislation banning drinking and driving; health care services have improved via vehicular development, although this is the least important aspect of public health; health improvement has been affected by reduction in active travel, such as walking and cycling, and increase in pollution.¹ All of this suggests an increase in cleaner public transport and availability of active travel is key to improving public health.

It is also, clearly, critical to climate and the importance of changing behaviour to move people from cars to other forms of transport has long been recognised.¹³ While the contribution of transport to climate change is a global issue, the North East Combined Authority's capacity to control transport grants it regional capacity for impact. In this respect, NECA also has capacity to affect urban design and development which, clearly, has an impact on sustainability.¹⁴ However, in this report, we focus solely on transport.

Given that policies require a trade-off between different levels and forms of investment and different levels and forms of taxation, it is important to establish how and in what ways North East residents prioritise potential impacts and means of funding. One means of achieving this has been through conjoint analysis, which has long been used in market research, but is increasingly used to elicit participants' preferences with regard to competing policy elements.¹⁵ A conjoint survey asks participants repeatedly to select from two randomly produced policy programmes their preferred policy design. The policy configurations compared include randomly allocated versions of attributes,

such as price of travel, cost to the taxpayer, etc. This allows researchers to estimate the average impact of any particular feature attribute-value on preference and strength of preference for the policy using comparable scales.

There have been precedents in conjoint analysis of transport policy. Mertens et al. examined preferences for cycling in the Netherlands, with respondents preferring models that increase safety and separate bicycles from motorised traffic.¹⁶ In Nepal, Aryal, Ichihashi and Kaneko examined demand and preferred design for a mass rapid transport (MRT) system using mode of transport, waiting time, one-way fare per km, commute time per km, and payment method as attributes.¹⁷ They found that integration between different aspects of the system, cost, waiting time, commuting time and ease of payment were important in promoting shifts to public transport.

We have previously¹⁸ used conjoint analysis to explore preferences for welfare reform and to construct the TriplePC (Public Policy Preference Calculator: <https://triplepc.northumbria.ac.uk/>) online policy analysis tool. That survey deployed attributes including the schemes' generosity (e.g. size of payment), conditionality (e.g. residency, work), funding mechanism (e.g. tax, borrowing) and outcomes (e.g. effects on poverty, health). Understandably, other conjoint studies found that, while people prefer public spending on most social goods,¹⁹ support reduces when people are asked to pay for that investment through tax. Placing that burden on the wealthiest is generally popular.²⁰ We found significant increases in universality and generosity within the current welfare system would be popular due to the high value placed on poverty reduction and its positive sequelae. This was sufficiently high to more than offset aversion to tax increases. The findings suggest a public much more favourable to redistributive government action than might otherwise be assumed.²¹

In this study, we examine eleven attributes of potential NECA transport policy design.

Aspects of policy design to examine

It is increasingly clear that ownership of the transport affects traveller experience and cost. Profit-making private companies generally decide to run only those services that make profits, set prices at levels that make profits and receive government subsidies to run certain services. This means that those who live in rural areas or new build estates often lack services and are forced to use cars, reducing business and services further and increasing congestion during commutes. Public ownership increases the number of services to meet needs in different areas as the service is intended to support communities directly, rather than to make profits. This may or may not affect fares directly, but it does affect distribution and reliability of services. At present, for example, the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive (NEXUS), which is a public body made up of members from the North of Tyne and North East Combined Authorities, own the Metro and Shields Ferry, subsidise rail and bus services and try to co-ordinate private services that are run for profit. In our study, we asked participants who should own the regional transport network and its vehicles and assets? a) North East Combined Authority; b) UK Government; c) a not for profit non-government body, such as a charity; d) a private corporation.

Increasing the proportion of journeys involving active travel, including walking and cycling, is associated with higher levels of health and wellbeing, reduced congestion

and traffic jams and reduced carbon emissions that contribute to climate change. In 2021, 49% of Tyneside residents walked 5 days a week and 5% of residents cycled at least once a week. These active journeys prevented 1,722 serious long-term health conditions by people being healthier, created £436.5 million in economic benefit for individuals and the region and, by taking 150,000 cars off the road, prevented 25,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. 57% of people aged 16-25 and 38% of people aged 66+ thought that it was safe to cycle.²² We asked preference to identify their preference with regard to the extent the North East Combined Authority should invest to make cycling a safer, more viable in order to achieve the following impact on journeys: 0% of journeys by bike; 5% of journeys by bike; 10% of journeys by bike; 15% of journeys by bike; 20% of journeys by bike.

With regard to the effects of transport poverty, we examined fares within a North East transport network. For 2024, the Government funded a cap of £2 on all adult single bus tickets.²³ There is also a North East Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which limits costs of day tickets for unlimited bus travel in County Durham to £4, in Northumberland to £5, unlimited bus, Metro and Ferry travel in Tyne and Wear to £6 and unlimited bus, Metro and Ferry travel across all of the North East (Tyne and Wear, Durham and Northumberland) to £6.80.²⁴ We asked participants their preferences for the maximum price of a single fare: £1 per journey; £1.50 per journey; £2 per journey; £2.50 per journey; £3.00 per journey

Beyond NECA, there is also reason to consider the long-distance one-way off-peak fare from Newcastle to London, since that journey is necessary for many people in the region due to the concentration of resources, opportunities and facilities in the capital. At present, a range of ticket prices exist, including those for peak travel times (e.g. between 06:45-07:59 and 15:59-17:45 on Monday-Thursday travelling to Newcastle and on any train that arrives in London before 10:08 on Monday-Thursday),²⁵ off-peak times (any time other than peak), bought on the day, bought in advance, those purchased for a specific service that is non-transferable and those that are flexible and can be used on more than one service. LNER is simplifying its number of tickets, but will retain peak and off-peak to manage the number of people who use peak time to avoid services being overwhelmed. The average cost of a one 2nd class way ticket on 23 January 2024 was £79 with cheaper, off-peak advance tickets available for £43.²⁶ We asked participants for their preference for the average cost (including both higher peak and lower off-peak) of a single journey: £25; £50; £75; £100; £125.



There is need to consider commuting times, given that this is essential to enabling fulfilment of employment contracts. Commuting times in the North East have increased significantly over the past two decades. Between 2007 and 2017, average commute times increased from 45 minutes to 52 minutes, 7 minutes in total.²⁷ This is equivalent to 24 days per year in total, with the extra 6 minutes adding a full day to that total between 2007 and 2017.²⁸ This has been blamed on lack of investment in public transport.²⁹ We asked participants to express their preferences for impact on average commuting time from investment: -26 minutes; -13 minutes; no change; +13 minutes; +26 minutes

Reliability is similarly important given that predictability is a cornerstone of effective economic and other activity. We asked participants to think about their experience of public transport now, and consider what proportion of services they would prefer to be made reliable by investment: 60%; 70%; 80%; 90%; 100%

Critically, we need to consider the trade-off required to pay for transport improvements through funding options: At present, funding for transport comes from local and national taxes. We asked participants to express a preference on which tax they would like to be used to cover the cost of investment in a North East transport network: A new carbon taxes on corporations; Corporation tax increase; A new annual wealth tax on individuals; Income tax on work increase; Council tax increase; private investment

As with concern for active travel, there is need to examine reliance on cars. Between 2014-2019, the total number of cars on North East roads increased from roughly 1,071,600 to 1,139,000. Participants were asked what effect on the number of cars on the road they would prefer as a result of increased public transport through investment in the network: -50%; -25%; 0%; +25%; +50%.

Congestion imposes costs on individuals and businesses. According to INRIX, a company analysing traffic, 'Direct costs relate to the value of fuel and time wasted, while indirect costs relate to freighting and business fees from company vehicles idling in traffic that are passed on to the household bills through higher prices'.³⁰ In Newcastle in 2017 (the most recent figures), the amount of hours each driver spent in congestion were 24 and 7% of all journeys involved congestion, costing each driver £991 and the city £139m. Participants were asked to express a preference on the impact on the total amount of congestion from investment in public and active transport: -50%; -25%; 0%; +25%; +50%.

We wanted participants to express a position on impact on transport poverty directly. Transport is the single largest household expense (excluding mortgage repayments) for rural families, and the second largest for urban ones. Poorer regions of the country, which tend to be less well served by public transport, are the worst affected by transport poverty. 12.5% of people in the North East likely suffer from transport poverty, compared to only 3.5% of people in London.³¹ Given that 25% of people in the North East were in poverty in 2022,³² which is measured as anyone living in households earning below 60% of the UK median (a measure of the average) salary, transport poverty can have a critical impact on those who need to commute in particular.³³ Every 10% increase in the speed of public transport relative to driving saves the average household over £434 per year, meaning that investment has an impact on poverty by reducing unavoidable costs. We asked participants to express a preference on the impact on

transport poverty in North East: -100%; -50%; 0% (no change); +50%; +100%.

'Almost 30% of preventable deaths in England are due to non-communicable diseases specifically attributed to air pollution',³⁴ with 630 people's deaths linked to air pollution in the North East in 2017.³⁵ We asked participants to express a preference on the percentage of these deaths that they would prefer to see affected by investment in public transport: reduced by 50%; reduced by 25%; unchanged 0%; increased by 25%; increased by 50%.

Methods

Participants were 577 (27 incomplete responses were removed) NECA residents resident adults recruited through online survey platform Prolific. They completed the study remotely. Prolific and related services provide convenience samples, in the sense that participation is limited to those who have decided to sign up and respond to the study call, but their demographic diversity is fairly broad. Research using Prolific has been validated by comparison with other sampling methods for a number of known findings in psychological and political science.³⁶ The Prolific pool over-represents younger and more educated people compared to the UK adult population.³⁷ Relative to the UK population, our sample contained an over-representation of people who intend to vote for the Labour party at the 2024 general election.

Participants were presented with pairs of transport reforms with an instruction to choose the one they preferred. Pairs were generated from all the possible combinations of the different levels of the 11 attributes described above. Instructions explained that participants might prefer some features in one policy and some in the other, but they needed to consider which policy they preferred overall. The attributes on which the policies varied were explained in greater depth prior to the first choice task, and then described just with brief phrases during the choice tasks themselves.

We used the patterns of participant choice to compute two quantities. The first was the utility for the average participant of each value of attribute. This is the marginal impact of the attribute being at that level on the choice of the policy. It can be interpreted as the value of that attribute level to the average participant. Thus, for example, if the utility of the single journey fare being £3 is negative, this means that a policy including a single journey fare of £3 makes that policy less likely to be chosen. The other quantity was the attribute importance. This is a way of comparing between attributes (rather than between the different levels of the same attribute). It can be interpreted as the relative importance of each attribute in determining the overall preference for the policy.

Participants were presented with a description of a series of areas of transport reform along with the impacts such reforms evidence indicates will follow from their implementation (see appendix 1). Participants were asked to rate their opposition or support to those policies on a scale of 0-100. They were then shown a randomised and asked to rate its persuasiveness on a scale of 0-100 and then to rate their opposition or support for the policy again on a scale of 0-100. Adversarial narrative co-production means, essentially, working with people who strongly oppose a specific policy to develop arguments to persuade those like them of the merits of the policy. We have suggested that this can address policy impasses by creating pathways to implementation.³⁸

We then presented five narratives designed to elicit features of the policies to persuade voters like them of its merits that were co-produced with those in NECA constituencies who expressed strong opposition (≤ 30 levels of support for transport reform) to the policy. Participants produced written narratives (minimum 150 words) that we standardised for language, style and length (150 words + 10 per cent max). We co-produced five narratives around the most cohesive ideas expressed, using the text provided by participants to organise prose around five specific justificatory elements: 1) absolute gains – the impact of reform on policy that affects all members of society; 2) relative gains – the impact of reform on improving the interests of low-middle income voters at the expense of wealth voters; 3) security – the impact of reform on securing society; 4) economic benefit; 5) environmental benefit.



Narrative 1: Absolute Gains: Our current transport system is broken and increasingly unaffordable to people in the North East. Since deregulation, the number of services has reduced as operators chase profitable routes and there has been a gradual loss of coordination, with buses and trains out of sync, leaving commuters stuck waiting for connections across the region. By bringing the transport infrastructure back into public ownership, this will allow the return of transport coordination, subsidised services that are currently unprofitable and capping of fares, so that we can all travel. Publicly controlled and owned transport networks give us all the ability to get to where we need to get to efficiently and affordably. By making our regional public transport affordable, especially to get to work, more people will use it as it will be cheaper than paying for petrol, helping families that are currently struggling with tax, insurance and car costs. This will help us to access public services and work in ways that we can't at present.



Narrative 2: Relative Gains: The transport system in the North East is in a mess and requires a radical overhaul. The price of travel in our region has now reached such high levels that people on even middle incomes find it difficult to afford to get about. Nationalisation of transport will allow those of us in the North East to receive the same levels of service that are currently reserved for London. We need to remember that London has a nationalised service and we in the North East have been left behind by privatisation in our region. By building publicly owned transport networks funded by taxing wealthy companies and individuals who have benefited most from public investment, we will be able to ensure that those of us who need to get to work can get to work affordably. There is a great potential for this to cause great investment on the infrastructure of left behind regions like ours.



Narrative 3: Security: Private transport companies have failed miserably across the North East. We need transport that is dependable, running on time and not being cancelled without good reason. By having fully integrated and high-quality infrastructure, we will benefit from quick, convenient and predictable transport with fewer breakdowns, cancellations and services without any seating, particularly at peak times when we can afford disruption the least. It will also mean that prices overall are reduced and made consistent across the network, removing the scramble for cheaper tickets bought weeks in advance, but which are often subject to disruption on the day of

travel. Nationalising transport will massively reduce strikes, cancellations and staff shortages in our region because staff currently taking action would be working under better conditions and pay. This will secure the entire transport network and ensure that those of us who need to get to places on time and without stress are able to do so without the threat of disruption.



Narrative 4: Economic benefit: Nationalisation our North East jobs with decent pay in our region. We need to invest in left behind communities and rural areas throughout the North East to enable economic activity where lack of infrastructure currently prevents it. There will be vast improvements in many areas of customer experience, but the policies will also bring money back into the North East economy through increased use of public transport. A fully-integrated, publicly owned and controlled transport system with new routes, stations and increased capacity would join up all the dots to make Britain much more efficient in industry and commerce with commuters being able to put their trust in a cost-effective network to get them to work on time. Having an integrated transport infrastructure will help ensure that people have to wait around less for connecting transportation links, ensuring shorter journeys which is particularly important during busy commuting periods.



Narrative 5: Environmental benefit: These policies will have an important impact on the environmental and health in the North East. By providing more cycling paths the policies will have a positive impact on the environment, which will reduce avoidable deaths from air pollution. By making alternatives to car travel viable in our region, including by providing financial support to buy travel passes and bicycles, there will be clear incentives for people to walk and cycle to work. Cycling and walking are incredibly healthy activities and making them more accessible would help improve the fitness of the younger generation. These activities will increase the emotional health and wellbeing of the population who struggle currently, reducing the number of people who rely on anti-depressants. These policies will therefore provide savings to the NHS as the health of the region improves. We need to make these investments now as the cost of the current system, first on the environment, then on health, will increase over time, costing society more in the long-term.

Participants were then asked to provide basic demographic data, socioeconomic data, including income, self-rated risk of destitution on 100 point scale, financial management, satisfaction with income, MacArthur ladder of subjective socioeconomic status,³⁹ health status, including Depression PHQ-8,⁴⁰ Anxiety GAD7,⁴¹ political affiliation, voting intention and faith in politicians established by six items in prior project iterations.⁴² Participants received £3.00 in remuneration. The protocol is openly available.⁴³

For the main analysis, we computed Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs)⁴⁴ from linear probability models. The AMCE for a given level of an attribute can be interpreted as the marginal effect on the probability of choice of the attribute being at that level compared to the reference level, averaging across the possible levels of all other attributes. All analyses were carried out using the cregg R package.⁴⁵

Results

Figure 1 shows the average utilities for the different levels of the different attributes. As might be expected, cheaper, quicker, more reliable journeys were always preferred to slower, more expensive or less reliable journeys. This was true of journeys to London as well as those within the North East. There was a preference to reduce congestion and a strong preference to reduce congestion and pollution-related deaths. There was a mild preference for decreasing car use, but preferences over the proportion of journeys by bike, though linear, were not strong. As for ownership, there was a strongly negative utility for private ownership compared to all other options (not-for-profit, UK government, NECA). For funding, increases in council tax and income tax had negative utilities, as might be expected, but there was strong support for taxation on wealth on high net worth individuals and on carbon production and profit making by corporations.

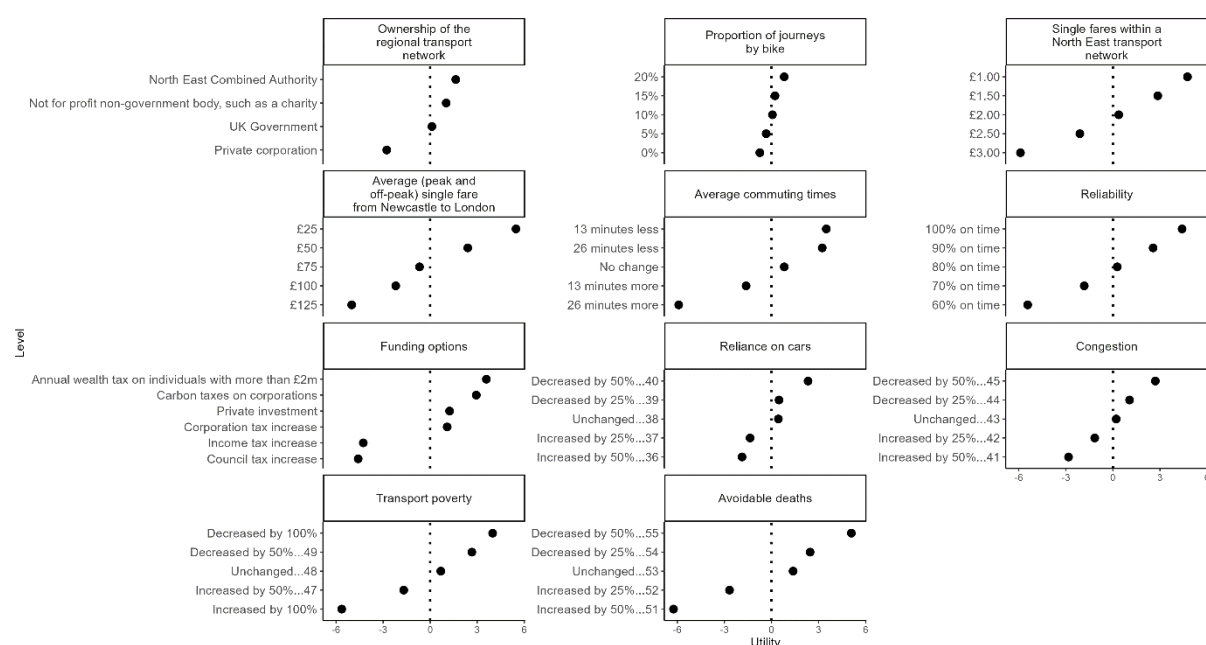


Figure 1. Average utilities for each level of the eleven attributes varied.

Results continued

Figure 2 shows the attribute importances. The most important attributes were deaths from air pollution, and funding (as this included possible tax rises). These were closely followed by fares, both within the North East and to London. The least important attribute was the proportion of journeys by bike.

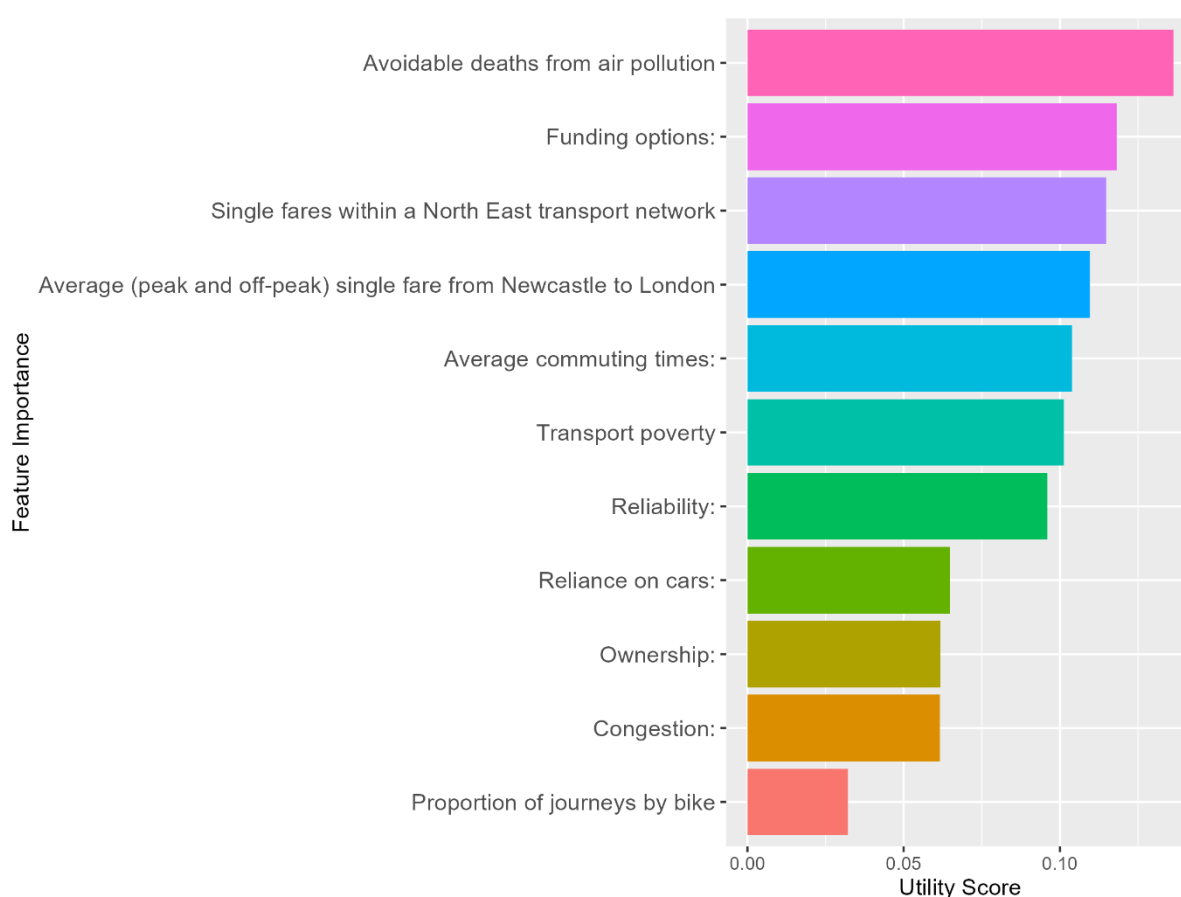


Figure 2. Relative attribute importance for the eleven attributes.

In terms of the narratives, narrative 1, absolute gains, was evaluated at 76.97%, narrative 2, relative gains, was evaluated at 77.96%, narrative 3, security, 76.65%, narrative 4, economic benefit, 77.52%, narrative 5, environmental benefit, 67.03. Overall support for a substantive programme of transport reform after presentation of narrative was 79.10%.

All data are available on Open Science Framework.⁴⁶

What this means for policy

Many of the findings here are common sense. People want a public transport system that is affordable and reliable. What is remarkable is the extent to which NECA residents view public ownership of the transport system as being central to this. There appears to be firm belief that private ownership of public transport has failed and does not deliver the service required. This represents a significant shift in terms of tying ownership to control and control to service quality and affordability. There are real reasons for NECA to consider the role of ownership.

The means of funding such schemes are tied to concern for impacts on poverty and spending power insofar as there are real reasons to believe that council tax and income tax increases are perceived as squeezing resources among those who are already under significant financial strain as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and longer-term effects of the Global Financial Crisis and austerity measures. The measures that are regarded as plausible need to be understood in light of other preferences. Private investment needs to be considered against the context of strong preference for public or third sector ownership. Wealth taxes and carbon taxes are the two most popular means of funding. Wealth tax is an increasingly popular reform insofar as there is increased public awareness of wealth as being highly unequally distributed and tax on wealth as likely affecting a small proportion of the population who are financially secure.⁴⁷

Carbon tax on carbon intensive corporations may be tied to strong preference to avoid deaths from pollution. Carbon production is increasingly viewed as being in contrast to the interests of people in light of the climate crisis. Both of these taxes are clearly national in nature and increased concern about the need for increased Westminster funding for local and regional authorities indicates possible pathways to renewed devolved settlements. It may be that reformed, progressive proportional property taxes, such as those in Northern Ireland, can replace existing Council Tax to achieve similar impacts to wealth taxes but within the authority area.

It is particularly important to recognise the priority that residents place on the effects of pollution to dealing with various environmental responsibilities. People strongly reject systems that lead to deaths from pollution and strongly favour reducing such impacts. While they regard active travel – e.g. proportion of journeys by bike – as being the lowest priority, there is clear need for policymakers to link the need for active travel to reduction in pollution as means of promoting walking and cycling. This is important in the context of meeting environmental targets.

Indeed, the fact that only the environmental benefit differed significantly in score to the other four narratives indicates that residents do not link avoidable deaths to environmental impacts of car usage. Citizens may still regard the environment as an abstract external good, rather than being the context within which humans live and within which human health is determined. It is essential that NECA emphasises that, if we wish to reduce avoidable deaths, we have to improve the environment. This offers considerable practical benefit to reframing environmental policy and making it salient to a range of public policy areas: put simply, the environment directly affects the outcomes that people do care about most keenly.

Findings in this study are consistent with international studies such as in Portugal⁴⁸ and Malaysia⁴⁹ in demonstrating the desire for a cheap, reliable, integrated and safe, public transport system. This is particularly prevalent in lower-socioeconomic groups as they are most likely to use public transport and such user groups who have lived experience of real-life transport issues are central to this research. It is crucial that the voice of those who experience such everyday scenarios, especially vulnerable groups, are empowered to be heard.⁵⁰ Public transport policy in a number of countries is tacitly built upon a three-way relationship with government, operators and community, but far less attention is paid to the public.⁵¹ Therefore, policy needs to reflect the desires of the public and enact them in a way that builds confidence in the system but also in the government to deliver such projects. Episodes, such as the HS2 rail project in the UK, have undermined public confidence in the Government's ability to implement integrated solutions. Despite this, there is still evidence in this study of a desire for greater governmental control leading to a nationalised integrated network system.

The effectiveness of politicians, especially local politicians, in terms of performance within transport services often directly translates to the public's views of other aspects of political performance.⁵² This indicator should at least encourage some political expediency. There are successful precedents of state-run transport in the UK in recent times, with the East Coast Mainline in the UK on the rail network being operated by the government owned LNER franchise but run at arm's length. The franchise, although nationalised, has proved popular with customers, with 89% rating their journeys as good or satisfied.⁵³ However, fares have not necessarily been reduced as a consequence of public ownership.

It is clear that the public have grown weary of the issues with public transport resulting in diminishing user numbers.⁵⁴ In a high income country such as the UK, reliable, integrated, cheap and safe travel should not be an aspiration, but a fundamental right.

Affordable fares are also key to a successful transport system policy. The £2 (£3 from 1st January 2025) single journey fare cap in England appears to be popular.⁵⁵ It opens up a greater radius for those in low socioeconomic groups to travel for work or social activity which can bring multiple benefits. The fare is clear and transparent, so no surprises on the bus, and it is cheap and more than competes with a cost-benefit analysis of owning and running a car. Improving bus service quality can effectively reduce car ownership and use.⁵⁶ A study in Sweden using data from 1986 to 2015 concluded that there was a direct correlation between service levels in public transport and car ownership.⁵⁷ Therefore, in an age of global warming the benefit of quality public transport will aid states to meet environmental targets.

The evidence in this study indicates a public consensus that private operating companies are failing and that a publicly owned network would be preferable. This is not unique to the UK, a study in the Australian state of Victoria demonstrated that the privatisation of Melbourne's public transport system (trams and trains) had been an expensive failure.⁵⁸ That same study concluded that a public transport agency would be a preferable solution, and it could deliver upgrading as well as integrating the network of trains, trams and buses to a world class standard.⁵⁹ In the context of case studies in Australia, South Africa and the Netherlands, Veeneman and Mulley suggest that the key to public transport service solutions is the spread of agency across the layers of

government. Therefore, giving resource and decision power to local government for local infrastructure while linking such up with regional and national government who have a focus on national transport issues.⁶⁰

The benefits for meeting the needs of the public are multifactorial. They include economic benefits, social mobility, financial security and environmental requirements. This study has demonstrated the appetite for an integrated, affordable, safe and reliable public transport system which is publicly owned.



Conclusion

This report supports common sense understandings of transport policy reform. People in the North East recognise that the current transport system is wholly unfit for purpose. At a time in which the shift to clean energy and transport has never been more necessary and more affordable, it is important to emphasise that there is strong public support for bold transport reform. This is a time of unique opportunity for NECA and its leaders: act now to deliver the publicly owned, controlled and transformative transport system and lay down a legacy of infrastructural and entrepreneurial renewal or continue with the same failed system and allow the region to continue to decline. Devolution gives regions control and resource by which to engage in pioneering policymaking. This report demonstrates that there is widespread public support for policymakers to act in their and the region's interests by taking control over a dysfunctional collection of disparate actors and deliver the change people need. There is great need to act now on transport.

Ethics

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences ethics committee, Northumbria University (5814). This committee contains members who are internal to the Faculty. This study was reviewed by members of the committee, who must provide impartial advice and avoid significant conflicts of interests.

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