

Written Evidence submitted by Transport Focus (EVP0148)

1. Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent, statutory consumer watchdog promoting the interests of transport users. Working with transport providers and Governments across England, Scotland and Wales – and in close partnership with our colleagues at London TravelWatch – we ensure that the user voice is heard.

Our remit from the Department for Transport includes representing the interests of all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network, SRN) and we have taken a particular interest in how the increasing use of electric cars will impact on longer-distance journeys made on the SRN.

2. Transport Focus research

Transport Focus has carried out two pieces of research relevant to your inquiry, and both informed a [webinar](#) we led last month on 'Going electric: the drivers' view':

In February 2021, we explored with over 1,300 road users their awareness of the phasing out of new petrol and diesel cars, and their expectations of their next car purchase in the light of that (summary report [here](#)).

In March 2021 we carried out in-depth discussions with 26 electric car users, a broad cross-section of different types of user, about their experience with public chargepoints, prompted by the consultation exercise carried out by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles. We will provide a copy of this report once published later next month.

In this submission we provide evidence in response to the Committee's areas of interest where our research provides relevant insight.

3. Committee's area of interest: "The feasibility, opportunities, and challenges presented by the acceleration of the ban of the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles to 2030"

The great majority (92%) of respondents in our February research were aware of the intention to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, even if they did

not know the detail; 70% knew of the 2030 deadline now set. 27% said they are likely to buy or lease an electric vehicle (EV) within the next five years, with this likelihood being higher among younger people, males, and those without disabilities.

In our more detailed probing of existing EV users in March, we found widespread enthusiasm for their vehicles and enjoyment of the EV driving experience. However, both our research exercises highlighted challenges in key aspects of the user experience which will need to be overcome. Concern about *up-front cost* was uppermost: of those saying they are unlikely to commit to an EV, the cost of buying or leasing emerged as the main obstacle, cited by 46%. Only 9% cited high running costs of EVs as a concern.

We wish to highlight in this submission three other important challenges, centred on the experience at public chargepoints, which particularly affect those planning and making longer-distance journeys.

Confidence about charging, and range anxiety:

44% of those currently unlikely to purchase an EV within five years were concerned about where to charge the EV and how far they could drive before needing to recharge. It is reasonable to assume that these concerns were shared by the 16% of respondents who were neither likely nor unlikely to commit, and the concerns will probably have been taken account of too by those likely to go electric.

Most of the existing users whom we engaged with in March charged their vehicles most of the time at home. When needing to top up the charge on the road, they had to make extra effort that would not arise for drivers of conventional vehicles, but there was a general feeling that the spread and quality of charging networks is improving. Users reported that coverage of chargepoints was less of an issue for them than it is generally perceived to be by current non-users – but reliability of chargepoints was another matter (see next section).

The need to charge en route or at the destination makes planning and management of longer-distance trips in an EV particularly important. Users felt this was generally straightforward, but reported problems arising from the complexity of multiple chargepoint operators – often requiring the use of multiple apps to get a full picture of where chargepoints are – and the reported inaccuracy of some information those apps present (see next section).

The users we spoke to have learnt to plan around the expectation of charger unreliability, and told us that putting in place a 'back-up plan' often becomes the norm.

The user experience at chargepoints will be an important factor in broader public perceptions of the ease of switching to EVs, in particular giving confidence that an EV is for longer trips too, not just for travelling around your own town. Addressing the perception, whether accurate or otherwise, that chargepoints are unreliable is crucial.

Personal safety at chargepoints:

Users contrasted the experience at public chargepoints with using a petrol station, with the former often found in more isolated locations or tucked away in remote corners of sites; this generated some anxiety about personal safety, for female respondents in particular. Good lighting was an important component of feeling safe, but it was felt that user safety was driven more by having easy, inconspicuous ways to pay, and through having other activities on site such as a staffed café. Users were attracted to the idea of 'hub' facilities replicating the busier environment of a conventional filling station.

Accessibility for disabled customers:

There was awareness of the particular requirements of disabled users of chargepoints, and a desire to see accessibility as a key component of chargepoint design from the outset, rather than a subsequent modification. It was noted that drivers suffering from anxiety would have heightened concern about range and chargepoint availability. But we found also recognition of the benefits of EVs for disabled drivers, given the ability to avoid fuel stations (as charging the EV at home would be the norm), and the greater simplicity and ease of driving an EV.

4. Committee's area of interest: "The actions required by Government and private operators to encourage greater uptake of electric vehicles and the infrastructure required to support them"

The Government has already recognised the need to take action to tackle concerns about public chargepoints, and we responded earlier this month to the consultation on proposals made by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles, under the following three headings:

Ensuring a reliable charging network

We highlighted the need reported by existing users for the highest possible level of reliability across the public charging network. They understood that

the standard might fall just below 100% because operational problems would occasionally arise, but any chargepoint failures should be repaired immediately; and the 99.0% overall availability target, as proposed by Government, should clearly be seen as the *minimum* acceptable level.

Payment methods

It was clear that EV users valued simplicity, and reliability, of the charging interface. One of the biggest challenges they faced when out on the road was having to deal with a multitude of different payment methods. We found strong appetite for methods that could be used at all chargepoints, whether simply contactless credit / debit card, or, through a roaming solution, an EV-specific universal payment card, or a universal app.

Users reported a wish to be able to access live support during the charging process, in particular to deal with issues that might arise – e.g. the unfairness of a connection fee if the charging fails and the user has to reconnect. They expected to see call centre services being available significantly beyond standard office hours.

Opening up data on chargepoints

The greatest need here was for live data on the current working status of the chargepoint, to enable users to seek out, or avoid, a particular chargepoint in real time. In addition, data on chargepoint location should be easily understood, including detail of any access limitations (e.g. if only accessible to traffic in one direction, or open only to employees at a privately-managed site). It would also help to know what other facilities might be available on-site. At the chargepoint itself, users wanted to see a clear metering display, showing how much charge is being supplied, the cost, and the time remaining to full charge.

Understanding consumer experience

The users we worked with were cautiously optimistic about how the network issues would be addressed in the run-up to 2030 – but had an unprompted sense that Government had to do more to bring the infrastructure for EVs up to speed. Care will be needed in the intervening years, as user numbers rise sharply, to meet expectations about the charging infrastructure to avoid user frustration when things don't work seamlessly.

Reliable charging on or adjacent to Highways England's roads will be key to generating confidence in making long-distance EV journeys – likely to be a key factor in take up. Transport Focus therefore recommends measuring satisfaction with public charging facilities on or adjacent to the SRN on an ongoing basis. This will allow benchmarking between suppliers and, in our

experience, will drive increased focus on quality. Transport Focus is in discussion with stakeholders about how this could be funded.

30 April 2021