

# CONGESTION CHARGING "DEAD IN THE WATER"?

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The RAC offers UK Breakdown cover (<http://www.rac.co.uk/web/breakdowncover/>), European Breakdown Cover (<http://www.rac.co.uk/web/euro-breakdown/>) and Car Insurance (<http://www.rac.co.uk/web/car-insurance/>) but also aim to supply news and information to the UK motorist. The congestion charge has been looked into to determine whether the end is near.

It seems like only yesterday that motorists across the country were bracing themselves for a future of road tolls and congestion charging. Last year, with green issues at the top of the political agenda and the beleaguered motorist taking the full brunt of the eco-assault, there was a certain inevitability about it all.

But how different the picture looks now... a popular vote has blocked Manchester's proposed scheme and London Mayor Boris Johnson has scrapped the western extension in the capital. Could 2009 be the year that congestion charging sinks "dead in the water"?

But if so, would we lose a vital opportunity to invest billions into our ailing and creaking public transport network? Is charging the only way to keep congested city roads flowing freely and fume-free? Or perhaps British motorists should rejoice, with victory in sight over yet another "tax" on already hard-pressed drivers?

Last month more than one million people voted on whether Greater Manchester should adopt congestion charging - and the answer was a resounding "no".

The public referendum was split with 79 per cent against charging and just 21 per cent in favour. So strong was the opposition that a reeling Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council, lamented the scheme was "dead in the water". And the Green Party's Transport Spokesman, Alan Francis, could not hide his disappointment that the opportunity had been missed "to bring Manchester's transport system into the 21st century, as well going some way to reducing the city's carbon emissions." Mr Francis blamed local councillors for not having a plan B, if the "No" vote prevailed. He said: "They urgently need to devise a strategy for reducing car use and getting more people travelling by train, tram, bus, bike and walking. That will require huge investment in improving those alternatives to car use.

"Meanwhile, Manchester residents will have to put up with traffic congestion and inadequate public transport and the climate change will continue to get worse"

But the people of Manchester's hostility towards congestion charging also sent a clear message to other UK cities considering adopting their own schemes, such as Leeds, Bristol and Cambridge.

In fact, the RAC's motoring strategist, Adrian Tink, predicted: "This is likely to be the death knell for those schemes, certainly in the short to medium term."

However, despite failing to secure even a quarter of the overall vote - 218,860 people still said "Yes" to congestion charging. The "Yes" campaign team said a chance had been missed to invest billions into the local transport network.

Local councils wanted to charge Manchester's drivers up to £5 a day to use the roads and help pay for £2.7 billion of investment in local, trains, trams and buses, promising a revolution in public transport. The ground-breaking scheme would have been the largest of its kind outside London and would have incorporated an Oyster-style card network, enabling public transport users to swipe in and out of a fully integrated network of trams and buses. Crucially, congestion charging in the city would not have even begun until 80 per cent of the ambitious transport "revolution" had been completed.

And the future of congestion charging in the capital took another body blow in November when London's newly-elected Mayor Boris Johnson announced he would scrap the western extension - covering Kensington and Chelsea. Johnson's move came after public consultation revealed nearly 70 per cent of respondents did not want congestion charging, and 86 per cent of businesses also said "no".

So does this mean the Sloane Rangers of west London are destined to choke on the fumes of their Chelsea tractors and Porsches? Well not according to Transport for London (TfL) which has estimated traffic returning to the western extension would result in "a small increase in emissions of air pollutants and carbon dioxide, but that this increase would be unlikely to have any material effect on measured air quality or on the boundary route because of the number of different factors that affect local air quality."

So are they now saying the congestion charge doesn't even improve our air quality - the very lynch pin of the green argument?

Well in truth it's not that simple - measuring air quality is complicated with many factors (including the prevailing weather conditions) affecting the readings. Back in 2005, TfL's 'Third Annual Monitoring Report' into the congestion charge found CO2 levels down 20 per cent and fine particle matter (PM10) down 12 per cent.

But more recently boffins from King's College London have found otherwise. They say car numbers might have fallen by a fifth since congestion charging was introduced in the capital in 2003 but there has been little change in pollutants such as smog, diesel soot and carbon monoxide and that nitrogen oxides levels even increased slightly. Professor Kelly, who led the research published last May, explained how his team made air quality measurements over two years before and after the charge and said the rise could be due to the increased numbers of buses in the centre of London, up 25 per cent (that's about 200 extra buses).

One thing that can't be denied is the need to clean up our air. London's Air Quality Strategy cites that: "1,600 deaths are brought forward and 1,500 breathing problem-related hospital admissions per year can occur in London as a result of air pollution."

But if it's not clear if congestion charging has even improved air quality, then surely the traffic jams have eased? Before the scheme was launched Transport for London predicted that congestion would be reduced by 10 to 15 per cent and that vehicle delays would drop by 20 to 30 per cent. However, five years after congestion charging was introduced and official figures showed that the jams were as bad as ever.

The number of cars entering the charging zones may have dipped but widespread roadworks and traffic management schemes have reduced the capital's capacity and, perversely, this has resulted in congestion returning to levels experienced before the charge was brought in.

So the case for congestion charging doesn't look bright - it hasn't convincingly reduced air pollution and hasn't reduced jams. But there's no two ways about it - we do need to reduce congestion.

Anybody who has tried driving through central London, or even sat in the back of a black cab with the meter ticking away despite its gridlocked wheels unable to budge, will know the misery of congestion. So what's the answer?

Well one alternative that's received the backing of the charity Campaign for Better Transport is car-pooling. There are hundreds of websites that can put you in touch with other drivers and help reduce the number of unnecessary miles; a quick Internet search will return plenty of national and local schemes.

And who is left fighting the cause for congestion charging? Well the Green Party for starters who: "adhere strictly to the 'polluter pays principle', requiring transport users to pay for the costs that we all have to live with."

But it remains to be seen if congestion charging can ever recover from its worldwide annus horribilis, only in March the American state of Assembly vetoed New York Mayor Bloomberg's proposed scheme - an act he described as "shameful".

Nobody can argue that UK roads, particularly those in urban areas, are miserably over-crowded and that we could all benefit from cleaner air. But whether congestion charging is the solution looks more doubtful. Motorists suspicion of a "stealth tax", a lack of popular support and unconvincing results in London - the UK champion of charging - have all stalled the cause... but for how long?

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