



IN REVERSE

A review of the
Scottish Government's
performance on its sustainable
transport commitments

September 2024



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PERFORMANCE AT A GLANCE

KEY:



GOOD PROGRESS
and/or target likely to be reached



SLOW PROGRESS
and/or risk of missing target



OFF TRACK
and/or target has been missed



Active travel budget increase



Bus fleet decarbonisation



Under 22s free bus travel



Bus Priority infrastructure investment



Bus priority on Glasgow motorways



Rail services decarbonisation



Low emission ferries



Fair Fares Review



Car traffic reduction



ICE vehicle phase out

INTRODUCTION

This report reviews the Scottish Government's progress on ten of its key sustainable transport commitments – from investment in walking and cycling, to better bus services, to cutting traffic.

This is the third in a series of annual reports prepared by Transform Scotland; after 2022's 'Stuck In Traffic', and 2023's 'Off Track', we conclude in 2024 that the Scottish Government is firmly 'In Reverse'.

Why the Government's promises matter

Sustainable transport is more than a matter of climate necessity. Sustainable transport is crucial for social justice, offering benefits that extend across various dimensions of our society. From tackling poverty to improving public health, active travel and public transport play a vital role in improving people's everyday lives.

POVERTY

The Scottish Government's commitments to increasing the active travel budget and ensuring fair fares will benefit low-income households by making getting around more affordable. Reducing reliance on costly car travel and lowering public transport fares frees up financial resources that families can redirect towards essential needs like food, education, and healthcare. So while it is encouraging to see continued investment this year in walking, wheeling, and cycling infrastructure, this falls far short of the £320 million promised. It is essential that finances are allocated to both improving the safety and accessibility of these modes and addressing the rise in public transport fares in order to effectively tackle **poverty**.

HEALTH

The **health** benefits of sustainable transport cannot be overstated. Promoting walking and cycling, decarbonising bus and rail fleets, and reducing car traffic all contribute to cleaner air and healthier lifestyles. This results in lower rates of respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and other chronic conditions, thereby addressing health inequalities across the population, all of which present significant costs to the NHS each year. However, progress against commitments to cut traffic, decarbonise the network, and invest in active travel is either slow or off track, undermining the ability of the transport network to improve public health and alleviate the pressure on our health services.

DISABILITIES

Improvements in transport infrastructure, like accessible pathways, crossings, and modernised trains with level boarding, significantly enhance mobility for people with disabilities. Simplifying payment systems, as recommended in the Fair Fares Review, would further improve accessibility, enabling independent travel and reducing the complexity and cost barriers faced by disabled individuals. Poor progress on commitments to improving public transport fleets and creating safe active travel environments will only exacerbate the difficulties faced by people with **disabilities**, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and isolation.

GENDER

Sustainable transport also plays a crucial role in promoting **gender** equity. Women, who are statistically more likely to rely on public transport, benefit from investments in safe and reliable travel options. Initiatives such as bus priority investments and electrified trains not only enhance safety and convenience but also ensure that women have access to dependable and clean transport services. Importantly, safer and better transport for women translates to safer and better transport for everyone. By prioritising the needs of women, we create a transport network that works for all Scots, regardless of age, gender, location, or ability. However, none of the Government's commitments to improving public transport services, particularly buses which are disproportionately relied upon by women and low-income households, are on track, hindering progress towards a fairer transport network.

CHILDREN & OLDER PEOPLE

Children and older people particularly benefit from safer, cleaner, and more reliable travel options. Active travel infrastructure provides safe routes for children and the elderly, while cleaner air from reduced emissions means healthier living environments for these vulnerable groups. The Free Bus Travel Scheme for under-22s, launched on time in January 2022, has seen over 137 million journeys, significantly impacting young people and their families. Investments in transport must ensure that both rural and urban residents have access to safe, affordable, and sustainable travel options. Enhancing active travel routes, providing free bus travel for young people, and introducing low-emission ferries help bridge the gap between isolated rural communities and urban centres, ensuring equal access to services and opportunities.

Committing to sustainable transport is a commitment to a **fairer, healthier, and more inclusive** Scotland. By missing these targets the Scottish Government is not only failing to address the urgent need for climate action but failing to deliver a sustainable transport system which supports a thriving and inclusive society.

We encourage the Government to deliver on its commitments to build a fairer transport network that works for all Scots—regardless of age, gender, location, or ability—ensures that everyone has the ability to get around without a car, everyone has equal access to opportunities, and that everyone can contribute to tackling climate change.



ACTIVE TRAVEL BUDGET INCREASE

Commitment

"ensure that at least £320 million or 10% of the total transport budget goes on active travel by 2024-25"

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

The Scottish Government has completely missed this commitment, with a £100 million shortfall announced with the Scottish Budget in December 2023.

Comment

It has been long known that the Scottish Government has failed to meet this commitment, with £220m allocated to active travel in the 2023/24 [Scottish Budget](#) in December last year. However, since then, it has become apparent that the Government is further failing to make walking, wheeling and cycling the easiest and most affordable transport options for Scots, [only £137 million](#) being spent – less than half of the funds committed. By cutting funds for these travel options, the Government undermines public health, depriving communities of the infrastructure and accessibility needed to support healthier, more active lifestyles.

BUS FLEET DECARBONISATION

Commitment

"remove the majority of diesel buses from public transport by the end of 2023"

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

The Scottish Government has provided £160 million capital funding for 800 [zero emission buses and coaches](#) through the Scottish Ultra Low Emission Bus Scheme (SULEBS) and the Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund (ScotZEB). There is now an expectation that the market for zero-emission vehicles and infrastructure will be commercially self-sustaining without further financial support from the Government.

Comment

While it's encouraging to see the Scottish Government's efforts to [roll out](#) electric buses, it's concerning that [over 70%](#) of public buses still run on diesel, with the target being missed by a large margin. Moreover, in the most recent funding round (ScotZEB2) there is a noticeable lack of transparency about whether new electric buses will be manufactured in Scotland, where manufacturing capacity still exists, or will be lost to overseas competitors. Overall, there is an absence of guidance for the electric bus industry on how the market will become self-sustaining without further government support. This is troubling, especially when the [roadmap](#) from 2022, which laid out key milestones, has not delivered on its ambitions. This leaves the future of decarbonising Scotland's most common mode of public transport uncertain.





UNDER 22S FREE BUS TRAVEL

Commitment

“provide nationwide free bus travel for Scotland’s young people aged under 22 from 31st January 2022”

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

The [Free Bus Travel Scheme](#) was delivered on time and has been running since January 2022, providing all young Scots aged 5 to 21 with a card granting them free bus travel throughout Scotland. As of April 2024, the scheme has seen Scotland’s under 22s make over [137 million journeys](#) taken by bus.

Comment

Despite [initial issues](#) with a complex application process, this initiative has [positively impacted](#) young people and their families by removing cost barriers to travel, reducing financial strain, and increasing access to educational, social, and employment opportunities. It is noted that a disparity exists in that the entitlement card does not include free ferry travel, which is essential for under-22s in island communities where ferries can serve as their equivalent of a bus service. It is promising that this issue is now being [reviewed](#) by the Scottish Government.

BUS PRIORITY INVESTMENT



Commitment

“invest over £500 million in improved bus priority infrastructure to tackle the impacts of congestion on bus services and raise bus usage”

– Programme for Government 2019-20

Progress

Just under [£27 million](#) of the Bus Partnership Fund (the Scottish Government’s designated fund for delivering bus priority measures) was spent in its first 3 years of operation, with funding facilitating the installation of bus gates, enforcement cameras, and traffic light equipment in Aberdeen, North Ayrshire, Glasgow, Inverness, and Edinburgh. However, the Fund was [paused](#) in January 2024, with no details given on when funding will be available again.

Comment

With [only 12.16 km](#) of bus lanes delivered, the suspension of the £500 million bus priority funding by the Scottish Government is detrimental to the future of Scotland’s buses and directly undermines efforts to improve bus reliability and speed, which are critical barriers to bus use. Given that buses are disproportionately used by older people and lower-income households, cutting support is set to hit the most vulnerable transport users hardest during the cost-of-living crisis. The Bus Partnership Fund must therefore be reinstated as soon as possible to avoid exacerbating inequalities in the transport system.



BUS PRIORITY ON GLASGOW MOTORWAYS

Commitment

"beginning plans to reallocate road space on parts of the motorway network around Glasgow to high-occupancy vehicles such as buses"

– Programme for Government 2019-20

Progress

No progress has been made on implementing bus priority on Glasgow motorways. [Delays](#) have been attributed to the need for a new business case for road space reallocation, as the 2021 case relied on pre-pandemic traffic patterns.

Comment

Transport Scotland have delivered a [5km section](#) of bus lane in the form of an actively managed hard shoulder for buses on the M8 near Edinburgh, showing that improvements for bus users is possible on the trunk road network.

With a decline in use post-pandemic, urgent support is needed to support bus services which provide essential transport for Scotland's most vulnerable users. It is therefore disappointing, five years on, there has been a complete failure from Transport Scotland to make progress on prioritising public transport movements on Glasgow's motorway network.

RAIL SERVICE DECARBONISATION



Commitment

"reduce emissions from Scotland's railways to zero by 2035"

– Programme for Government 2019-20

Progress

Whilst [76% of passenger journeys are electrified](#), progress on this commitment has been slow and it has been labelled [off track](#) by the Government's own report.

In light of restricted budgets and high upfront investment to decarbonise the rail network, the Government's 2020 'Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan' (DAP) is currently being [refreshed](#) which suggests this target may be extended beyond 2035.

Comment

It is concerning to see limited progress on rail decarbonisation over the past year. Whilst electrification of the East Kilbride line is proceeding it was notable that the Leven line was reopened without the necessary electrification infrastructure being in place.

Alongside lack of progress on rail electrification is the failure to go to market for new trains which will be required to achieve modal shift targets. There is a looming crisis developing here as the current diesel fleet is ageing and becoming increasingly unreliable. This results in service cancellations and short-formed trains leading to overcrowding on key routes – not an image of Scotland that we would wish to see portrayed to the wider world and surely not one of which the Government can be proud.



LOW EMISSION FERRIES

Commitment

"ensure that 30% of state owned ferries are low emission by 2032"

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

The share of low emission ferries has remained at [8%](#) throughout the past six years. However, six new major vessels are due by 2026 and a replacement programme for ten new small ferries is making progress. These new vessels will reduce fossil fuel consumption by utilising battery and onshore charging solutions.

Comment

It is promising that the Scottish Government is on track for this target, with the procurement process for its Small Vessel Replacement Programme [now underway](#). Given the lead times associated with procurement, the share of low-emission ferries is [expected](#) to remain static at 8% until 2026, with 21% of the fleet being low emission by 2028, and reaching 30% by 2030.

However, we hold concerns that this commitment may not be sufficient to significantly reduce climate emissions from maritime transport – due to the low percentage of low-emission vessels, the continued reliance on fossil fuels under the "low emission" label, and its focus solely on CalMac ferries, excluding other fleets like those in operation in Orkney and Shetland.

FAIR FARES REVIEW



Commitment

"commission a Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to transport fares"

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

After a gestation of two and a half years, the Scottish Government published its [Fair Fares Review](#) in March 2024. The main report set out recommendations supported by consideration of current public transport trends and fares, a review of international case studies and findings from public engagement.

Comment

Although this commitment has now technically been met, it is deeply disappointing that the Review has been unable to set out detailed plans to improve the affordability and accessibility of public transport – instead [delaying action](#) to the traffic reduction plan (which is itself badly overdue) and a new unspecified 'Future of Public Transport' review. The commitment to trial flat fare ticketing is promising but we express concern that the Review, after 2.5 years, has not been able to specify where and when this will happen, instead making a vague, unscheduled and unfunded commitment. The Fair Fares Review argued that action was being taken via the ScotRail [off-peak fares trial](#); however, this has now been abandoned with the Government citing high costs and minimal patronage growth.

CAR TRAFFIC REDUCTION



Commitment

“achieve a 20% reduction in car kilometres driven by 2030”

– Programme for Government 2021-22

Progress

The commitment to reducing car use is [off track](#) by the Government’s own admission, with the most recent data showing that car traffic has [increased 11%](#) in the past year. The final ‘route map’ for achieving this target is [expected](#) in autumn 2024.

Comment

Rising traffic levels are alarming, especially since the target year for achieving the reduction in car use by 20% is now just 6 years away. While efforts are underway to enhance public transport, the Government’s own models emphasise the necessity of traffic demand management measures such as road pricing to achieve this goal. These measures are expected to be detailed in the overdue final route map, delayed by over two years.

We are also concerned that the Scottish Government is expecting [local authorities](#) to deliver road user charging schemes without providing any financial incentives for them to take action. Achieving the target entails reversing current driving trends to levels [not seen since 1994](#), so clear, coordinated and urgent action is required.



ICE VEHICLE PHASE OUT

Commitment

“creating conditions to phase out the need for all new petrol and diesel vehicles in Scotland’s public sector fleet by 2030”

– Programme for Government 2019-20

Progress

This commitment has been [extended](#) to encompass all new petrol and diesel cars and vans. The phase-out of internal combustion engine (ICE) cars is [on track](#), currently exceeding the minimum viable pathway. However, the decarbonisation of the van fleet is lagging with ULEV (ultra low emission vehicle) vans making up only 3.8% of new van registrations.

Comment

There is promising progress in phasing out fossil fuel cars in Scotland, collectively the transport sector’s top polluters. To ensure momentum is not lost and there are appropriate conditions for *both* car and van decarbonisation, it is imperative that appropriate and comprehensive charging infrastructure is rolled out nationwide. A detailed plan for implementing an additional 24,000 public charge points by 2030 is [expected](#) to be published in late 2024.

CONCLUSION: IN REVERSE

This report demonstrates that the Scottish Government has now clearly reneged on a number of key commitments made over the past five years to invest in, and prioritise, sustainable transport.

The groundbreaking commitment for 10% of transport spend to be devoted to the healthiest modes of transport — walking, wheeling and cycling — has not been met, with spend far below even the reduced value announced in the 2024/25 Scottish Budget. Meanwhile, bus users have been let down by the withdrawal of the Bus Partnership Fund, designed to give bus users priority in their journeys over queues of single-occupant private cars.

We understand that the calamitous state of public finances—whether at Westminster, Holyrood, or in local councils—means we need to carefully decide how to use the money that remains.

The First Minister has stated that his government's priorities are to eradicate child poverty, grow Scotland's economy, and tackle the climate emergency. But we see little correspondence between these welcome policy priorities and the transport budget's actual spending. Transport Scotland's budget has increased year-on-year despite the organisation's comprehensive failure to drive modal shift or cut traffic levels. The First Minister must critically examine why this is the case.

Investing in buses — used most by those on low incomes — aligns with all three of the First Minister's priorities. But the decisions taken by his predecessor has led to funding for bus investment instead being slashed.

At the same time, the government has committed to ramping up spending on dualling the A9. Given that car use skews to the more affluent, it will do precisely nothing to tackle child poverty. It is also a disastrous course of action for a government that asserts that it wants to tackle climate change yet continues to fail to meet its emissions targets.

And it is woefully misled to think that building new roads is an efficient way to grow Scotland's economy. Most road-building contracts go to companies headquartered outside of Scotland. While some money will trickle down into the Scottish economy, it would be far wiser for roads policy to invest in fixing the multi-billion-pound maintenance backlog, not least as this would likely benefit Scottish companies rather than international conglomerates.

So while we welcome the Scottish Government's stated priorities, the First Minister must take a hard look at where funds are actually going — and whether these funds truly benefit the Scottish economy rather than overseas interests.

As this report shows, the previous administration made bitter cuts to sustainable transport investment. It's now time for Mr Swinney to turn his attention to why his executive agency, Transport Scotland, is concentrating its new investment on traffic-generating roads when its mission should be on rebuilding public transport patronage, transforming conditions for active travel, and addressing the surge in car use.

Now let's see some proper prioritisation from the First Minister in this year's Scottish Budget, and some genuine progress in meeting the Scottish Government's priorities.

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Transform Scotland is the national alliance for sustainable transport, bringing together organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors.

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