

How to talk about car free cities

August 2022



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Inspiring climate action

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Possible is a UK based climate charity working towards a zero carbon society, built by and for the people of the UK.

www.wearepossible.org

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What is this guide for?



This guide has been put together to support campaigners, activists, spokespeople, and anyone working on traffic reduction in cities. It has been compiled by Possible's Car Free Megacities campaign which reimagines London, Paris and New York as cities free from car dependency. The guide uses examples from these three cities to illustrate key points and, therefore, may be of particular relevance to UK, European and US cities.

Pitching car free cities



In a line

We want to bring to life a positive vision for cities that moves away from mass private car ownership.

In a paragraph

Imagine our cities with fewer cars clogging streets, without all the noise of revving engines and honking horns. We could trade in dirty air and the dangers of traffic for cleaner, greener, healthier cities. Our cities could be a place where people come first, and private cars become largely obsolete - while retaining some cars for elderly and disabled people. A car free city, after all, is not a city with no cars at all, just one free from the dangers of mass private car ownership. We need to dramatically raise policy and public support for urban car reduction, and raise the ambition and courage of our elected representatives to take action. Recent experience shows that change can happen almost overnight. If we take immediate action now, we can create cities that are friendly to both people and the climate.

Key takeaways

We want to celebrate the bold steps that cities have taken to curb car use, and call out where they could do better.

Car free cities are the future. They are key to tackling so many difficult issues that face us today - from climate change to air pollution, to fuel prices, to congestion bringing cities to a standstill.

Car free cities are healthy, thriving cities: cities with more urban space for people and nature, cleaner air, improved accessibility for all, and an abundance of choice in how we get around - be it by bus, tube, train, tram, on foot, or cycling.

A car free city is not a city with absolutely zero cars. Some people including disabled people and people with mobility needs rely on cars to get around.

Car free cities are cities with a lot fewer cars on the roads. This means less congestion so that people who do need to travel by car can enjoy an easier ride, tradespeople can more easily get around, and emergency vehicles can reach their destinations without being impeded by traffic.

Top tips



✓ **Stay upbeat, energetic, and have a sense of car free cities being the future.**

Car free cities are happening, it's time for our city to climb on board; let's see who's in front and how other cities can catch up.

✓ **Be positive, celebratory and proud.**

Going car free is a massive step forwards for our cities and as such we want to encourage a positive sense of identity which celebrates our cities' potential to be better!

✓ **Actively involve those who are reliant on, or affected by, cars or traffic reduction initiatives, especially if they are disabled, have mobility needs, or are tradespeople who make a living through their cars. If you are affected directly, make your views known.**

Many residents in many inner city areas, including London, Paris, and New York, [live car free already](#); and these are the people who will feel the impact of cars on their lives the most. There are also important questions around how best to design cities to be accessible to people with disabilities including mobility issues. This feedback needs to be incorporated into any approach, campaign, initiative or traffic reduction scheme. If you are disabled or have mobility needs your voice matters and you have a right to be heard.

✓ **Empower people to go car free if they can - but avoid shaming personal travel habits.**

Going car free can be an [empowering choice](#) - in July 2022, for example, 1,000 people took part in Possible's [Going Car Free challenge](#). Encourage people to go car free but only if they can. It is essential to steer clear of a 'polarised debate' frame of discussion. Avoid shaming personal travel choices.

✓ **Keep the focus on elected representatives' ambitions and visions, and how they can better design cities for the future.**

While individuals can take action themselves, it is down to elected officials to implement systems change. The burden of responsibility to free cities from car dominance is not on individuals. But at the same time, we can help people realise the power they have in influencing local politicians.

Framing principles, key messages & key resources



1. Start with shared values and hope. Establish common ground and a sense of community around the basics.

Invite conversation around what we love about our cities and what we hope for the future. For example, 'no matter who we are, most of us want to enjoy the best that our cities have to offer and get around conveniently, cheaply, and in a way that doesn't harm the planet'; or 'congestion is a nightmare and cars take up so much space.' By forefronting a point of connection and widening the scope of the conversation you will encourage your audience to examine their entrenched beliefs and imagine something new.

Key message: We want to take joy and pride in the cities that we live in.

Key resource: [The irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities.](#)

2. Go forward with a sense of the future, momentum, and opportunity.

The shift towards public transport, walking and cycling has already started. Change is possible and it's time to dramatically reduce our reliance on private cars – it is time for all of us to climb aboard.

Our cities are changing rapidly. Lockdown accelerated that change but it also showed that ambition and subsequent rapid action is possible. For example:

- Paris is [set to ban non-essential through-traffic](#) from its city centre from 2024.
- London has set a [target to reduce car traffic by 27%](#) by 2030. Car ownership has [fallen 6% since 2015](#).
- When New York City [banned cars from certain streets](#) during the COVID lockdowns, roads were transformed; pedestrians had more space to walk, children played safely in the streets, and local restaurants and cafes introduced outdoor seating.

It's important to therefore move the conversation from a discussion of whether or not our cities should be car free, to *how* they should become car free.

Key message: Our cities will be better. The future is car free.

Key resources: [Car Free Megacities leaderboard](#) and [the irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities](#).

3. Reframe the conversation from 'drivers' versus 'pedestrians' versus 'cyclists' versus 'wheelchair users' to 'putting people before cars'.

Point the finger of responsibility towards our elected representatives to redesign our cities so that they allow everyone to get from A to B in an affordable and accessible way.

Our transport systems should also allow as many people as possible, from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible, to get wherever they want in the cheapest, greenest way. When we talk about 'drivers', 'pedestrians', 'cyclists' and 'wheelchair users' we can end up feeling pigeon-holed and like we are in competition with one another for space. We set ourselves up to make enemies with one another, when in fact, we need broader systems change. We all live in the same city, we all breathe the same polluted air, and we are all affected by the climate crisis - and mass private car ownership is contributing to those problems.

It's time to design cities for people, not cars - politicians, parties in power, and other local elected officials need to take on that responsibility.

As city-planner [Brent Toderian put it](#): 'When you design a city for cars, it fails for everyone, including [people who need to get around by car]. When you design a city for people, it works better for everyone, including [people who need to get around by car].'

Key message: Cities should be designed for people, not cars.

Key resources: [The irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities](#) and [Nobody Left Behind: Envisioning inclusive cities in a low-car future](#).

4. Paint a picture of what car free cities look like...

Be positive, proud, celebratory and joyful: going car free is a step forwards for our cities. Cities designed around the needs of people, rather than cars, improve community cohesion, social interaction, and health and wellbeing. They unlock space for nature and people and support people to spend more time outdoors. Cities that have moved towards being car free have seen positive results. We want to encourage a positive sense of identity which celebrates the best of our cities. We should also be inviting people to contribute their ideas, imagining their ideal city street and aiming to deliver as much of that vision as possible.

Key message: Car free cities are great cities.

Key resource: [The irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities.](#)

5. ...and what problems they overcome.

Car free cities help tackle complex issues. The world is in the throes of many crises that can make people feel despondent, powerless, burned out and, at the worst, apathetic. Therefore, problems should be communicated with care and sensitivity and it's helpful to point to concrete examples of inspiring cities that have got it right.

It can be overwhelming to talk about every single problem that mass private car ownership contributes to in one go, so concentrate on individual aspects and take a solutions-based approach. People are likely to feel more inspired if they can clearly identify the problems themselves and know how they can take action.

Here are some problems that moving to car free cities could overcome:

a. Fuel price increases

Driving has always been expensive but with diesel and petrol prices now at an [all-time high](#), people are rethinking their transport choices. This is hard for people in transport fuel poverty. It is the responsibility of elected representatives to make public and active travel a realistic option for everyone.

b. Congestion

Most cities were not designed to accommodate the number of vehicles that are currently on the road. The average London driver spends on average 119 hours per year in traffic; for a Parisian, it's 144 hours, for a New Yorker, 123 hours. In many cases, drivers don't enjoy driving and non-drivers do not want to take up driving because it is perceived to be such a nightmare. But no city has successfully addressed congestion by building more roads and lanes. On the other hand, when road capacity is reduced, existing traffic isn't simply re-routed (as many people think), but instead 'disappears' or 'evaporates' altogether. For example, the closure of the Hammersmith Bridge in London resulted in the evaporation of about 9,500 car trips per day.

c. Climate change

If we're not vigilant, the world is on track to miss the 1.5C Paris Agreement goal. Road transport sectors generate the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions in the US, in the UK, and in France. Within that, private cars are by far the biggest single source of transport emissions. City residents are in a great position to significantly reduce their carbon emissions by going car free as they benefit from the inherent advantages of city living such as access to public transport, more densely-populated areas and easier access to amenities.

d. Air pollution

99% of the world's population live in places where air pollution levels exceed WHO guideline limits. In London, up to 9,500 premature deaths are attributed to poor air quality a year (figures for NO₂ and PM_{2.5}). In Paris, it's 2,575 deaths (figures for NO₂), and in New York City it's 3,400 deaths (figures for PM_{2.5} and O₃). Road transportation is the dominant cause of urban air pollution. As well as being a silent killer, air pollution reduces the quality of life for many more, especially children, older people and people made vulnerable by chronic health conditions. Air pollution also disproportionately affects poorer communities and communities of colour.

e. Inequality

Private cars are parked 95% of the time with swathes of public land given over to those who are privileged enough to own a car. The most deprived areas of our cities have the lowest car ownership rates yet often, they experience the worst effects of congestion due to drivers coming into city centres. Fundamentally, it is a social justice issue where those

who are causing harmful emissions are sheltered from their impacts while those not contributing to the problem are suffering from its impacts.

f. Deaths caused by traffic collisions

Road traffic crashes claim over 1.3m lives each year and are the leading cause of death for children and young adults aged 5-29 years.

g. Noise pollution

Noise pollution is one of the biggest threats to environmental health in Europe, with around one in three people negatively affected by it, and road transport is a major contributor. Car free cities are peaceful cities.

Key message: Car dominance has caused numerous problems that negatively impact the residents of cities, especially those that are poorer, have mobility needs or are disabled, and communities of colour.

Key resources: [Car Free Megacities data dashboard](#) and [Let our cities sing](#).

Pictures that tell a story



Pictures that show how much space cars take up show the potential for car free cities to unlock urban space.

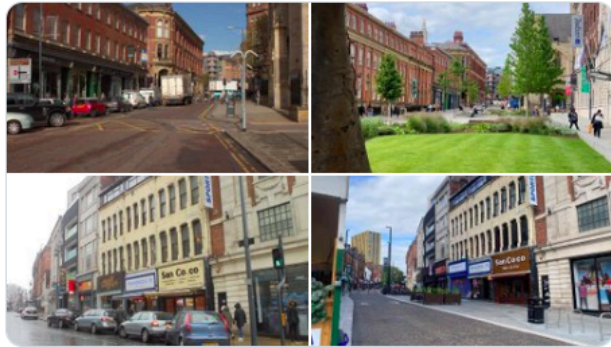


Before and after pictures show that change is possible.

 **Hannah**
@HannahKettle

Took the [#CarFreeCities](#) team on a little walking tour of [#Leeds](#) this week. Check out these “before & after” shots of some dreamy road space reallocation 🥰


[@ConnectingLeeds](#) [@_wearepossible](#)
[@ClimateActLeeds](#)




9:31 AM · Jun 15, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

10 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 45 Likes

Pictures that show car free spaces are full of nature paint a positive vision.

 **Possible**
@_wearepossible

pov: you're a little plant in a parklet and everyone loves sitting next to you



9:00 PM · Jun 14, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

16 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 46 Likes

Common concerns and criticism with effective responses



1. 'I would get involved with efforts to tackle traffic in my community, but I'm a driver myself.'

Accept that at the moment, many of our cities are not optimised to allow people to live car free. People drive and that's okay. But that doesn't mean they can't get involved. Empower them to advocate for the improvement of public transport and active travel infrastructure and reassure them that once those are in place, it will be much easier for them to live car free.

Encourage them to dip their toes in by cutting their car use. A helpful resource is [Possible's Going Car Free campaign](#) which helped almost 1,000 people to do exactly that. Frame trialling car free life as an experiment or a challenge and to go on to see how far it goes.

You can also frame it as taking climate action as that is exactly what it is. As one participant of [Possible's Going Car Free trial](#), Funmi Shonibare, said 'I couldn't imagine a world where I didn't get around on four wheels, but [that all changed when I tried going car-free.](#)'

Help people refocus on decision makers: acknowledge people's feelings, and highlight that car free cities campaigning is focused on systems change as well as supporting people to go car free.

2. 'Won't electric cars mean that we can tackle climate change and not have to change our driving habits?'

Electric vehicles are part of the solution in reducing transport emissions but they are not the only solution.

Electric vehicles are going to be essential to disabled people or those with mobility needs in the cities of the future.

Unfortunately however, all vehicles – even electric and hydrogen ones – produce non-exhaust emissions (particles from brake, tyre and road surface wear, known as particulate matter or PM2.5 or PM10). These are still harmful so car use

being retained at current levels will still mean dangerous levels of air pollution for all.

We also have to consider embodied emissions. Electric cars still produce significant emissions from their manufacture and from battery resourcing.

Electric vehicles will also continue to contribute to congestion and road danger, while car free living will help reclaim public space for communities, encourage transport equity, and help communities become more active and interactive with each other.

3. 'Car free cities are a step backwards.'

It is essential to acknowledge all concerns about a move to car free cities. It's completely normal to be apprehensive about such a big change. In fact, where changes like these are proposed, opposition is usually quite strong and vocal. The task of eliminating hundreds of thousands of private cars from large parts of cities and the subsequent impact it could have on peoples' daily lives may make it seem like an impossible task. But, interestingly, where changes have been implemented, an inspiring change comes about. Slowly but surely, people come to love the changes with businesses benefitting, people becoming healthier, and cities becoming greener and ready for the future - [just look at Ljubljana](#).

4. 'I'm a disabled person, how will car free cities affect me?'

It is essential to be absolutely clear from the outset - a car free city is not a city with no cars at all. It's a city which is free of the dangers of pollution and emissions caused by mass private car ownership.

It is essential that as we design cities with fewer cars we ensure that they lead to increased accessibility for all, including people who do need to get around with a car. So that means making public walkways wider, increasing the number of cycleways, and introducing measures to reduce congestion.

We also need to ensure that bike hire schemes cater to those with mobility needs through equipment like e-bikes, that cycleways are wide enough to cater to specially-adapted active travel equipment used by disabled people, and that

public transport is widely available and caters to those who use mobility aids.

It is important that disabled people are enabled and empowered to travel. It's vital that they are at the forefront of conversations about how to tackle the climate crisis, how we decarbonise transport, and how we redesign our cities to be less car dominant.

The Car Free Megacities report, '[Nobody Left Behind: Envisioning inclusive cities in a low-car future](#)', was an in-depth research project that worked with disabled people and representatives of organisations representing disabled people's rights in order to propose a list of actions to incorporate disabled people's perspectives into the creation of car free cities.

It found:

- The dominance of private cars in our cities creates barriers for disabled people that serve to disable them further. Barriers include poor walking and wheeling environments, poor public transport provision, lack of awareness of disabled people's needs and habits, and poor engagement in transport decision-making.
- A move away from car-centred planning would bring benefits for people with many impairments, and especially for those who are unable to drive. If on the one hand, the car is an enabler for some disabled people, it is also a hindrance for others who will instead be enabled by a low-car city - we need cities that work for all.
- Car access should be maintained for some disabled people, especially those who could be excluded from society if they are deprived of such access.
- The burden of reducing car use needs to fall more heavily on non-disabled people for whom alternatives are more easily available.
- Efforts to help those non-disabled people use their cars less should be supported by policies that support people to walk, cycle or use public transport on a daily basis, so car use can be retained by those who have no other practical alternative.

5. 'Driving is a rite of passage. This campaign is against people's personal freedom.'

The last thing we'd want to do is to ban people from using cars. But what we need to do is to move our cities towards a model where the alternatives are just as viable as using a car. We need to empower and enable people to make positive choices for the climate. This means making public transport more accessible, affordable and plentiful as well as building active travel infrastructure that makes people feel safe and reassured in using that infrastructure for travel.

Cars are useful but mass private car ownership is causing harm to the residents of cities and the climate.

For those who still need to use cars, we can also make use of car clubs - car-sharing schemes that allow people to use cars when they need them. This is especially important as cars go completely unused 95% of the time and car clubs can help communities reclaim the space that they previously used.

6. 'How will car free cities impact local businesses?'

Approach these arguments thoughtfully and empathetically. People's livelihoods are directly related to footfall in cities, on high streets, around cafés and restaurants. We need to be sensitive to that.

Car free cities can open up streets to allow restaurants and cafés to use that space for dining. We can also build infrastructure such as parklets that will make streets more attractive to walk down, and improve public transport so that more people can easily and cheaply access city shops and other businesses. There are lots of opportunities for business in car free cities.

And in creating our interactive map, [The irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities](#), we discovered many positive stories for business. For example in Strøget, Denmark: [it went car free in the 60s](#) and is now Copenhagen's largest and busiest shopping area; it was also the case for Groningen in the Netherlands, which was redesigned in the 70s. Shopkeepers were worried and protested at the time, but the area saw [urban renewal and increased retail spending](#).

The UK Department for Transport (DfT) has also [endorsed](#) findings that high density, cycle friendly urban design can increase economic growth, that cycle parking allows 5 times more retail spend than the same space for car parking, and that cycle friendly neighbourhoods can have greater retail spend.

Further reading and some great resources



- Car Free Megacities [Data Dashboard](#)
- Car Free Megacities [Leaderboard](#)
- Car Free Megacities [Stories Map](#)
- Car Free Megacities Reports:
 - Active Travel Academy for Possible (February 2022) [Nobody Left Behind: Envisioning inclusive cities in a low-car future](#)
 - New Weather Institute for Possible (September 2021) [Car Free Stories: The irresistible rise of people-friendly, clean air cities](#)
 - Active Travel Academy for Possible (August 2021) [The Promise of Low Carbon Freight: Benefits of cargo bikes in London](#)
 - Active Travel Academy for Possible (July 2021) [Paris, London, NYC: people, parks, and parking](#)
 - Transport for Quality of Life, Mums for Lungs, and Active Travel Academy for Possible (January 2021) [School Streets: Reducing children's exposure to toxic air pollution and road danger](#)
 - Active Travel Academy for Possible (May 2020) [Congestion ahead: a faster route is now available](#)
 - Active Travel Academy for Possible (November 2020) [LTNs for all? Mapping the extent of London's new Low Traffic Neighbourhoods](#)