



Car Free Birmingham

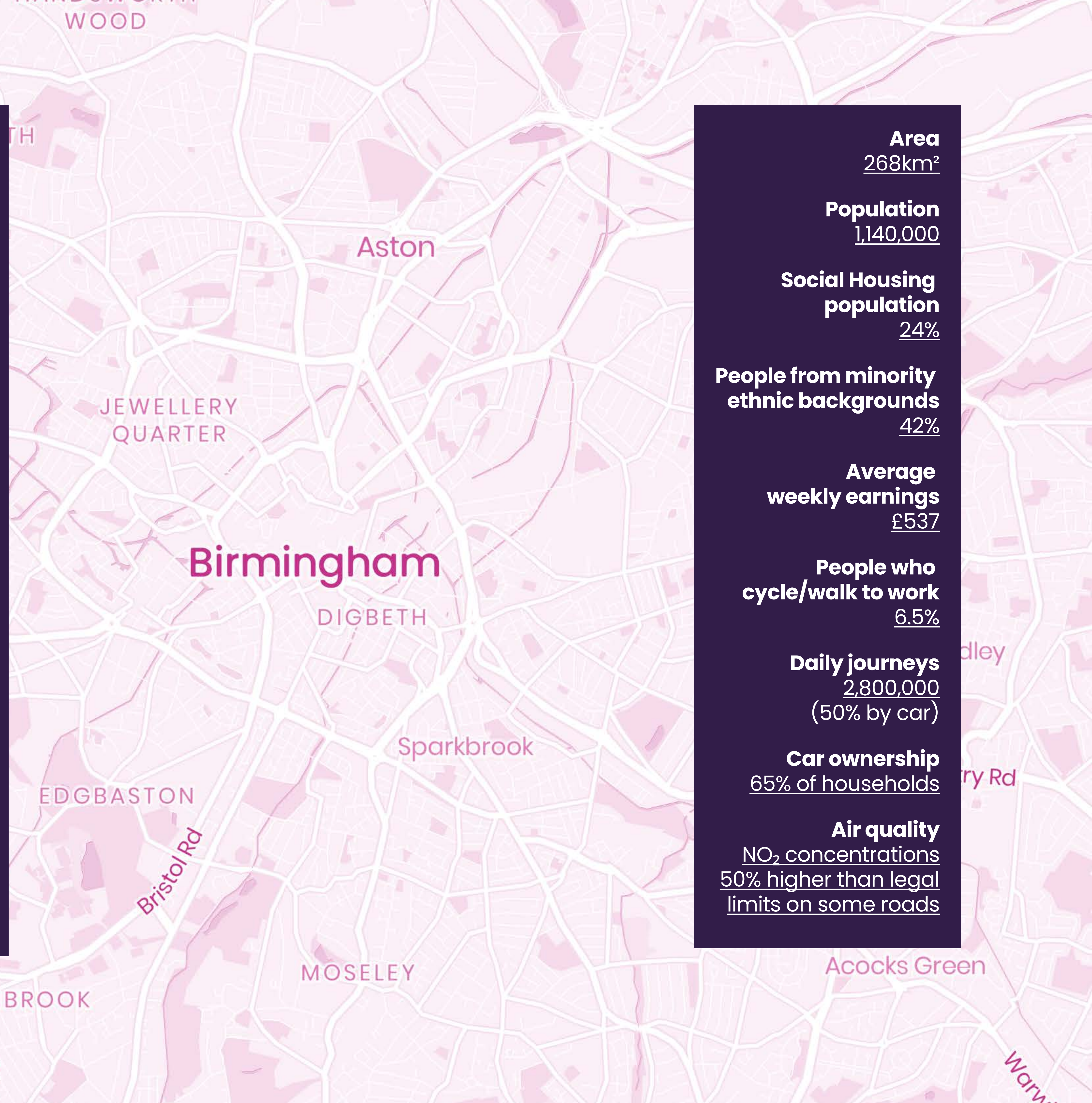
Possible.
Inspiring climate action

Birmingham is a brilliant city: caring, creative and optimistic. It's the UK's second city, and the centre of the West Midlands Combined Authority.

However in many areas the population (people and cars) has outgrown the space. Overdependence on cars has blighted our streets, our personal health, and the planet.

The alternatives to private car ownership (buses, trains, trams, car clubs, bike share, cycle lanes, e-scooters) all need to significantly increase their capacity, and become more accessible and affordable.

The city council has made clear commitments to prioritise people over cars, and to tackle the climate crisis. There's a lot to do.



Area
268km²

Population
1,140,000

Social Housing population
24%

People from minority ethnic backgrounds
42%

Average weekly earnings
£537

People who cycle/walk to work
6.5%

Daily journeys
2,800,000
(50% by car)

Car ownership
65% of households

Air quality
NO₂ concentrations
50% higher than legal limits on some roads

At Possible, we want to see a zero carbon society, built by and for everyone, and we want to see this fast.

Our **Car Free Birmingham** campaign brings to life a positive case for fewer cars on the streets of our second city.

We are working with communities currently blighted by traffic and air pollution to co-design changes to local streets, taking space away from cars and giving it back to people and nature.

We recognise that there are many people, including disabled people, who cannot get around without a car. Our aim of fewer cars on the road means more space for those who need to drive – and a better Birmingham for everyone.

At the same time, we will encourage and inspire local decision makers to raise ambitions and accelerate change at the city level.



credit: Salem Alkanderi

Our **Car Free** **Birmingham** campaign

There's so much we'd love to do in Birmingham to help shift us away from car dominance.

Here's what we've got planned so far.

Parklets

If streets are lined with parked cars, well, that's just free car storage. What about some space for people to walk, cross the road, sit, rest, socialise?

Parklets are a great way of repurposing car parking spaces. They often host benches and greenery for people to enjoy, and they can lower air temperatures and increase biodiversity too.

In 2020 Birmingham introduced temporary parklets in the city centre, organised by the Colmore Business Improvement District (BID).

We want parklets to become a widely recognised means of creating pleasant spaces for all.

Teaming up with others who share our passion for giving public space back to people, we will campaign for a simple process for residents to apply for temporary and permanent parklets – especially in neighbourhoods where people have the least access to green spaces.

We'll be developing resources to help residents through the process: from a photographic history of parklets, to developing a 'how-to' toolkit, to showcasing case studies.



credit: @ColmoreBID

Who wants the traffic back?

Places for People measures use planters and bollards ('modal filters') to remove through traffic from neighbourhoods.

Residents can still drive onto their road, or receive deliveries, but shortcutting from one main road to the next is harder or impossible. This stops people unnecessarily driving through residential roads, making them quieter, safer, and easier to walk and cycle and play.

The recent implementation of Places for People schemes under emergency Covid-19 measures has given rise to a debate about the right to public space and how we use it.

The benefits of these schemes are not immediately obvious to some residents. Change can be a challenge for many people, including those who currently own cars, but over time, people tend to adapt to any perceived inconvenience, and in the end don't want their local modal filters removed.

We plan to test this assumption by surveying local residents who have lived by modal filters that have been in place for a while, and ask, 'Who wants the traffic back?'. We will recruit volunteers to carry out the door knocking survey when it is safe to do so and we will share our findings.



Traffic counting

Although Birmingham City Council carries out its own traffic monitoring, we want to gather data on neighbourhoods 'under the radar'.

Our focus will be areas which are not benefiting from existing monitoring, and where people are suffering high volumes of through-traffic.

We will engage new people in climate action by supporting local residents and businesses to install traffic counters in their windows.

We will analyse and publish the results to help make the case to the relevant authorities for street re-designs and changes in how we travel.

Cleaner air

Birmingham's Clean Air Zone, launching on 1st June 2021, means that drivers of the most polluting vehicles must pay a daily charge to drive within the A4540 Middleway Ring Road.

This is a great opportunity to support people in switching to greener transport modes, instead of trading in their existing vehicles for Clean Air Zone compliant ones.

We will be starting a conversation around the costs and benefits of different transport choices, and analysing the cost of car ownership.

We want to demonstrate that a car-free life is possible, and we want to support people through this journey. We plan to launch a car-free trial pledge, and we'll be supporting people with advice on how to do a car-free school run, daily commute, and weekly shop.

We will also raise awareness of other transport options such as car share clubs, examine the factors that prevent people from giving up their cars, and facilitate discussions on how these can be addressed.



credit: Dorian Le Sénéchal



credit: Juan Carballo Diaz

Future filling stations

With the UK phasing out petrol and diesel cars, there's a great opportunity to do something amazing with the land currently occupied by petrol stations.

We will first audit Birmingham's petrol stations and find out how much land they currently occupy.

We will support local groups to register petrol stations as Assets of Community Value (ACV), which is land or property, nominated as important by a local community group, that then has added protection from development. If an owner of an ACV wishes to sell, they must first inform the local authority. If a qualifying community group wants to buy the ACV, they can have more time (up to six months) to raise the money to purchase it.

We also want to run workshops with local communities to develop ideas for what these petrol stations can be – perhaps a community garden or a space for young people.

Key dates

Key dates in the calendar will provide a focus for our activities, often working in partnership with other stakeholder organisations across Birmingham.

Clean Air Day 17 June 2021

Climate Coalition Festival 18–26 September 2021

Car Free Day 22 September 2021

UN climate talks 1–12 November 2021

Getting people talking

Not talking about the problem with mass private car ownership makes it easier for us all to ignore.

This is why we want to get people talking; sharing their stories and experiences of getting around our city – the good and the bad!

We'd love to showcase these stories in a creative way with local art groups and encourage people to change how they talk, and think, about travel.

We particularly want to engage with young adults about car culture. What if your car is your only private space? An expression of your style and status? Is this sustainable or are there other options?

2022 Commonwealth Games

As we draw closer to the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, with potentially up to a million visitors, the need for accessible, efficient alternatives to private cars will become more urgent.

We will look for opportunities to showcase creative solutions for enabling thousands of people to move around the city during the Games, like rickshaws, e-cargo bike hire and newly pedestrianised streets.

We'd love to hear your ideas about how we can work together on these events and maximise collaboration.

The **problem with** **cars** in Birmingham

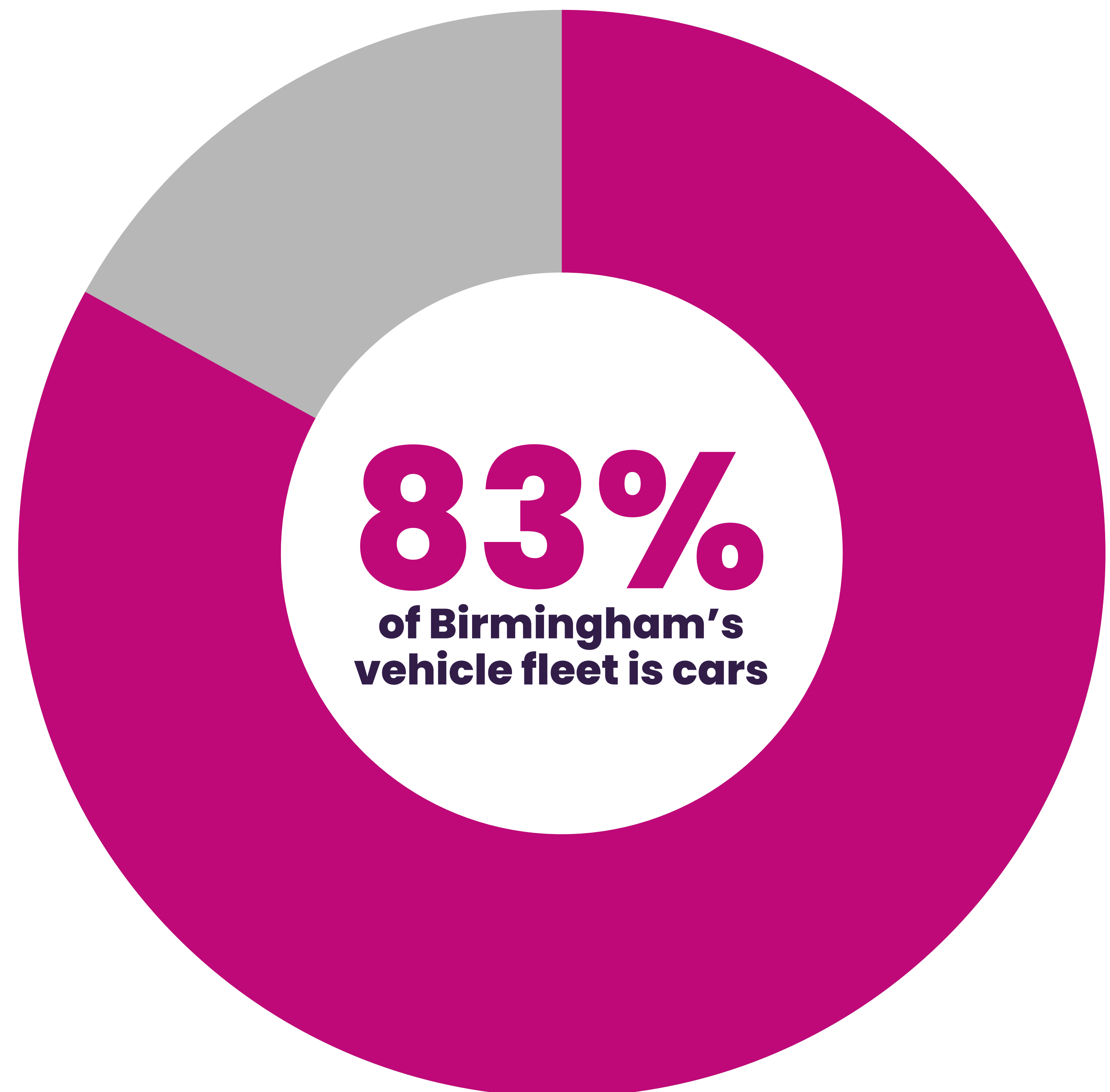
We all want to live in a neighbourhood where we can breathe clean air, walk around safely and feel connected to our community.

But Birmingham is congested with traffic, choked by fumes and is often dangerous for people who walk and cycle. This affects all Brummies, but older people, disabled people, children and communities where people of colour, and poor people live are hit the hardest.

1. The climate emergency

Transport emissions are the largest source of CO₂ emissions in the UK, and within that, private cars produce more than a third.

In 2019, Birmingham City Council declared a Climate Emergency. They also set a target to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030, and established the Route to Zero (R20) taskforce which is responsible for identifying the changes required across the council.



Data: [Birmingham City Council](#)



Credit: Lucian Alexe

2. Collisions

With 1.3 million people killed each year globally, cars have been termed the world's "deadliest animal".

In 2017, over 2,700 Brummies were recorded as having been injured in road collisions, with almost 411 of those injuries categorised as serious, and 30 fatalities – up by 20% from the previous year.

Of those killed, approximately a third were people in cars and a third were pedestrians.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) has been calling for a reduction of the speed limit to 20mph on all urban roads, on the basis that this would reduce the number and severity of road collisions and take pressure off the NHS.

To combat road danger, we need motor traffic reduction measures, as well as support for walking, cycling and scooting.

Fewer cars means fewer collisions, and more space for pedestrians to move, play and socialise safely.

3. Toxic air

Motor traffic is a major contributor to air pollution, responsible for about 80% of harmful nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) emissions in Birmingham.

All vehicles produce non-exhaust emissions (particles from brake, tyre and road surface wear, known as Particulate Matter, PM2.5 or PM10). These pollutants have both direct and indirect effects on the environment and our own physical and mental health.

According to the World Health Organisation, air pollution-related deaths are most closely linked to PM2.5 emissions.

Birmingham is one of the UK's cities with the highest air pollution levels, causing over 1000 deaths a year in the city alone. Living near a busy road in Birmingham has been shown to increase the risk of lung cancer by 4%.

Children living in Birmingham could have their lives cut short by up to seven months if the current levels of air pollution continue.

In a landmark verdict in January 2021, a coroner ruled that a nine year old child, Ella Kissi-Debrah, died from illegal levels of air pollution – the main source being traffic emissions.

Ella, who had severe asthma, lived within 30 metres of London's infamous South Circular Road. The judge is expected to make recommendations for legislation to prevent future deaths.

In March 2021, the UK was found guilty by the European Court of Justice of “systematically and persistently” breaching air pollution limits.

In Birmingham, one in four local car journeys are less than a mile. A car free city would offer cleaner and healthier alternatives to these short trips – cycling and walking routes, accessible and affordable public transport.

4. Noise pollution

Traffic is a big contributor to noise pollution in Birmingham – especially for those who live on or near major roads, for whom the exposure to traffic noise is constant.

Noise pollution contributes to an increase in heart and circulatory problems, sleep disturbance, chronic annoyance, physiological effects, mental health effects, hearing impairment, reduced performance and communication and learning effects.

The World Health Organisation recognises environmental noise as the second largest environmental health risk in Western Europe, behind air quality.

5. Inactivity crisis

Birmingham is facing an inactivity crisis, thanks to our sedentary lifestyles. More than 40% of adults in Birmingham do not achieve the recommended 150 minutes of activity a week. Over 29% of adults in Birmingham do less than 30 minutes of activity a week.

People who have a physically active lifestyle have a 20–35% lower risk of killer diseases like cardiovascular disease and stroke, as well as improved mental health.

We urgently need to design physical activity back into our everyday lives. Walking more, cycling more, using public transport more, are the easiest and most affordable ways for many of us to get more active and live healthier lives.



credit: Tom W

6. Public space

The Covid-19 lockdown, and the closure of parks and urban green spaces, has highlighted how access to outdoor space is a luxury denied to many people, particularly those from low income households living in tower blocks.

A quarter of Birmingham's households live in flats, and in 2020, the Office for National Statistics found that 14% of Birmingham's homes have no access to a private or shared garden, affecting 63,000 families.

In England's largest cities, like Birmingham, up to 30% of available land is taken up by car parking. Meanwhile, the average car sits unused for 95% of the time.

We could use more of this land to increase our green spaces through measures such as parklets and increasing cycle storage space.

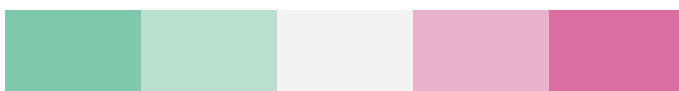
7. Inequality and social justice

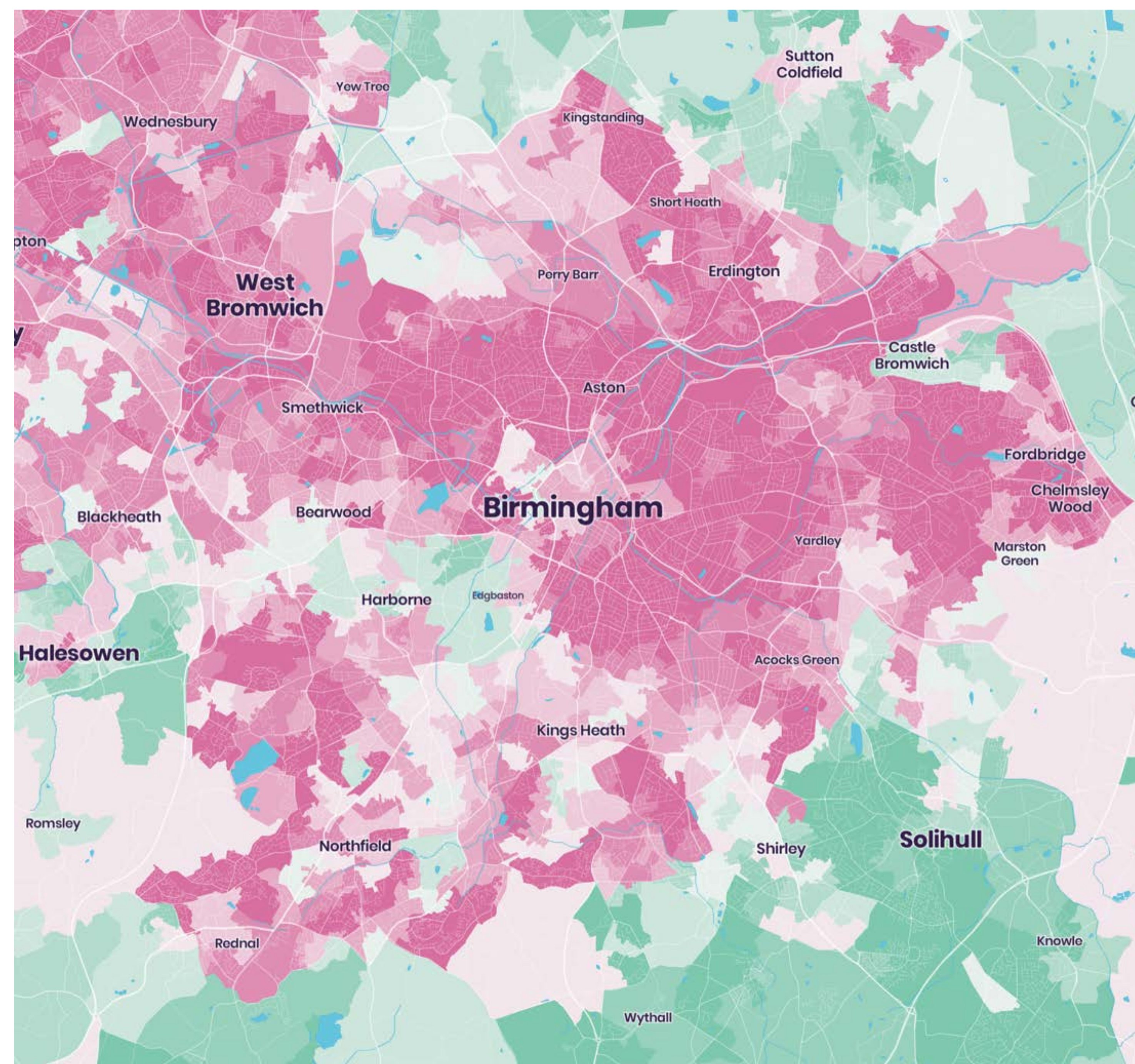
Car dominance is also a matter of social justice. In the most deprived areas of Birmingham (see map to the right), in and around the city centre, over half of all households have no car or van.

But it is these people who suffer the most from the toxic air, noise, stress, congestion and traffic danger from other people driving through their streets.

Black, Asian and other ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by air pollution from motor traffic. A large proportion of the workforce of taxi drivers and bus drivers are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and are thus consistently exposed to vehicle fumes for long hours.

UK index of multiple deprivation, 2019

Least Deprived  Most Deprived



Data: Consumer Data Research Centre © Mapbox, © OpenStreetMap

8. Congestion

Birmingham was not designed to accommodate the vast numbers of vehicles it currently endures.

Traffic congestion affects the speed and efficiency of emergency services, buses and taxis. The spillover into residential streets (shortcutting) causes frustration and aggression towards other drivers and road users.

The average Birmingham driver lost 134 hours in congestion in 2018. The annual cost of congestion to Birmingham's economy currently stands at £632 million. This figure is expected to rise as demand increases – an estimated extra 1.2 million journeys every day by 2031.

This growth in motor traffic is unsustainable.

9. Social isolation

A major threat to our quality of life in Birmingham is the impact of high motor vehicle traffic on neighbourhood social interaction.

Where traffic volumes are high, residents report limited social contact with people on the other side of the road. They have fewer friends and acquaintances than on lower traffic streets. The extent of people's "home territories" also diminishes as motor traffic increases and high traffic limits the mobility of people walking and cycling.

People often perceive more road danger in their neighbourhood as a result of traffic conditions on their street, and this affects the degree of independence granted to children.

This all highlights the need to reclaim urban residential neighbourhoods from motor traffic, and that political will is required to make this happen.



credit: Andrew Roberts

Are electric vehicles the solution?

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 can enter all major organs of the body, not just the lungs, heart, and brain, but also the placenta, affecting life chances of unborn children.

Electric vehicles still cause congestion and road danger, they do nothing to encourage space or transport equity, and they compound the inactivity crisis and social isolation in our communities.

So, no – the answer isn't just newer cars, but fewer cars.

Moving away from car dependency

This campaign brings to life a positive vision for major cities to move away from mass private car ownership – we want to take space away from cars and give it back to people and nature.

Let's be clear, our vision of a car-free city is one free from the dangers caused by mass private car ownership. That's not the same as a city with no cars at all. We recognise there are many people, including disabled people, who cannot get around without a car, and our campaign to reduce the number of cars in cities will make their lives easier too.

Motor City no more

Birmingham used to be known as the Motor City, but the car factories are long gone. Despite no longer being a centre for vehicle manufacture, the design of the city still prioritises cars above people. If you enter via the M6 Spaghetti Junction and A38(M) Aston Expressway (a motorway into the city centre), you will see what city planners are up against, but the city is changing. The Council has made clear that private car use is causing ill health and air pollution.

The Council launched a [draft Transport Plan](#) in January 2020, an [Emergency Active Transport Plan](#) in May 2020, and will publish a revised Transport Plan in early 2021.

These plans aim to:

- Reallocate road space away from private cars to create safe space for walking and cycling.
- Transform the city centre by limiting access for private cars.
- Prioritise active travel (such as cycling and walking) in local neighbourhoods.
- Repurpose land and space currently occupied by car parking.

There are long term ambitions to move traffic away from the central section of A38 to free it up for green spaces, active travel and public transport infrastructure.

Clean Air Zone

Birmingham's [Clean Air Zone](#), launching on 1st June 2021, means that drivers of the most polluting vehicles must pay a daily charge to drive within the A4540 Middleway Ring Road. Parking will also be restricted. The area will be organised into cells to allow movement within cells but to prevent through traffic.

There are concerns that the Clean Air Zone may increase traffic on the ring road, and in residential areas just outside the ring road. Buses and trains into the city centre are already running at capacity at commuting times. The Clean Air Zone needs to be seen as an important first step towards a car free city.

20 is plenty

We have 20mph zones in some parts of the city and the council has an aspiration to make 20mph the default speed limit on all residential streets and local centres (90% of all roads). This could be made a quicker, cheaper process with central government support; this has not been forthcoming, so each proposed 20mph zone will have to be planned and consulted on.

The council has created [downloadable toolkits](#) to encourage residents, schools and community groups to organise for 20mph in their areas.

Access to green space

Unlike many other major cities, Birmingham does not have a large park at its centre, but is considering plans for combined housing and green space development on the former wholesale market in Smithfield.

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Project aims to link green spaces to other aspects of living and the economy.

Council-managed woodlands capture more than 350 tonnes of pollutants each year, avoiding approximately 133 hospital admissions, 28 deaths, and adding 489 life years.

Parks and greenspaces managed by Birmingham City Council store more than 573,000 tonnes of carbon, equivalent to 2.1 million tonnes of CO₂.

Places for People

During the Covid-19 lockdown, the council quickly took advantage of emergency funding from the Department of Transport to trial low traffic neighbourhoods (branded “Places for People”) to help rapidly transform the character of urban spaces.

In 2020, Birmingham was awarded £1.6 million and at the start of 2021 received a further £4.5 million of the Emergency Active Travel Fund.

The council is now running a consultation process, asking people if they would like to keep them.

School Streets

School Streets restrict motor traffic at school opening and closing times. They help improve road safety and air quality, and increase the number of children who walk or cycle to school.

Since September 2019, roads outside six Birmingham schools have been closed to motor traffic at the start and end of the school day. A further six schools were added in September 2020. They are enforced by signage and drivers can be issued with spot fines if caught (residents are given permits).

Our report found that about half of Birmingham’s schools may be suitable for a School Street.

Cycling

New blue protected cycle paths opened in 2019 along the A34 Walsall Road (North) and A38 Bristol Road (South), but other main roads are still unsafe for cycling. Several National Cycle Routes run through Birmingham, and there are various canal paths and walkways through parks, but they could all be better connected to each other. Cycling to get somewhere (rather than for leisure) is seen by many to be too risky. Some experimental cycle lanes were fitted in 2020, which could be made permanent, depending on the results of current consultation.

Birmingham Cycle Revolution (BCR) is a council scheme to enable cycling to become more mainstream across the whole city. Over 6000 free bikes were given to residents in the most deprived areas and bikeability training is available in schools and hubs across the city. It has a target to increase the proportion of cycling trips to 5% of all journeys by 2023, and to 10% by 2033.



credit: Ross Sneddon

Shared mobility

In many parts of the city there are opportunities to hire cars, bikes and e-scooters via sharing schemes, offering flexibility by enabling users to pay only for the time they use the vehicle.

There are two car sharing clubs in Birmingham ([Co-wheels](#) and [Enterprise Car Clubs](#)).

There are [Brompton](#) folding bike hire lockers in the city centre. There are some free hire bikes at [wellbeing \(leisure\) centres](#). A new, long-awaited Transport for West Midlands [Beryl pedal bike hire scheme](#) is starting in spring 2021 in North Birmingham.

A 12 month trial [Voi e-scooter hire scheme](#) started in September 2020. To use them, you must be over 18 with a valid driving licence (provisional or full) and you should use the road, not the pavement. Private e-scooters are still illegal.

Public transport

The Covid-19 pandemic completely changed our use of public transport.

In Birmingham, buses are the most used form of public transport, reaching many parts of the city where people have no access to trains or private cars. Building work has started on new Sprint lines – priority bus lanes on main roads.

Trains (especially the Cross-City line) desperately need more capacity with some commuters forced to find stations where they will be let on to crowded carriages.

University Station (for University of Birmingham and Queen Elizabeth hospital) is getting upgraded (it currently has 3.5 million passengers per year).

The old Camp Hill line is being reopened, and work has started on the HS2 High Speed Rail link to London.

credit: TKTkTK



credit: Naassom Azevedo

Collaboration

We want to work with residents, businesses, individuals, campaigners, community groups and other organisations to drive forward the car free vision and re-imagine Birmingham as a place designed around people, rather than cars.

We are also keen to work in partnership with other organisations already doing fantastic work in this area, and add value to existing initiatives.

We particularly want to engage with groups and individuals who are most affected by the harms of cars, to amplify their voices and co-design solutions. We want to work with disabled people's organisations, communities of colour, schools, and faith groups as well as local authorities.

If you like the sound of this and want to help us work towards the vision of a Car Free Birmingham, we'd love to hear from you!

Find Out More

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