

Driving the change: EVs

Electric taxis, hydrogen buses and trains are becoming increasingly popular while hybrids and electric vehicles are growing their share of all vehicle sales. However, of all the new cars registered in 2018, less than 4% were plug-ins, showing uptake remains in first gear.

So, while we're well aware of the links between air quality and health, is enough being done to get people behind the wheel of an electric vehicle?

Of course, there have been a raft of developments, enhancements and modifications in electric vehicles. Everything from how batteries are cooled, to better integration of renewables with charging infrastructure and adding charge points to existing urban furniture is being looked at. Promisingly, Tesla reported record sales last quarter, but the market isn't quite in top gear.

Range anxiety, lack of infrastructure and vehicle choice all still common complaints. And questions still remain over the sustainability of electric vehicles, particularly around cobalt and lithium.

The inventors of the world have plenty to do and plenty of opportunity. So, while there is a desire for change, there are also obvious areas for improvement:

Invest in infrastructure

The UK lags behind the rest of Europe in terms of ability to fast charge. For those unable to charge easily at home, having a near "petrol station" experience is key to encouraging people to make the switch. Essential investment in nationwide infrastructure is needed to keep the sector on the right track. Currently, there is a piecemeal approach to charging points. It's vital, regardless of what vehicle I drive up in, that I'm able to charge at the next charge point. This investment in this infrastructure also needs to include maintenance so charge points remain functional.

Provide financial incentives

Cars aren't cheap, that's especially true for electric vehicles which can be a barrier to entry. Coupled with their fledgling status there aren't many second hand vehicles on the market, further preventing uptake. To break through in the market, incentives need to be given to encourage people to get on board with the EV journey. Norway celebrates high EV uptake due to a strong incentive programme -over 10% of vehicles on the road in Norway are plug-ins – the equivalent is less than 1% in the UK. While the costs of running an electric car might be cheaper, the upfront cost can be prohibitive.

Reduce lead time for vehicles

Increasing demand needs to be matched with a strong supply of vehicles. This isn't happening. Long lead in times of months between order and delivery will also put people off from jumping into the driving seat of an electric vehicle. Manufacturers across the spectrum from Bentley to Renault are investing into electric vehicles and building up their supply chains. This is encouraging, but with warnings about battery production capabilities in the UK being raised¹, more can and should be done.

The road to decarbonisation will contain many twists and turns but it is clear transport emissions need to be reduced. As the most polluting sector in the UK today, continued commitments from government and manufacturers will be needed to keep this embryonic sector heading in the right direction.

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¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/07/uk-car-industry-future-hinges-not-on-brexite-but-on-batteries>